

## THE AMERICAN INDIAN THROUGH ENGLISH SPECTACLES, 1608-1791

By Robert Rutland

Students of the American Indian have long recognized their debt to the English soldiers, traders and adventurers who returned to their native land to publish works of varying worth on the aborigines of the New World. The English book-fancier, on the eve of the Enlightenment, was mildly interested in these Indians who were feted in court,\* romanticized in the poets' corner, and generally expected to possess those qualities of virtue and courage as only man in a primitive state might enjoy. There was an inverse ratio between this interest in the Indian and the remoteness of the frontier, as previous studies of the American seaboard attitude toward the West will attest.

One of the first to capitalize upon this "fad" was Captain John Smith. Smith's histories of his adventures and the curious embellishments in subsequent make-over editions demonstrate his willingness to make the Indian attain the ideal then becoming current among the English. Hence one does not find the Pocahontas story in his *A True relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath happened in Virginia since the first planting of that collony* (1608); but in the rewritten version in *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer isles* (1624) Smith declared the Indian princess "got his head in her armes. . . . to save him from death."<sup>1</sup>

Even the reports of frontier massacres, Indian captives and bloody battles could not change the idealized version of the Indian in England. After Rousseau and other French writers took up the task of glorification, a turn toward realism became evident. James Adair sought a true understanding of the Indian amongst his British brethren with his *History of the American Indians*. Adair, a trader with years of experience on the American frontier, advanced a quaint theory about the Indian's descent from Israelite ancestors.<sup>2</sup> He was equally speculative regarding the color of the Indian, which he firmly believed resulted from "the parching winds, and hot sun-beams, beating upon their naked bodies, in the various gradations of life, [which] necessarily tarnish their skins with the tawny red colour."<sup>3</sup> As a prognosticator Adair was most inept, for he predicted

\* Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *Indians Abroad* (Norman, 1943).—Ed.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, (New York, 1938), 140.

<sup>2</sup> James Adair, *History of the American Indians*, (London, 1775), 15 *et passim*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

the virtual extinction of the Cherokee tribe's warriors around 1810.<sup>4</sup> But despite the obvious faults, Adair's work contained much valuable information and cannot be overlooked by scholars investigating that period.

The Englishmen often exaggerated what they saw, accepted hearsay with great credulity, and were uncritical to a degree now considered shocking. Captain Thomas Morris was somewhat realistic about his military mission of 1764 which carried him into Indian country and the presence of Pontiac. Despite his perilous position, Morris alluded to the Indians as "an innocent, much-abused, and once happy people," when he edited his journal in 1791.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Morris saw the advantages of an enlightened Indian policy and had great respect for the Indian's sense of honor.

John Long, another trader with nearly 20 years' experience among the Algonquin, Chippewa, Iroquois, Shawnee and Mohican tribes, wrote a narrative with more accuracy than most of his predecessors. His subjects ranged from a neat description of scalping ("the operation is generally performed in two minutes") to quotations from Peter Kalm's *Travels*.<sup>6</sup> His work was published in 1791, and its merit lies principally in Long's description of his personal adventures and his personal observations, rather than his attempt to write good history. Thwaites said Long "seems to have been superior to the ordinary trader," and his determination to write the story of his American sojourn would confirm this judgment. To an extent, Long's realism was a "debunking" agent in the period when the Indian was mentioned in English parlors as "the noble savage," and his description of frontier brutality is most candid when he relates the drunken debauchery of four days' duration caused by a gift of rum.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the stoic resignation of an Indian woman "in labor a day and a night, without a groan" would restore much lost admiration to the English reader who in the first place was seeking just such a picture of Indian forbearance.<sup>8</sup>

Long was perhaps the most critical of the early English writers who moved among the Indians. He prefaces sentences with a Livy-like "It is said," then challenges the source by adding, "but I believe it is merely an opinion." He reported customs which still can interest the ethnologists, and his Indian-English dictionary was at least a commendable attempt to promote understanding among the white men and Indians. His unaffected and straightforward style, as Thwaites pointed out, "will always be readable."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>5</sup> "Journal of Captain Thomas Morris of His Majesty's XVII Regiment of Infantry," in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 32 vols. (Cleveland, 1904-1907), I, 318.

