

Narrative of the Captivity

by Mary Rowlandson

Pre-reading Questions

- The peace that first existed between the Native American Indians and the European settlers eventually turned into bloodshed. What do you think caused this breakdown?
- This selection is the account (or narrative) of a woman who is abducted by hostile Indians. What are some of the things you would expect to read in such a story?



Background Information

Who were the Puritans? *Puritan* is a broad term, referring to a number of Protestant groups that, beginning about 1560, sought to "purify" the Church of England, which since the time of Henry VIII had been virtually inseparable from the country's government. Like other Protestant reformers on the European continent, English Puritans wished to return to the simpler forms of worship and church organization described in the New Testament. For them, religion was first of all, a personal, inner experience. They did not believe that the clergy or the government should or could act as an intermediary between the individual and God.

Many Puritans suffered persecution in England. Some were put in jail and whipped, their noses slit and their ears lopped off. Some fled England. A small group of Puritan refugees led by William Bradford journeyed to the New World of America. They were called "the Pilgrims." Eventually, more and puritans found refuge in North America. Ten years after the pilgrims, seven hundred more Puritan settlers arrived in what they called "New England." The growing number of settlers in the New World caused tensions to rise between them and the Indians.

King Philip's War King Philip's War began fifty-five years after the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth. By 1675, there were about forty thousand settlers and about twenty thousand American Indians in New England. From June 1675 to August 1676, the Wampanoag chief, Metacomet (called King Philip by the colonists), carried out a series of bloody raids on Colonial settlements in what is now called King Philip's War. The Puritans viewed the war as a sign of God's punishment for the sins of their young people (who had taken to dancing and wearing their hair long), but a conflict between colonists and American Indians was probably inevitable. The native people of New England had been forced into ever more restricted areas, and, although they had sold the land, they rejected conditions stipulating that they could no longer

hunt on it. To them, "selling" meant selling the right to share the land with the buyers, not selling its exclusive ownership.

Matters came to a head when Metacomet's former assistant, who had given information to the colonists, was killed by his fellow Indians. His Indian killers were tried and hanged by the Puritans. This was too much for Metacomet to bear, and two weeks later the most severe war in the history of New England began. Its tragic result was the virtual extinction of the indigenous way of life in this region. Among the war's victims was Mary Rowlandson, the wife of a Congregational minister of Lancaster, a frontier town of about fifty families, located thirty miles west of Boston. On a February morning she and her three children were carried away by a Wampanoag raiding party that wanted to trade hostages for money. During the attack on Lancaster by the Wampanoag tribe, the town was virtually destroyed: Twenty people were killed, and twenty-four were taken captive. After eleven weeks and five days of captivity, Rowlandson's ransom was paid.

Rowlandson's captors, it is important to realize, were only slightly better off than their prisoners. Virtually without food, they were chased from camp to camp by Colonial soldiers. Their captives, they thought, were the only currency with which to buy supplies and food. In a graphic passage, Rowlandson describes the lengths to which the Wampanoag were driven by their hunger, eating horses, dogs, frogs, skunks, rattlesnakes, and even tree bark. "They would pick up old bones," she wrote, "and cut them to pieces at the joints, and if they were full of worms and maggots, they would scald them over the fire to make the vermin come out, and the boil them, and rink up the liquor....They would eat horse's guts, and ears, and all sorts of wild birds which they could catch....I can but stand in admiration, she concluded, "to see the wonderful power of God in providing for such a vast number of our enemies in the wilderness, where there was nothing to be seen."

Rowland's narrative not only presents a terrifying and moving tale of frontier life but also provides insight into how the Puritans viewed their lives with a characteristic double vision. For Rowlandson, as for other Puritans, events had both a physical and spiritual significance. She did not want merely to record her horrifying experience. she wishes to demonstrate how it revealed God's purpose.

From Narrative of the Captivity

On the tenth of February 1675, came the Indians with great numbers upon Lancaster: their first coming was about sunrising. hearing the noise of some guns, we looked out. Several houses were burning, and the smoke ascending to heaven. There were five persons taken in one house. The father, and the mother and a sucking child, they knocked on the head. The other two they took and carried away alive. There were two others, who being out of their garrison upon some occasion were set upon. One was knocked on the head, the other escaped. Another there was who running along was shot and wounded, and fell down. He begged of them his life, promising them money but they would not hearken to him but knocked him in head, and stripped him naked, and split open his bowels. Another, seeing many of the Indians about his barn, ventured and went out, but was quickly shot down. There were three others belonging to

the same garrison who were killed. The Indians getting up upon the roof of the barn, had advantage to shoot down upon them over their fortification. Thus these murderous wretches went on, burning, and destroying before them.

