

Thomas Morton, Description of the Indians in New England (1637)

[Thomas Morton was one of the founders of the settlement at Mount Wollaston (present day Quincy, MA, south of Boston), a renegade group of colonists who became the object of the ire and punishments of the Puritan colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay.]

Of their Houses and Habitations.

The Natives of New England are accustomed to build them houses much like the wild Irish; they gather Poles in the woodes and put the great end of them in the ground, placing them in forme of a circle or circumference, and, bendinge the topps of them in forme of an Arch, they bind them together with the Barke of Walnut trees, which is wondrous tough, so that they make the same round on the Topp for the smoke of their fire to ascend and pass through; . . . The fire is alwayes made in the midst of the house, with winde falls commonly: yet some times they fell a tree that groweth near the house, and, by drawing in the end thereof, maintaine the fire on both sides, burning the tree by Degrees shorter and shorter, untill it be all consumed; for it burneth night and day. Their lodging is made in three places of the house about the fire; they lie upon planks, commonly about a foote or 18 inches above the ground, raised upon railes that are borne up upon forks; they lay mats under them, and Coats of Deares skinnnes, otters, beavers, Racoons, and of Beares hides, all which they have dressed and converted into good leather, with the haire on, for their coverings: and in this manner they liee as warme as they desire. . . . for they are willing that any shall eat with them. Nay, if any one that shall come into their houses and there fall a sleepe, when they see him disposed to lie downe, they will spread a matt for him of their owne accord, and lay a roll of skinnnes for a boulster, and let him lie. If he sleepe untill their meate be dished up, they will set a wooden bowl of meate by him that sleepeth, and wake him saying, Cattup keene Meekin: That is, If you be hungry, there is meat for you, where if you will eat you may. Such is their Humanity.

Likewise, when they are minded to remove, they carry away the mats with them; other materials the place adjoining will yield. They use not to winter and surnmer in one place, for that would be a reason to make fuel scarce; but, after the manner of the gentry of Civilized natives, remove for their pleasures; some times to their hunting places, where they remaine keeping good hospitality for that season; and sometimes to their fishing places, where they abide for that season likewise; and at the spring, when fish comes in

plentifully, they have meetinges from severall places, where they exercise themselves in gaming and playing of jugling trickes and all manner of Revelles, which they are delighted in; [so] that it is admirable to behold what pastime they use of severall kindes; every one striving to surpass each other. After this manner they spend their time. . . .

Of their Reverence, and Respect to Age.

It is a thing to be admired, and indeede made a president, that a Nation yet uncivilized should more respect age than some nations civilized, since there are so many precepts both of divine and humane writers extant to instruct more Civil Nations: in that particular, wherein they excel, the younger are always obedient unto the elder people, and at their commands in every respect without grumbling; in all counsels, (as therein they are circumspect to do their actions by advise and counsell, and not rashly or inconsiderately) the younger mens opinion shall be heard, but the old mens opinion and counsell embraced and followed: besides, as the elder feede and provide for the younger in infancy, doe the younger, after being growne to years of manhood, provide for those that be aged; . . .

The consideration of these things, me thinks, should reduce some of our irregular young people of civilized Nations, when this story shall come to their knowledge, to better manners, and make them ashamed of their former error in this kinde, and to become hereafter more dutyfull; which I, as a friend, (by observation having found,) have herein recorded for that purpose. . . .

Of their Trafficke and Trade One With Another.

Although these people have not the use of navigation, whereby they may trafficke as other nations, that are civilized, use to doe, yet doe they barter for such commodities as they have, and have a kinde of beads instead of money, to buy withall such things as they want, which they call Wampampeak [wampum]: and it is of two sorts, the one is white, the other is of a violet coloure. These are made of the shells of fish. The white with them is as silver with us; the other as our. gould: and for these beads they buy and sell, not only amongst themselves, but even with us.

We have used to sell them any of our commodities for this Wampampeak, because we know we can have beaver againe of them for it: and these beads

are currant [i.e. currency] in all the parts of New England, from one end of the coast to the other. . . .

Of their Admirable Perfection, in the Use of the Senses.

This is a thinge not only observed by me and divers of the Salvages of New England, but, also, by the French men in Nova Francia, and therefore I am the more encouraged to publish in this Treatice my observation of them in the use of their senses: which is a thinge that I should not easily have been induced to believe, if I myself had not been an eye witnesse of what I shall relate.

I have observed that the Salvages have the sence of seeing so farre beyond any of our Nation, that one would almost believe they had intelligence of the Devill sometimes, when they have told us of a ship at Sea, which they have seen sooner by one hour, yea, two hours sail, then any English man that stood by of purpose to looke out, their sight is so excellent. . . .

