Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

(*Events described:* 1676)

Mary Rowlandson was a white Puritan born in New England. In the late 1670s, a coalition of Algonquian-speaking indigenous peoples of New England, including Wampanoags and Nipmucs, launched a devastating but ultimately unsuccessful anti-colonial uprising that became known as King Philip's War. Rowlandson and her three children were captured during an Algonquian attack on their home in Lancaster, Massachusetts, while her husband was away in Boston. Rowlandson's youngest child, a 6-year-old girl, died of a bullet wound several days after their capture; Rowlandson's other two children were separated from her. For three months, Rowlandson traveled with an Algonquian band as they evaded English troops. Then she and, later, her surviving children were freed by ransom.

Rowlandson published a famous autobiographical account of her captivity, selections from which appear below. Rowlandson sectioned her narrative by the various "removes," or journeys, she made as her captors traveled about. The selections presented here illustrate ways that religion contributed to Rowlandson's othering of indigenous people, as well as illustrating her prejudice toward "praying Indians," meaning indigenous Christians, some of whom sided with the English during the war while others joined the anti-colonialists. The selections show also Rowlandson's Calvinist interpretation of the war as an act of God, an interpretation that obscures colonists' roles in creating the conflicts that led to the war.

[Captured]

On the tenth of February [...] came the Indians with great numbers upon Lancaster. [...Our] house stood upon the edge of a hill; some of the Indians got behind the hill, others into the barn, and others behind anything that could shelter them, from all which places they shot against the house so that the bullets seemed to fly like hail; and quickly they wounded one man among us, then another, and then a third. About two hours [...] they had been about the house before they prevailed to fire it [...T]hey fired it once, and one ventured out and quenched it; but they quickly fired it again, and that took.

Now is the dreadful hour come [...] Some in our house were fighting for their lives, others wallowing in their blood, the house on fire over our heads, and the bloody heathen ready to knock us on the head if we stirred out. Now might we hear mothers and children crying out for themselves and one another, "Lord, what shall we do?" Then I took my children [...] to go forth and leave the house. [...T]he bullets flying thick, one went through my side, and the same (as would seem) through the bowels and hand of my dear child in my arms. One of my elder sister's children, named William, had then his leg broken, which the Indians perceiving, they knocked him on [the] head. Thus were we butchered by those merciless heathen, standing amazed with the blood running down to our heels. My eldest sister, being yet in the house and seeing those woeful sights—the infidels haling mothers one way and children another, and some wallowing in their blood, and her elder son telling her that her son William was dead and myself was wounded—she said, "And Lord, let me die with them," which was no sooner said, but she was struck with a bullet and fell down dead over the threshold. [...]

Oh, the doleful sight that now was to behold at this house! *Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he has made in the earth.* [...] There were twelve killed, some shot, some stabbed with their spears, some knocked down with their hatchets. [...] It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their blood, some here and some there, like a company of sheep torn by wolves, all of them stripped naked by a company of hellhounds, roaring, singing, ranting, and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out [...]

[First remove]

Now away we must go with those barbarous creatures [...] About a mile we went that night, up upon a hill within sight of the town, where they intended to lodge. There was hard by a vacant house (deserted by the English before, for fear of the Indians). I asked them whether I might not lodge in the house that night, to which they answered, "What, will you love Englishmen still?" This was the dolefullest night that ever my eyes saw. Oh, the roaring, and singing, and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell. [...]

Little do many think what is the savageness and brutishness of this barbarous enemy, even those that seem to profess more than others among them, when the English have fallen into their hands. Those seven that were killed at Lancaster the summer before upon a Sabbath day, and the one that was afterward killed upon a weekday, were slain and mangled in a barbarous manner by One-Eyed John and Marlborough's praying Indians, which Capt. Moseley brought to Boston, as the Indians told me.[a] [...]

