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17th Century:Explorers, Governors, Pilgrims and Captives (1607-1700)

Although it is becoming clear that native Americans had long possessed various traditions for oral and pictorial stories about themselves, (1) what is called autobiographical writing begins in America with the journals and histories of the explorers, who recorded their experiences for themselves and their supporters and critics back in Europe. The first extensive description of what is now the United States is *Adventurers in the Unknown Interior of America* by Cabeza de Vaca, one of four survivors of a disastrous expedition to Florida in 1527. His ten-year journey of exploration and flight took him along what is now the Gulf Coast, through Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, and down to Mexico City. Between the lines, his narrative also tells and implies so much about him that it can well be considered autobiography.

Beginning in the 1580's, many narratives of exploration were edited and published by the great Elizabethan geographer Richard Hakluyt (c. 1552-1616), who wished to promote more English exploration and settlement in things seen. The explorers had been sent to look for gold and precious gems, to seek a new route to the Indies, to convert the natives to Christianity, so to advance English power, which was in competition with the French, Spanish, and other European nations. These were the subjects of the backers of the expeditions wanted to hear about--not the life histories of the writers. By the same rule, the water-color paintings of Virginia which were done by John White to accompany Thomas Hariot's *Briefe and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia (1588, 1590)* were of the birds and fish, the animals and plants, and the native people and their dwellings, dress, and customs. The purpose of these expeditions was exploration of the "new-foundland," not self-exploration. "Autobiography" did not exist.

Yet in a larger sense these early writers and artists were expressing themselves and even exploring themselves. In their enthusiasm and curiosity about new places and people, they were expressing a new, expansive outward-looking spirit. Simultaneously, they were learning more about their capacities for suffering, endurance, and leadership.

Explorers began to write still more directly about themselves when it became necessary for them to defend their actions against rivals or to explain why they had not done some of the things their backers had directed them to do. No one demonstrates this more vividly than John Smith, member of the Jamestown Colony of 1607, and its eventual, then deposed, leader. Smith first wrote *A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents in Virginia* (1608), a very short account (only forty pages in all) of the sea voyage and first year of the Jamestown settlement. That Smith, rather than someone else, reported on these "occurrences and accidents," was because other men died, became sick, or proved incompetent. The party originally contained 105 men, who sailed from England on New Year's Day, 1607, and arrived at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay at the end of April. By the time their ship started back to England in June, 1607, some had already been killed by Indians, and most of the original leaders were sick or dying or discredited, Smith says. By the end of December, only 30 men were left. (2)

Smith began to take command because he was successful in trading with the Indians for food. Without him, he implies, the whole settlement would have starved. Once in command, he insisted on building stronger defenses and on sterner discipline. He punished Indians who stole English tools and weapons, and he put down the quarrels among the English. He also discouraged the pursuit of gold and easy riches, which some colonists had expected, and instead made the men cut down trees and plant corn. In these ways he began to demonstrate-and advertise-the kind of character he thought was essential to building a new, permanent, self sustaining colony. "Captain John Smith," as one recent admirer has written, noting his archetypal stature as a Euro-American male, is "Father of Us All." (3)

Returning to England and then making later journeys to New England, Smith published three more books about America: *A Map of Virginia, with a Description of its Commodities, People, Government, and Religion,* in 1612; *A Description of New England,* in 1616; and *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles,* in 1624. Of these, *The General History* is the longest and

the one that has had the greatest impact on later writing, if only because it includes the story of Smith's rescue by Pocahontas. But the Pocahontas story also has led to questions about Smith's reliability, because he never mentioned the rescue in *A True Relation,* even though it supposedly happened during the first year, the period of that narrative. More doubt has been cast on *The General History* because it is written in the third person singular and includes various testimonies by other men. The likeliest explanation is that Smith was using the *General History* not only to elaborate on his earlier accounts but also to further advertise his own exploits. The third person means of narration made such self-advertisement more rather than less feasible-as other autobiographers have realized.

The last book Smith wrote, *The True Travels, Adventurers, and Observations of Captain John Smith,* 1630, was also in the third person singular. It briefly describes his family background-he was the son of a Lincolnshire yeoman-and then narrates his almost unbelievable adventurers in Italy, Turkey, and Austria in the years before he set out for America. He had fought in great battles and sieges, been taken into slavery, acted as diplomat, and become a bold, swaggering soldier of fortune. It was these experiences which prepared him for the dangers and uncertainties of colonization in America. The telling of them was yet another way of continuing to promote himself and gain favor from his aristocratic patrons.