Of Their Petty Conjuring Tricks

If we doe not judge amiss of these Salvages in accounting them witches, yet out of all question we may be bold to conclude them to be but weake witches, such of them as we call by the names of Powahs: some correspondency they have with the Devil out of all doubt, as by some of their actions, in which they glory, is manifested. Papasiquineo, that Sachem or Sagamore, is a Powah of greate estimation amongst all kinde of Salvages there: he is at their Revels (which is the time when a great company of Salvages meete from severall parts of the Country, in amity with their neighbours) hath advanced his honor in his feats or juggling tricks (as I may right term them) to the admiration of the spectators, whom he endeavoured to persuade that he would goe under water to the further side of a river, too broad for any man to undertake with a breath, which thing he performed by swimming over, and deluding the company with casting a mist before their eyes that see him enter in and come out, but no part of the way he has been seen: likewise by our English, in the heat of all summer to make Ice appear in a bowl of faire water; first, having the water set before him, he hath begun his incantation according to their usuall custom, and before the same has been ended a thick Cloud has darkened the aire and, on a sudden, a thunder clap hath been heard that has amazed the natives; in an instant he hath showed a firm piece of Ice to float in the midst of the bowl in the presence of the vulgar people, which doubtless was done by the agility of Satan, his consort.

And by meanes of these sleights, and such like trivial things as these, they gaine such estimation amongst the rest of the Salvages that it is thought a very impious matter for any man to derogate from the words of these Powahs. In so much as he that should slight them, is thought to commit a crime no less heinous amongst them as sacrilege is with us, . . .

Of a great mortality that happened amongst the Naitves of New England, near about the time that the English came there to plant.

It fortuned some few years before the English came to inhabit at new Plymouth, in New England, that upon some distast given in the Massachusetts bay by the Frenchmen, then trading there with the Natives for beaver, they set upon the men at such advantage that they killed many of them, burned their ship, then riding at Anchor by an Island there, now called Peddocks. Island, . . . they did keepe them so long as they lived, only to sport themselves at them, and made these five Frenchmen fetch them wood and water, which is the generall worke that they require of a servant. One of these five men, out living the rest, had learned so much of their language as to rebuke them for their bloody deed, saying that God would be angry with them for it, and that he would in his displeasure destroy them; but the Sa - vagcs (it fectues boaffing of their ftrength,) replied and say that they were so many that God Could not kill them.

But contrary wise, in short time after the hand of God fell heavily upon them, with such a mortal stroke that they died on heaps as they lay in their houses; and the living, that were able to shift for themselves, would run away and let them die, and let their carcasses lie above the ground without burial. For in a place where many inhabited, there hath been but one left alive to tell what became of the rest; the living being (as it seems) not able to bury the dead, they were left for Crows, Kites and vermin to pray upon. And the bones and skulls upon the severall places of their habitations made such a spectacle after my coming into those parts, that, as I traveled in that Forrest near the Massachussets, it seemd to me a new found Golgatha.

. . . And this mortality was not ended when the Brownists of new Plymouth were settled at Patuxet in New England: and by all likelihood the sickness that these Indians died of was the Plague, as by conference with them since my arrivall and habitation in those parts, I have learned. And by this means there is as yet but a small number of Salvages in New England, to that which hath been in former time, and the place is made so much the more fit for the English Nation to inhabit in, and erect in it Temples to the glory of God.

Of their Religion.

It has been a common received opinion from Cicero, that there is no people so barbarous but have some worship or other. In this particular, I am not of opinion therein with Tully; and, surely, if he had been amongst those people so long as I have been, and conversed so much with them touching this matter of Religion, he would have changed his opinion. Neither should we have found this error, amongst the rest, by the helpe of that wooden prospect, [*Morton is sardonically referring to an earlier publication: William Wood, New England Prospect (1634), in which Wood claimed that the Indians he encountered worshiped something, but exactly what is too difficult to determine. Morton contests that view in this pamphlet.*]

Of their acknowledgement of the Creation, and the immortality of the Soul.

Although these Salvages are found to be without Religion, Law, and King (as Sir William Alexander hath well observed,) yet are they not altogether without the knowledge of God (historically); for they have it amongst them by tradition that God made one man and one woman, and bade them live together and get children, kill deer, beasts, birds, fish and fowle, and what they would at their pleasure; and that their posterity was full of evil, and made God so angry that he let in the Sea upon them, and drowned the greatest part of them, that were naughty men, (the Lord destroyed so;) and they went to Sanaconquam, who feeds upon them (pointing to the Center of the Earth, where they imagine is the habitation of the Devill:) the other, (which were not destroyed,) increased the world, and when they died (because they were good) went to the house of Kytan [*the word Morton records for the supreme good Spirit or God*], pointing to the setting of the sun; where they eate all manner of dainties, and never take pains (as now) to provide it.

Kytan makes provision (they say) and saves them that labour; and there they shall live with him forever, void of care. And they are persuaded that Kytan is he that makes corne growe, trees growe, and all manner of fruits. . . .

I asked him [*an Indian who had lived in Morton's house*] who was a good man; his answer was, he that would not lie, nor steal.

These, with them, are all the capital crimes that can be imagined; all other are nothing in respect of those; and he that is free from these must live with Kytan for ever, in all manner of pleasure. . . .

Of their Custom in burning the Country, and the reason thereof.