[Sixth remove]

On Monday [...] they set their wigwams on fire and went away. [...] I went along that day mourning and lamenting, leaving farther my own country and traveling into the vast and howling wilderness, and I understood something of Lot's wife's temptation, when she looked back. We came that day to a great swamp, by the side of which we took up our lodging that night. When I came to the brow of the hill that looked toward the swamp, I thought we had been come to a great Indian town (though there were none but our own company). The Indians were as thick as the trees; it seemed as if there had been a thousand hatchets going at once. If one looked before one, there was nothing but Indians; and behind one, nothing but Indians; and so on either hand, I myself in the midst, and no Christian soul near me [...]

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[a] *"One-Eyed John" was the English nickname for Monoco, a Nashaway or Nipmuc leader who launched a raid on Lancaster in August 1675, several months before the larger attack in which Rowlandson was captured. Marlborough was a "praying town"—a settlement of Algonquians who had become Christian—about 10 miles from Lancaster. On suspicion that they had participated in Monoco's raid, over a dozen Christian Algonquians from Marlborough were arrested by colonial militiaman Samuel Moseley, a controversial figure whose brutality toward indigenous people was deplored among colonial leaders but applauded by many colonists; Moseley then marched his prisoners from Marlborough to Boston to stand trial. Although the court decided the accused were innocent, colonists tried to lynch them. Rowlandson is here claiming to know from her captors that the Christian Algonquians were indeed guilty. As for Monoco, he surrendered to the English during the winding down of the war and was executed.*

[Eighth remove]

On the morrow morning, we must go over the river, i.e., Connecticut, to meet with King Philip[b] [...] When I was in the canoe, I could not but be amazed at the numerous crew of pagans that were on the bank on the other side. When I came ashore, they gathered all about me, I sitting alone in the midst. I observed they [...] laughed and rejoiced over their gains and victories. Then my heart began to fail, and I fell a-weeping, which was the first time, to my remembrance, that I wept before them. [...N]ow I may say, as Psalm 137:1, *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept when we remembered Zion.* There one of them asked me why I wept. I could hardly tell what to say, yet I answered they would kill me. "No," said he, "none will hurt you." Then came one of them and gave me two spoonfuls of meal to comfort me, and another gave me half a pint of peas, which was more worth than many bushels at another time.

Then I went to see King Philip. He bade me come in and sit down, and asked me whether I would smoke it (a usual compliment nowadays among saints and sinners); but this no way suited me. For though I had formerly used tobacco, yet I have left it [...] It seems to be a bait the devil lays to make men lose their precious time. I remember with shame how, formerly, when I had taken two or three pipes, I was presently ready for another, such a bewitching thing it is; but I thank God he has now given me power over it. Surely there are many who may be better employed than to lie sucking a stinking tobacco pipe. [...]

[Thirteenth remove]

About this time, they came yelping from Hadley, where they had killed three Englishmen, and brought one captive with them, viz., Thomas Read. [...H]e was crying bitterly, supposing that they would quickly kill him, whereupon I asked one of them whether they intended to kill him; he answered me they would not. He being a little cheered with that, I asked him about the welfare of my husband; he told me he saw him such a time in the Bay, and he was well but very melancholy. By which I certainly understood (though I suspected it before) that whatsoever the Indians told me respecting him was vanity and lies. Some of them told me he was dead, and they had killed him. Some said he was married again, and that the governor wished him to marry and told him he should have his choice, and that all [were] persuaded I was dead. So like were these barbarous creatures to him who was a liar from the beginning. [...]

[Sixteenth remove]

We began this remove with wading over Baquag River. The water was up to the knees, and the stream very swift, and so cold that I thought it would have cut me in sunder. I was so weak and feeble that I reeled as I went along [...]; the Indians stood laughing to see me staggering [...] Then [...] there came up to us an Indian, who informed them that [...] there was a letter come from the [English] council to the sagamores about redeeming the captives, and that there would be another in fourteen days, and that I must be there ready. My heart was so heavy before that I could scarce speak or go in the path, and yet now so light that I could run. [...]

