

Vowell - Selection

Let's return to the coast of England in 1630 as John Cotton preaches to the Winthrop fleet. Cotton would have been aware of the pros-and-cons list Winthrop and his fellows in the Massachusetts Bay Company wrote and passed around among the godly, enumerating the reasons to go to America. In the various similar versions of this tract, Winthrop and Co. are trying to talk themselves and other potential colonists into going; but just as importantly, they're also trying to justify the venture to loved ones they're leaving behind, the family and friends who have a right to feel hurt if not downright insulted by this abandonment.

Two things especially weigh on Winthrop and his shipmates—news from Europe and news at home. Over the previous dozen years, continental Catholics and Protestants had been killing each other relentlessly, from Sweden to Spain, from France to Bohemia, in what came to be known as the Thirty Years' War. (As much as a fifth of the population of what would become Germany died.) The English couldn't help but worry the war would spread across the Channel. As Thomas Hooker would preach not long after the *Arbella* sailed:

Will you have England destroyed? Will you put the aged to trouble, and your young men to the sword? Will you have your young women widows, and your virgins defiled? Will you have your dear and tender little ones tossed upon the pikes and dashed upon the stones? Or will you have them brought up in Popery . . . perishing their souls forever, which is worst of all? . . . Will you see England laid waste without inhabitants?

After Charles I dissolved Parliament in 1629, Winthrop became convinced England was courting the wrath of God. He wrote a letter to his wife, Margaret, confessing that he feared that since God had already made the European Protestants "drink of the bitter cup of tribulation," the unrepentant English would surely be served "the very dregs." He continued, "God will bring some heavy affliction upon this land, and that speedily." And so, he told Margaret about escaping to America, "If the Lord sees it will be good for us, he will provide a shelter and a hiding place for us and others."

The tract about the pros and cons of emigration that Winthrop wrote, most likely together with the Puritan ministers John White and Francis Higginson, was given the catchy title *Reasons to Be Considered for Justifying the Undertakers of the Intended Plantation in New England, and for Encouraging Such Whose Hearts God Shall Move to Join with Them in It*. It is a handy, albeit touchy, account of the Massachusetts Bay Company's objectives in the New World, and objections to the Old. Clearly, they believe England is in trouble, if not doomed. "The departing of good people from a country does not cause a judgment," they write, "but warns of it."

Again, Hooker, who would echo this run-for-your-lives sentiment before taking off for America via Holland:

So glory is departed from England; for England hath seen her best days, and the reward of sin is coming on apace; for God is packing up of his gospel, because none will buy his wares. . . . God begins to ship away his Noahs, which prophesied and foretold that destruction was near; and God makes account that New England shall be a refuge for his Noahs and his Lots, a rock and a shelter for his righteous ones to run unto; and those that were vexed to see the ungodly lives of the people in this wicked land, shall there be safe.

Honestly, I wish I weren't so moved by this Puritan quandary. I wish I did not identify with their essential questions: What if my country is destroying itself? Could I leave? Should I? And if so, what time's the next train to Montreal?

Well, maybe not Montreal. The first reason Winthrop's pros-and-cons tract gives for crossing the Atlantic is to build a Protestant New England as an antidote to Catholic New France, to "raise a bulwark against the kingdom of Antichrist, which the Jesuits labor to rear up in those parts." Antichrist, by the way, is another name they call the pope.

Their other arguments for getting gone? Overpopulation ("England grows weary of her inhabitants"); the universities at Oxford and Cambridge are "corrupted" and "ruffianlike" and cost too much; God gave the Indians land and they aren't really using it (no cattle); the Indians can "learn from us" about God (and, presumably, cattle); they will avoid hard times like the recent drought in Virginia (known as "the starving time") because, unlike the Virginians, they are neither "sloth" nor "scum"; and, regarding Massachusetts, "God hath consumed the natives with a great plague in those parts, so as there be few inhabitants left."

I take back what I said about how there's nothing more dangerous than a belief. Sometimes there's nothing more dangerous than a germ.

"From 1492 to 1650, contagions claimed as many as nine [native] lives out of ten. . . . The kingdom of death extended from Chile to Newfoundland." I saw those words printed next to a map of North and South America when I visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. The map is black and white but it has a red light on a timer inside, so the Americas turn bloodier and bloodier all day long, like some kind of lava lamp of loss.

Standing in front of that map I let those numbers sink in. Nine out of ten. I learned to count by singing that old minstrel song turned nursery rhyme, "Ten Little Indians." Now I have that melody stuck in my head and I'm picturing seven little, eight little, nine little Aztecs struck dead by smallpox. I guess I knew all this. But watching the map blush so many times, I'm dizzy, so dizzy I have to look for a chair. And once I sit in the chair I feel like I'm learning to count all over again.