At length they came and beset our own house, and quickly it was the dolefullest day that ever mine eyes saw. The 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 (which they did with flax and hemp, which they brought out of the barn, and there being no defense about the house, only two flankers at two opposite corners and one of them not finished). They fired it once and one ventured out and quenched it, but they quickly fired it again, and that took. 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 (and one of my sisters') to go forth and leave the house: but as soon as we came to the door and appeared, the Indians shot so thick that the bullets rattled against the house, as if one had taken an handful of stones and threw them, so that we were fain to give back. We had six stout dogs belonging to our garrison, but none of them would stir, though another time, if any Indian had come to the door, they were ready to fly upon him and tear him down. But out we must go, the fire increasing, and coming along behind us, roaring, and the Indians gaping before us with their guns, spears, and hatchets to devour us. No sooner were we out of the house, but my brother-in-law (being before wounded, in defending the house, in or near the throat) fell down dead, whereat the Indians scornfully shouted, and hallowed, and were presently upon him, stripping off his clothes, the bullets flying thick. One bullet 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 sisters' children, named William, had then his leg broken, which the Indians perceiving, they knocked him on [his] 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 hauling 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. The Indians laid hold of us, pulling me one way, and the children another, and said, "Come go along with us". I told them they would kill me: they answered, if I were willing to go along with them, they would not hurt me.

Of thirty-seven persons who were in this one house, none escaped either present death, or a bitter captivity, save only one. There were twelve killed, some shot, some stabbed with their spears, some knocked down with their hatchets. There was one who was chopped into the head with a hatchet, and stripped naked, and yet was crawling up and down. 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 hell-hounds, roaring, singing, ranting, and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out. Yet the Lord by His

almighty power preserved a number of us from death, for there were twenty-four of us taken alive and carried captive.

I had often before this said that if the Indians should come, I should choose rather to be killed by them than taken alive, but when it came to the trial my mind changed. Their glittering weapons so daunted my spirit, that I chose rather to go along with those (as I may say) ravenous beasts, than that moment to end my days and that I may the better declare what happened to me during that grievous captivity, I shall particularly speak of the several removes we had up and down the wilderness....

THE SECOND REMOVE

The morning being come, [the Indians] prepared to go on their way. One of the Indians got up upon a horse, and they set me up behind him, with my poor sick babe (child) in my lap. A very wearisome and tedious day I had of it what with my own wound, and my child's being so exceeding sick, and in a lamentable condition with her wound. It may be easily judged what a poor feeble condition we were in, there being not the least crumb of refreshing that came within either of our mouths from Wednesday night to Saturday night, except only a little cold water. This day in the afternoon, about an hour by sun, we came to the place where they intended, an Indian town, called Wenimesset, northward of Quabaug.

I sat much alone with a poor wounded child in my lap, which moaned night and day, having nothing to revive the body, or cheer the spirits of her, but instead of that, sometimes one Indian would come and tell me one hour that "your master will knock your child in the head," and then a second, and then a third, "your master will quickly knock your child in the head."

Thus nine days I sat upon my knees, with my babe in my lap, till my flesh was raw again. My child being even ready to depart this sorrowful world, they bade me carry it out to another wigwam (I suppose because they would not be troubled with such spectacles) whither I went with a very heavy heart, and down I sat with the picture of death in my lap. About two hours in the night, my sweet babe like a lamb departed this life on Feb. 18, 1675. It being about six years, and five months old. It was nine days from the first wounding, in this miserable condition, without any refreshing of one nature or other, except a little cold water. I cannot but take notice how at another time I could not bear to be in the room where any dead person was, but now the case is changed. I must and could lie down by my dead babe, side by side all the night after. I have thought since of the wonderful goodness of God to me in preserving me in the use of my reason and senses in that distressed time, that I did not use wicked and violent means to end my own miserable life.

In the morning, when they understood that my child was dead they sent for me home to my master's wigwam (by my master in this writing, must be understood Quinnapin, who was a Sagamore, and married King Philip's wife's sister. Not that he first took me, but I was sold to him by another Narragansett Indian, who took me when first I came out of the garrison). I went to take up my dead child in my arms to carry it with me, but they bid me let it alone. There was no resisting, but go I must and leave it. When I had been at my master's wigwam, I took the first opportunity I could get to go look after my dead child. When I came I asked them what they had done with it. Then they told me it was upon the hill. Then they went and showed me where it was, where I saw the ground was newly digged, and there they told me they had buried it.

There I left that child in the wilderness, and must commit it, and myself also in this wilderness condition, to Him who is above all.

God having taken away this dear child, I went to see my daughter Mary, who was at this same Indian town, at a wigwam not very far off, though we had little liberty or opportunity to see one another. She was about ten years old, and taken from the door at first by a Praying Indian (an Indian who was converted to Christianity) and afterward sold for a gun. When I came in sight, she would fall aweeping. At which they were provoked, and would not let me come near her, but bade me be gone, which was a heart-cutting word to me. I had one child dead, another in the wilderness, I knew not where, the third they would not let me come near to. I could not sit still in this condition, but kept walking from one place to another.

As I was going up and down mourning and lamenting my condition, my son came to me, and asked me how I did. I had not seen him before, since the destruction of the town, and I knew not where he was, till I was informed by himself, that he was amongst a smaller parcel of Indians, whose place was about six miles off. With tears in his eyes, he asked me whether his sister Sarah was dead and told me he had seen his sister Mary and prayed me, that I would not be troubled in reference to himself. The occasion of his coming to see me at this time, was this: [The group of Indians who held him captive had gone and attacked the colonial settlement of Medfield.] In this time of the absence of his master, his mistress brought him to see me. I took this to be some gracious answer to my earnest and unfeigned desire.