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[b] *Metacomet, the Wampanoag chief who led the anti-colonialist uprising, was known to the English as "King Philip."*

In that time came a company of Indians to us, near thirty, all on horseback. My heart skipped within me, thinking they had been Englishmen at the first sight of them, for they were dressed in English apparel, with hats, white neckcloths, and sashes about their waists, and ribbons upon their shoulders. But when they came near, there was a vast difference between the lovely faces of Christians and the foul looks of those heathens, which much damped my spirit again. [...]

[Nineteenth remove]

After many weary steps, we came to Wachusett [...] Then came Tom and Peter[c] with the second letter from the council about the captives. Though they were Indians, I got them by the hand and burst out into tears; my heart was so full that I could not speak to them. But recovering myself, I asked them how my husband did and all my friends and acquaintance. They said, "They are all very well but melancholy." They brought me two biscuits and a pound of tobacco. The tobacco I quickly gave away [...]

When the letter was come, the sagamores met to consult about the captives and called me to them to inquire how much my husband would give to redeem me [...] I was in a great strait. I thought if I should speak of but a little, it would be slighted and hinder the matter; if of a great sum, I knew not where it would be procured. Yet at a venture, I said, "Twenty pounds," yet desired them to take less; but they would not hear of that but sent that message to Boston, that for twenty pounds I should be redeemed.

It was a praying Indian that wrote their letter for them. There was another praying Indian, who told me that he had a brother that would not eat horse, his conscience was so tender and scrupulous (though as large as hell for the destruction of poor Christians). Then, he said, he read that scripture to him: *There was a famine in Samaria; and behold, they besieged it until an ass's head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver* [...] (2 Kgs. 6:25). He expounded this place to his brother and showed him that it was lawful, in a famine, to eat that which is not [lawful] at another time. "And now," says he, "he will eat horse with any Indian of them all." There was another praying Indian, who, when he had done all the mischief that he could, betrayed his own father into the English hands, thereby to purchase his own life. Another praying Indian was at Sudbury fight, though, as he deserved, he was afterward hanged for it. There was another praying Indian, so wicked and cruel as to wear a string about his neck strung with Christians' fingers. [...]

[Reflections on divine providence]

[...B]efore I go any further, I would take leave to mention a few remarkable passages of providence, which I took special notice of in my afflicted time. [...]

I can but admire to see the wonderful providence of God in preserving the heathen for further affliction to our poor country. [...] It was thought if their corn were cut down, they would starve

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[c] *Tom Dublet (a.k.a. Nepanet) and Peter Conway (a.k.a. Tatiquinea) were Christian Nipmucs who sided with the English during the war. They served as go-betweens when the colonial government negotiated with the anti-colonialist Algonquians for the release of English captives.*

and die with hunger. And all their corn that could be found was destroyed, and they driven from that little they had in store into the woods in the midst of winter; and yet how to admiration did the Lord preserve them for his holy ends and the destruction of many still amongst the English! Strangely did the Lord provide for them, that I did not see (all the time I was among them) one man, woman, or child die with hunger. [...] It is said: *Oh, that my people had hearkened to me, and Israel had walked in my ways; I should soon have subdued their enemies and turned my hand against their adversaries* (Ps. 81:13-14). But now our perverse and evil carriages in the sight of the Lord have so offended him that instead of turning his hand against them, the Lord feeds and nourishes them up to be a scourge to the whole land.