The Salvages are accustomed to set fire of the Country in all places where they come, and to burne it twice a year, viz.: at the Spring, and the fall of the leaf. The reason that moves them to doe so, is because it would other wise be so overgrown with underweeds that it would be all a coppice wood, and the people would not be able in any wise to pass through the Country out of a beaten path. . . .

The burning of the grass destroys the underwoods, and so scorcheth the elder trees that it shrinks them, and hinders their growth very much: so that he that will looke to finde large trees and good timbcr, must [look] . . . to finde them on the upland ground. . . .

And least their firing of the Country in this manner should be an occasion of damnifying us, and endangering our habitations, we ourselves have used carefully about the same times to observe the winds, and fire the grounds about our owne habitations; to prevent the Damage that might happen by any neglect thereof, if the fire should come near those houses in our absence.

For, when the fire is once kindled, it dilates and spreads itself as well against, as with the wind; burning continually night and day, untill a shower of rain falls to quench it.

And this custom of firing the Country is the meanes to make it passable; and by that meanes the trees growe here and there as in our parks: and makes the Country very beautifull and commodious.

Of their inclination to Drunkenness.

Although Drunkenness be justly termed a vice which the Salvages are ignorant of, yet the benefit is very great that comes to the planters by the sale of strong liquor to the Salvages, who are much taken with the delight of it; for they will pawn their wits, to purchase the acquaintance of it. Yet in all the commerce that I had with them, I never proffered them any such thing; nay, I would hardly let any of them have a dram, unless he were a Sachem, or a Winnaytue, that is a rich man, But they say if I come to the Northern parts of the Country I shall have no trade, if I will not supply them with lusty liquors: it is the life of the trade in all those parts: for it so happened that thus a Salvage desperately killed himself; when he was drunk, a gun being charged

and the cock up, he sets the mouth to his breast, and, putting back the trigger with his foote, shot himself dead.

That the Salvages live a contended life.

A Gentleman and a traveller, that had been in the parts of New England for a time, when he returned againe, in his discourse of the Country, wondered, (as he said,) that the natives of the land lived so poorly in so rich a Country, like to our Beggars in England. Surely that Gentleman had not time or leisure while he was there truly to informe himself of the state of that Country, and the happy life the Salvages would leade were they once brought to Christianity.

I must confess they want the use and benefit of Navigation, (which is the very sinews of a flourishing Commonwealth,) yet are they supplied with all manner of needfull things for the maintenance of life and lifelyhood. Food and rayment are the cheife of all that we make true use of; and of these they finde no want, but have, and may have, them in a most plentifull manner.

If our beggars of England should, with so much ease as they, furnish themselves with food at all seasons, there would not be so many starved in the streets, neither would so many gaoles [jails] be stuffed, or gallouses furnished with poore wretches, as I have seen them.

But they of this sort of our owne nation, that are fit to go to this Canaan, are not able to transport themselves; and most of them unwilling to go from the good ale tap, which is the very loadstone of the lande by which our English beggars steer their Course; it is the Northpole to which the flowre-de-luce of their compass points. The more is the pity that the Commonalty of our Land are of such leaden capacities as to neglect so brave a Country, that doth so plentifully feed many lusty and a brave, able men, women and children, that have not the meanes that a Civilized Nation hath to purchase food and rayment; which that Country with a little industry will yield a man in a very comfortable measure, without overmuch carking.

I cannot deny but a civilized Nation hath the preeminence of an uncivilized, by meanes of those instruments that are found to be common amongst civil people, and the uncivil want the use of, to make themselves masters of those ornaments that make such a glorious show, . . .

Now since it is but food and rayment that men that live needeth, (though not all alike,) why should not the Natives of New England be said to live richly,

having no want of either? Cloaths are the badge of sin; and the more variety of fashions is but the greater abuse of the Creature: the beasts of the forrest there doe serve to furnish them at any time when they please: fish and flesh they have in greate abundance, which they both roast and boil. . . .

I must needs commend them in this particular, that, though they buy many commodities of our Nation, yet they keepe but few, and those of speciall use.

They love not to be cumbered with many utensils, and although every proprietor knowes his owne, yet all things, (so long as they will last), are used in common amongst them: A bisket cake given to one, that one breakes it equally into so many parts as there be persons in his company, and distributes it. Plato's Commonwealth is so much practised by these people.

According to humane reason, guided only by the light of nature, these people leades the more happy and freer life, being void of care, which torments the mindes of so many Christians: They are not delighted in baubles, but in usefull things. . . .

I have observed that they will not be troubled with superfluous commodities. Such things as they finde they are taught by necessity to make use of, they will make choice of, and seeke to purchase with industry. So that, in respect that their life is so void of care, and they are so loving also that they make use of those things they enjoy, (the wife only excepted,) as common goods, and are therein so compassionate that, rather than one should starve through want, they would starve all. Thus doe they pass away the time merrily, not regarding our pomp, (which they see dayly before their faces,) but are better content with their owne, which some men esteem so meanely of.

Source: Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan* . . . (1637), reprinted in *Old South Leaflets* (Boston, 1883), vol. 4.