What Smith's *True Relation* and *General History* did was to establish an American tradition of the governor's narrative as a combination of personal history had history of the colony. The needs for such narratives were, as in Smith's case, for records, for justification, and for promotion of further colonies. Governors were the logical persons to write them because they knew the colonies; affairs, dealt with all the members and the European backers, and were often the best educated, most literate people in the communities. They directed their community's destiny, and that destiny was finally discerned and inscribed in the narrative.

Two of the most important later governor's narratives are William Bradford's of *Plymouth Plantation,* 1620-1647, about the Separatists from the Church of England who founded the Plymouth Colony, and John Winthrop's *Journal*, the record of his leadership of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They were different men, and their books are equally different. Bradford, the more modest and self-effacing of the two, wrote *Of Plymouth Plantation,* a kind of meditative history which he began in 1630 and resumed in 1644. Winthrop, on the other hand, was a wealthy attorney, and he wrote the *Journal* in the form of daily entries. But both had a Christian-classical ideal of continuous dedication of the governor to the welfare of the community. The tribute which Bradford paid to John Robinson, an earlier leader of the Separatists, expresses this ideal well. Robinson led the people, "So…they grew in knowledge and other gifts and graces of the Spirit of God, and lived together in peace and love and holiness…And if at any time any differences arose, or offenses broke out (as it cannot be but some time there will, even amongst the best of men) they were ever so met with and nipped in the head be-times, or otherwise so well composed, as still love, peace, and communion was continued. Or else the church purged off those that were incurable and incorrigible, when, after much patience used, no other means would serve, which seldom came to pass. Yea, such was the mutual love and reciprocal respect that this worthy man had to his flock, and his flock to him, that it might be said of them as it once was of that famous Empero Marcus Aurelius, and the people of Rome, that is was hard to judge whether he delighted more in having such a people, or they in having such a pastor." Such men were also expected "to give directions in civil affairs and to foresee dangers and inconveniences, by which he was very helpful to their outward estates and so was every ways as a common father unto them." (4)

The Puritans viewed history as the working out of God's design. This made their venture in the New World a holy project, and all the more important to record and study. Leaders like Winthrop or Bradford were further revered as new embodiments of Biblical leaders. Thus Cotton Mather later wrote a short biography of John Winthrop which he entitled *Nehemias Americanus,* or the American Nehemiah. Winthrop was like the leader of the Israelites who came after Moses and led them into Canaan. (5)

The governor's narrative was no place for highly personal reflection. Nor was it for the ordinary person to write. However, several other tenets of Puritan belief also made autobiographical writing extremely important to commoner people.

One such tenet was its radical Protestant emphasis on individual salvation and the need of the individual to experience divine blessing for himself or herself, without the intercession of priests or a church hierarchy. The greatest certainty of this salvation was the experience of conversion, coming after the recognition of sin and a sense of God's favor. It could come to any man or woman, and writing down the stages of the experience was both beneficial to the individual and instructive to friends, children, and other church members. *The Autobiography of Thomas Shepard* is one of the most famous illustrations of such a text. Shepard was an important early minister and therefore not a typical Puritan, and yet as a minister has influence was great, and he often served "as stenographer of his congregation's confessions." (6)

Anne Bradstreet's poems and her prose letter "To my Dear Children" illustrate the Puritan practice of careful self-scrutiny. Everything that happens is a potential sign of God's favor of disfavor-spiritual message. The fire that destroyed her house was the occasion for grief and also for meditation on the superiority of a heavenly "house on high erect, / Framed by that mighty Architect," as she wrote in "Some Verses upon the Burning of our House, July 10th, 1666" The works of God in the visible world are emblems of the invisible world. Sickness or despair or doubt were occasions for self examination, during which she found some sin she had not repented or duty she had neglected, and after such afflictions she had "abundance of sweetness and refreshment." Such experiences and the lessons learned from them were what she wished to pass on to her children.