[...] Another thing that I would observe is the strange providence of God in turning things about when the Indians were at the highest and the English at the lowest. [...The Indians] would boast much of their victories, saying that in two hours' time they had destroyed such a captain and his company at such a place, and boast how many towns they had destroyed, and then scoff and say they had done them a good turn to send them to heaven so soon. Again they would say that this summer they would knock all the rogues in the head, or drive them into the sea, or make them fly the country [...] Now the heathen begin to think all is their own; and the poor Christians' hopes [begin] to fail (as to man), and now [the Christians'] eyes are more to God, and their hearts sigh heavenward and to say in good earnest, *Help, Lord, or we perish.* When the Lord had brought his people to this, that they saw no help in anything but himself, then he takes the quarrel into his own hand; and though [the Indians] had made a pit, in their own imaginations, as deep as hell for the Christians that summer, yet the Lord hurled themselves into it. And the Lord had not so many ways before to preserve them but now he hath as many to destroy them. [...]

[After being freed]

About the sun going down, Mr. Hoar, and myself, and the two Indians[d] came to Lancaster, and a solemn sight it was to me. There I had lived many comfortable years amongst my relations and neighbors, and now not one Christian to be seen nor one house left standing. [...W]e came to Concord. Now was I full of joy, and yet not without sorrow: joy to see such a lovely sight, so many Christians together, and some of them my neighbors [...]

Being recruited with food and raiment, we went to Boston that day, where I met with my dear husband; but the thoughts of our dear children—one being dead, and the other[s] we could not tell where—abated our comfort each to other. I was not before so much hemmed in with the merciless and cruel heathen but now as much with pitiful, tenderhearted, and compassionate Christians. [...N]ot knowing where our children were was a sore trial to us still, and yet we were not without secret hopes that we should see them again. That which was dead lay heavier upon my spirit than those which were alive and amongst the heathen, thinking how it suffered with its wounds and I was no way able to relieve it, and how it was buried by the heathen in the wilderness [away] from among all Christians. [...]

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[d] *John Hoar, a white lawyer, had traveled with Tom Dublet and Peter Conway to the Algonquian camp where Rowlandson was being held, to finalize her release and escort her to Boston to rejoin her husband. Rowlandson was the first of the English war captives to be ransomed. Other captives, including Rowlandson's two surviving children, were ransomed later after further negotiations.*

[Final reflections]

I have seen the extreme vanity of this world. One hour I have been in health and wealth, wanting nothing, but the next hour in sickness, and wounds, and death, having nothing but sorrow and affliction. [...T]he Lord had his time to scourge and chasten me. The portion of some is to have their afflictions by drops, now one drop and then another; but the dregs of the cup, the wine of astonishment, like a sweeping rain that leaveth no food, did the Lord prepare to be my portion. [...A]ffliction I had, full measure (I thought), pressed down, and running over; yet I see when God calls a person to anything, and through never so many difficulties, yet he is fully able to carry them through and make them see and say they have been gainers thereby. And I hope I can say in some measure, as David did, *It is good for me that I have been afflicted.* The Lord hath showed me the vanity of these outward things—that they are the vanity of vanities, and vexation of spirit; that they are but a shadow, a blast, a bubble, and things of no continuance—that we must rely on God himself, and our whole dependence must be upon him. If trouble from smaller matters begins to arise in me, I have something at hand to check myself with and say, "Why am I troubled? It was but the other day that if I had had the world, I would have given it for my freedom or to have been a servant to a Christian." I have learned to look beyond present and smaller troubles and to be quieted under them. As Moses said: *Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord* (Ex. 14:13).

Source: *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God* [...]*; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge [MA]: Samuel Green, 1682), rpt. in Henry Stedman Nourse and John Eliot Thayer, eds., *The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Lancaster, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1903), 1-7, 20-24, 35, 43-44, 47-50, 59-67, 72-73, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t8hd7p90r. Public domain in the United States.

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For the sake of modernization and readability, various words capitalized in the source publication, not always consistently, are presented here in lowercase. Among these are religious terms (*heathen, infidels, pagans, devil, heaven,* and *scripture*; *hell* and *providence* were already lowercase in the source) and terms indicating office or social status, both colonial and indigenous (*master, mistress, governor, council,* and *sagamores*). Likewise, the word *praying* in the term *praying Indian,* capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase.

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