Ninety percent.

Way before Europeans started building settlements in the Americas and intentionally killing natives, thanks to the earliest European rambles—the explorers, the fishermen, and other pale-faced

entrepreneurs and rubbernecks passing through—European microorganisms moved here for good right away.

Just before the Pilgrims set foot in Plymouth in 1620, the plague of 1616-19 that Winthrop and the others reference in their tract wiped out New England tribes. Remember Squanto, the legendary English-speaking Indian, hero of the First Thanksgiving? He spoke English because he had learned it in Europe after he was kidnapped by sailors. By the time he made his way back to America, everyone he knew was dead. Plymouth was actually built on the site of Squanto's hometown, Patuxet. All his friends and family, his whole village, were killed off by the diseases that arrived with earlier European visitors. Squanto was hanging around Plymouth because it was the only home he knew. That's why he was there to help the incompetent white people grow corn—using seeds they'd stolen from some other Indians on Cape Cod.

When King James learned of the epidemic he thanked "Almighty God in his great goodness and bounty toward us" for "this wonderful plague among the savages."

It wasn't only the insufferable James, whom Winston Churchill described as having assumed the crown "with a closed mind, and a weakness for lecturing," who made such unkind remarks. Winthrop saw the plague the same way. "God hath thereby cleared our title to this place," he wrote.

Even the nineteenth-century abolitionist (and Puritan descendant) Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had a moral blind spot where the continent's original inhabitants were concerned. According to her son and grandson, upon reading as a child that "a plague had wasted the Indian tribes, and so prepared a place for the Pilgrim fathers to settle undisturbed" she felt "that the very ground under her feet was consecrated by some special dealings of God's wonder-working providence."

An excerpt from Anglo adventurer Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* is printed next to the kingdom of death map in the museum. Describing his first trip to New England in 1622, he writes that the Indians "died in heaps as they lay in their houses. . . . And the bones and skulls upon the several places of their habitations made such a spectacle . . . that, as I traveled in that forest near Massachusetts it seemed to me a new Golgotha." Golgotha, the museum points out, means "place of the skull."

Next to Morton's grim account is this one from *The De Soto Chronicles* of 1540 about how disease had turned parts of the American Southeast into a wasteland: "About this place . . . were large vacant towns grown up in grass that appeared as if no people had lived in them for a long time."

When I was reading up on the plague, one sentence in James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* startled me. Loewen writes that "after a smallpox epidemic the Cherokee," according to anthropologist William S. Willis, " 'de spaired so much that they lost confidence in their gods and the priests destroyed the sacred objects of the tribe.' "

I was born in eastern Oklahoma and both my parents have Cherokee ancestors who were forced west on the Trail of Tears in 1838. I have in my possession two family heirlooms—a crumbling copy of *The Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, published in 1875, and my great-grand-mother's high

school diploma from the Cherokee Female Seminary (the first school for girls west of the Mississippi), dated 1898. These are probably the two items I own that I would reach for as I sprinted for the door in case of fire. But they are exceedingly Cherokee artifacts, which is to say they are embarrassingly English: a law book pretty much straight from the quill of James Madison, and a young lady's diploma from Bible school. Of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast, the Cherokee, even when I was young, still prided themselves on being the most civilized of all—the most Christian, the best behaved, the only North American tribe with an alphabet, invented by Sequoyah in 1821. And I have always been a little uneasy about what seems like a striving for whiteness. It's just ever so craven.

I'm a tad Seminole, too. Now there's a tribe with backbone. Swamp fights! Osceola stabbing Andrew Jackson's treaty with a knife! Technically, the Seminole are, to this day, still at war with the United States.

So I always cringed, wondering why, when the English showed up, most of the Cherokee dropped whatever they were doing and adopted English ways on the spot, from becoming Christians and speaking English to eventually printing their own newspaper, ratifying a constitution, and owning black slaves like the white Southerners they aspired to be. Perhaps this is why: they "despaired so much that they lost confidence in their gods and the priests destroyed the sacred objects of the tribe." It makes so much sense. Some microscopic predator comes along and wipes out most of the tribe and *of course* they would abandon their gods. Their gods abandoned them. Of course, they would take one look at the English—so alive, so well—and bow down to this English deity with so much mojo he endows his believers with some magical vaccine. I'm starting to see my family heirlooms not just as artifacts of American history but rather artifacts in the history of immunology.

The following words are written next to that bloody map of the Americas in the National Museum of the American Indian: "That initial explosion of death is one of the greatest tragedies in human history because it was unintended and unavoidable, and even inevitable. But what happened in its wake was not."