The writers of Puritan diaries had roughly similar motives. The young Samuel Sewall could not even feed his chickens without being "convinced what need I stood in of spiritual food, and that I should not nauseate daily duties of Prayer, &c." (January 13, 1677). The diary was a place to preserve such reflections, meditate further on them, and observe in what directions his soul was tending. He kept notes on sermons he had heard. And he kept an account of deaths and disasters in his family and community which might have divine meaning. A modern reader might just say that Sewall was superstitious, and he did, in fact, believe in witches - that, for instance, demons could possess people's souls. But after a series of accidents and deaths which he took as signs of God's disfavor, he performed the extraordinary act of publicly asking the pardon of the people and of God for his decisions in the Salem witch trials, in which he had been a judge. He then duly copied the text of this formal request for pardon into his diary.

Sewall's lengthy diary also has some of the qualities of the governor's narrative. He was an important leader. His acts affected the life and well-being of the community, even when he was just called out at night to quiet rowdy drinkers in a tavern. Yet there is also a crusty, status-conscious streak in Sewall that makes a reader suspect that another reason he kept his diary was simple vanity. He liked writing down the names of all the Puritan dignitaries with whom he dined. He was sensitive to the ups and downs of his popularity. Late in life he became comically self-conscious in his attempt to marry a wealthy widow, Madam Winthrop. Spanning so many years, his diary documents the changes in Puritan society, from a harsh and dramatic sense of divine presence to a more relaxed and comfortable worldliness. Distress with this worldliness would help engender the so-called "Great Awakening" of the 1730's and '40's, when Jonathan Edwards revived the practice of recording conversion narratives and writing intense examinations of the state of the soul.

In the 1680's, meanwhile, another kind of story had been published which was the beginning point of what would become the most egalitarian and popular form of early American autobiography, the narrative of Indian captivity.

The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, …a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson was published in Boston in 1682, with a second edition coming the same year from a press in Cambridge, "on authority of the General Court." No complete copy of the first edition has survived (good evidence of how widely the book was read (7)), and another edition was printed in London, also in 1682. Since then, over thirty more editions have been printed. Mary Rowlandson's story of her eleven-week captivity with Indians in the late winter and spring of 1676 was the first great American autobiographical best-seller.

The basis for her interpretation of her experience was the same sense of providential design that empowered other Puritan and personal historians. Mary Rowlandson saw her captivity as God's will and

as a lesson, therefore, to her and her readers. However, the story of a woman and her child being captured in a surprise attack during an all-out war, and then of the child's dying while the woman almost starves and is forced to walk, though injured for miles in the snow and to sleep on the ground, living among "savages," and of the woman finally being ransomed and rejoining her family was a lot more than just a pious lesson. It was a thriller-a scary, gruesome thriller, that still had a pious coating and a happy ending. Americans, or the Americans-to-be, had discovered their first original literary genre, and in the centuries to come they would develop it not only in autobiography but in fiction, drama, film, biography, and journalism.

Besides being thrillers-and many later ones were much more sensational than Mary Rowlandson's-why were captivity narratives so popular? One reason, it has been suggested, was that Euro-Americans needed them to counter the demonstrable superiority of Indian life. As Benjamin Franklin, among others, pointed out, more captives stayed among the Indians than returned. When whites were raised among Indians, they preferred to stay; whereas when Indians were raised among whites, they preferred to go back to the forest. (8) A story which emphasized the cruelty and barbarism of Indians had a necessary propaganda value. Such a story also fitted into a basic ritualistic pattern of a person's "Separation, Transformation, and Return." (9) The captive was separated from the group, underwent a trial of faith while also being changed by contact with an alien society-or collection of little, heterogeneous, insecure societies, as they were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whatever American "civilization" was, it was the opposite of "savagery." An encounter with Indians therefore made an "American." The captive had encountered her or his "other," the creature who had preceded the Europeans and was the "original," the "primitive," the "barbaric," and come back. In coming back, the former captive endorsed his or her "old," new American society, This strengthened the Euro-American society's confidence in its superiority, and re-integrated the former captive, who might otherwise be suspected of being not really loyal, of having become a conjurer or witch.

For all these reasons, captivity narratives signified to Euro-Americans a new concept of self *as* both European and American: European in values, origin, and ultimately loyalty, American in experience and skills of survival. At the same time, they have perhaps contributed to a kind of enduring American paranoia-fear of the wilderness, fear of Indians and people of their races, and the sense of being endangered and embattled.

Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* affirmed that Americans were God's chosen people…but that they were also constantly at risk. It, and other early autobiographical writing, helped to make, to unite, and to frighten a people.