<sup>6</sup> "Long's Voyages and Travels, 1768-1782," in Thwaites, *Travels*, II, 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Interest in the English view of the Indian before 1800 was recently enlivened by the release of a heretofore unpublished manuscript written by Thomas Hughes, a young British army officer.<sup>9</sup> Hughes was an ensign who served under Burgoyne and was captured by the Americans at Ticonderoga. His journal was written "for his Amusement, & Designed only for his Perusal by the time he attains the Age of 50, if he lives so long." Unfortunately, Hughes died far short of his goal, in 1790, and it is one of his last entries which concerns us. After the Revolution, Hughes was assigned to duty in Canada, where one of his last missions took him to Detroit and there gave him an opportunity to observe the Indians who traded at that outpost. Hughes, like John Long, was a reporter more interested in facts than second-hand accounts (although he was to use the latter). Since the journal was kept as a personal memento, he had no need for rhetorical flights that marred other works. He wrote that his knowledge of the Indian "was principally confined to the nations who border'd the Lakes," but elsewhere allusions to western tribes make it plain that he had discussed the land beyond the Mississippi with the Indians at Detroit.

The entire account, written shortly after Hughes returned to Quebec in 1788, covers only ten pages in the printed journal, and well repays the reader. Hughes' terse observations included the size of Indian men and women, care and schooling of the young, hunting grounds, tribal government, treaties, warfare, torture, cannibalism, dress, eating habits, family customs and morality.

Hughes plainly was led astray when he did not depend on personal observation.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the southern Indians, such as the Sioux, Pawnees &c, fight on horseback with spears and bows and arrows—in their countries are vast plains or savannahs, where they chase the buffalo. Some of these savannahs are a hundred miles long, cover'd with grass four or five feet high, and abounding in buffaloes, who go in herds of some hundreds. The Pawnees are in a state of warfare with all the northern nation[s] and they are the only nation that are sold—and sell—for slaves all that are taken prisoners. Many of them were at Detroit—bought of the Indians who had taken them. The Pawnees live on the south side of the Mississippi and are by all accounts a very numerous nation—they make bad slaves, being idle and always trying to get away.

Obviously, Hughes erred when he accepted the word of the Indian slaveholders at Detroit unquestioningly. The Pawnees certainly were not constantly at war with all the northern tribes, and Hughes was deceived by the slave term *pani*. Hodge indicates "the name *pani* (*pawnee*) was given in the last [18th] century to every Indian reduced to servitude."<sup>11</sup> Hence in Hughes' time it was

<sup>9</sup> R. W. David, ed., *A Journal by Thos: Hughes*, (Cambridge, 1947). In some catalogs, E. A. Benians, who wrote the introduction, is listed as the editor.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Webb Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1907-1910), II, 199.

merely a synonym for slavery, a word with no strict relationship to tribal origins, and one with its roots deeply embedded in the past. Too, the Pawnees were not "a very numerous nation" according to Colonel Henry Bouquet's liberal estimate (actually made by Captain Thomas Hutchins) of 3,700 warriors at the close of the French and Indian War.<sup>12</sup> That every *pami*, regardless of his tribal ties, abhorred slavery we cannot doubt.

Other Englishmen who contributed to the growing shelves of Indian literature included Cadwallader Colden (1750), Robert Rogers (1765), Johnathan Carver (1778) and Lieutenant Henry Timberlake.<sup>13</sup> Their value varied according to the writer's contact with the frontier, his sources of information and his critical judgment. Carver "borrowed" material from Adair, but most of the writers knew the frontier and the Indian through long experience. By the middle of the next century it was apparent that the fields of anthropology, ethnology and history germane to the American Indian would have to be reworked in keeping with the new emphasis on the scientific method. The early works of these Englishmen nevertheless retain considerable historical interest and make excellent reading for the dilettante and expert alike. And perhaps no one has stated the merit of their works more poignantly than Worthington C. Ford did when (discussing another problem of a similar character) he declared, "We have formal histories of the time . . . . It is well, however, occasionally to return to original contemporary records, and get at first hand the impressions, the fears, and the aspirations" of those men who pioneered this fascinating field of study.

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<sup>12</sup> Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Indian Tribes of the United States*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1852-1857), III, 559.

<sup>13</sup> See Benjamin Bissell, *The American Indian in English Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, (New Haven, 1925).