The next day, the Indians returned from Medfield, all the company, for those that belonged to the other small company, came through the town that now we were at. But before they came to us, Oh! The outrageous roaring and hooping that there was. They began their din about a mile before they came to us. By their noise and hooping they signified how many they had destroyed (which was at that time twenty-three). Those that were with us at home were gathered together as soon as they heard the hooping, and every time that the other went over their number; these at home gave a shout, that the very earth rung again. And thus they continued till those that had been upon the expedition were come up to the Sagamore's wigwam. And then, Oh, the hideous insulting and triumphing that there was over some Englishmen's scalps that they had taken (as their manner is) and brought with them. I cannot but take notice of the wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible. One of the Indians that came from Medfield fight, had brought some plunder, came to me, and asked me, if I would have a Bible, he had got one in his basket. I was glad of it, and asked him, whether he thought the Indians would let me read? He answered, yes. So I took the Bible....

THE FIFTH REMOVE

[The next time our camp moved the reason was the advancing English army.] It was very near and following them. For they went as if they had gone for their lives, for some considerable way, and then they made a stop, and chose some of their stoutest men, and sent them back to hold the English army in play whilst the rest escaped. And then, like Jehu, they marched on furiously, with their old and with their young: some carried their old decrepit mothers; some carried one, and some another. Four of them carried a great Indian upon a bier. But going through a thick wood with him, they were hindered, and could make no haste, whereupon they

took him upon their backs, and carried him, one at a time, till they came to Banquaug river. Upon a Friday, a little after noon, we came to this river. When all the company was come up, and were gathered together, I thought to count the number of them, but they were so many, and being somewhat in motion, it was beyond my skill. In this travel, because of my wound, I was somewhat favored in my load. I carried only my knitting work and two quarts of parched meal. Being very faint I asked my mistress to give me one spoonful of the meal, but she would not give me a taste. They quickly fell to cutting dry trees, to make rafts to carry them over the river: and soon my turn came to go over. By the advantage of some brush which they had laid upon the raft to sit upon, I did not wet my foot (which many of themselves at the other end were mid-leg deep) which cannot but be acknowledged as a favor of God to my weakened body, it being a very cold time. I was not before acquainted with such kind of doings or dangers. "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee" (Isaiah 43.2). A certain number of us got over the river that night, but it was the night after the Sabbath before all the company was got over. On the Saturday they boiled an old horse's leg which they had got, and so we drank of the broth, as soon as they thought it was ready, and when it was almost all gone, they filled it up again.

The first week of my being among them I hardly ate anything. The second week I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something. And yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash. but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and die before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste...

We traveled on till night. And in the morning, we must go over the river to Philip's crew. 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 asked one another questions, and laughed, and rejoiced over their gains and victories. Then my heart began to fail: and I fell weeping, which was the first time to my remembrance, that I wept before them. There one of them asked me why I wept. I could hardly tell what to say: Yet I answered that I wept because they would eventually 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 amongst saints and sinners) but this no way suited me. For though I had formerly used tobacco, yet I had left it ever since I was first taken. 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.

CONCLUSION: Rowlandson and the Indians soon cross the river and meet King Philip. At this settlement, Rowlandson sews for the Indians for food. Rowlandson wants to go to Albany in hopes of being sold for gunpowder but the Indians take her northward and cross the river again. Rowlandson starts hoping she will be returned home, but now the Indians turn south continuing along the Connecticut River instead of turning east towards civilization. The Indians

continue their attacks, and Thomas Read joins Rowlandson's group. Read tells Rowlandson that her husband is alive and well, which gives her hope and comfort. Rowlandson and her group finally start to move east.

They cross the Baquaug River again where they meet messengers telling Rowlandson she must go to Wachuset where the Indians will discuss her possibility of returning to freedom. Rowlandson eagerly heads toward Wachuset, but the journey wears her down and she is disheartened by the sight of an injured colonist from a previous Indian attack. She reaches Wachuset and speaks to King Philip who guarantees she will be free in two weeks. The council asks how much her husband would pay for her ransom and they send a letter to Boston saying she can be free for twenty pounds.

After many more Indian attacks and victories Rowlandson is allowed to travel back to Lancaster, then to Concord and finally to Boston. She is reunited with her husband after 11 long weeks. They stay with a friend in Concord for a while until Rowlandson's sister, son, and daughter are returned. Now back together, the family builds a house in Boston where they live until 1677.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does there seem to be hostility between Mary Rowlandson and her captors? Explain.
2. One of the themes of Rowlandson's narrative is the uncertainty of life. Is life uncertain? Explain.
3. Do you think Rowlandson considered her captors to be savages or fellow human beings? Explain.
4. Rowlandson's narrative became America's "first bestseller." What about the narrative would make it exciting to readers?