

## 2. Thomas Morton, The Native Americans of New England (1637)

Source: *Thomas Morton, New English Canaan . . . (1637), reprinted in Old South Leaflets (Boston, 1883), vol. 4.*

Among the first English settlers to write a description of the Indians of New England was Thomas Morton, an early leader of a community at Mount Wollaston (present-day Quincy), Massachusetts, founded in 1625. In *New England Canaan*, published in 1637, Wollaston described Indian life as well as the natural environment of the area, and offered a running commentary on nearby settler communities, many of whom condemned Mount Wollaston as a place of drunkenness and debauchery. Nonetheless, Morton's account of Native Americans was widely influential. Morton presented a careful account of the Indians' homes, trade relations, society, and religion, freely offering his own judgments about them. He condemned some aspects of Indian life, claiming that their religious beliefs amounted to devil-worship, but admired their generosity and the fact that unlike Europeans they were not obsessed with acquiring "superfluous commodities."

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### OF THEIR HOUSES AND HABITATIONS.

The Natives of New England are accustomed to build them houses much like the wild Irish; they gather poles in the woods and put the great end of them in the ground, placing them in form of a circle or circumference, and, bending the tops of them in form of an Arch, they bind them together with the bark of Walnut trees, which is wondrous tough, so that they make the same round on the top for the smoke of their fire to ascend and pass through; . . . The fire is always made in the midst of the house, . . . yet some times they fell a tree that groweth near the house, and, by drawing in the end thereof, maintain the fire on both sides, burning the tree by degrees shorter and shorter, until it be all consumed; for it burneth night and day. Their lodging is made in three places of the house about the fire; they lie upon planks, commonly about a foot or 18 inches above the ground, raised upon

rails that are borne up upon forks; they lay mats under them, and coats of deer skins, otters, beavers, racoons, and of bears' hides, all which they have dressed and converted into good leather, . . . and in this manner they lie as warm as they desire. . . . If any one that shall come into their houses and there fall asleep, when they see him disposed to lie down, they will spread a mat for him of their own accord, and lay a roll of skins . . . and let him lie. If he sleep until their meat be dished up, they will set a wooden bowl of meat by him that sleepeth, and wake him saying, . . . if you be hungry, there is meat for you, where if you will eat you may. Such is their humanity. . . .

### Of Their Petty Conjuring Tricks

If we do not judge amiss of these savages in accounting them witches, . . . some correspondence they have with the Devil out of all doubt. Papasiquineo [a Native American leader] . . . hath advanced his honor in his feats or juggling tricks (as I may right term them) to the admiration of the spectators, whom he endeavored to persuade that he would go under water to the further side of a river, too broad for any man to undertake with a breath, which thing he performed by swimming over. . . . Likewise . . . in the heat of all summer to make ice appear in a bowl of fair water; first, having the water set before him, he hath begun his incantation according to their usual custom, and before the same has been ended a thick cloud has darkened the air and, on a sudden, a thunder clap hath been heard that has amazed the natives; in an instant he hath showed a firm piece of ice to float in the midst of the bowl in the presence of the vulgar people, which doubtless was done by the agility of Satan, his consort. . . .

### Of Their Acknowledgement of the Creation, and the Immortality of the Soul

Although these savages are found to be without Religion, Law, and King . . . yet are they not altogether without the knowledge of God (historically); for they have it amongst them by tradition that God made one man and one woman, and bade them live together and get children, kill deer, beasts, birds, fish and fowl, and what they would at

their pleasure; and that their posterity was full of evil, and made God so angry that he let in the Sea upon them, and drowned the greatest part of them, that were naughty men, (the Lord destroyed so) . . . The other, (which were not destroyed,) increased the world, and when they died (because they were good) went to the house of Kytan [the supreme good Spirit or God], pointing to the setting of the sun. . . .

#### That the Savages Live a Contended Life

A gentleman and a traveler, that had been in the parts of New England for a time, when he returned again, in his discourse of the Country, wondered, (as he said,) that the natives of the land lived so poorly in so rich a Country, like to our Beggars in England. Surely that Gentleman had not time or leisure while he was there truly to inform himself of the state of that Country, and the happy life the Savages would lead were they once brought to Christianity.

I must confess they want the use and benefit of Navigation, (which is the very sinews of a flourishing Commonwealth,) yet are they supplied with all manner of needful things for the maintenance of life and livelihood. . . . I must needs commend them in this particular, that, though they buy many commodities of our nation, yet they keep but few, and those of special use. They love not to be cumbered with many utensils, and although every proprietor knows his own, yet all things, (so long as they will last), are used in common amongst them. . . . According to humane reason, guided only by the light of nature, these people lead the more happy and freer life, being void of care, which torments the minds of so many Christians: They are not delighted in baubles, but in useful things.

#### Questions

1. What does Morton admire in the life of Native Americans and what does he condemn?
2. Why does he write that the Indians lead a "freer life" than Europeans?

### 3. Bartolomé de las Casas on Spanish Treatment of the Indians, from *History of the Indies* (1528)

*Source: Bartolomé de las Casas: from History of the Indies, trans./ed. Andrée Collard. Copyright © 1971 by Andrée Collard, renewed 1999 by Joyce J. Contrucci. Reprinted by permission of Joyce Contrucci.*

Known as the "Apostle of the Indians," Bartolomé de las Casas, a Catholic priest, was the most eloquent critic of Spanish mistreatment of the New World's native population. Las Casas took part in the exploitation of Indian labor on Hispaniola and Cuba. But in 1514, he freed his Indian slaves and began to preach against the injustices of Spanish rule. In his *History of the Indies*, Las Casas denounced Spain for causing the deaths of millions of innocent people. The excerpt that follows details events on Hispaniola, the Caribbean island first conquered and settled by Spain. Las Casas called for the Indians to enjoy the rights of other subjects of Spain.

Largely because of Las Casas's efforts, in 1542 Spain promulgated the New Laws, ordering that Indians no longer be enslaved. But Spain's European rivals seized upon Las Casas's criticisms to justify their own ambitions. His writings became the basis for the Black Legend, the image of Spain as a uniquely cruel empire. Other nations would claim that their imperial ventures were inspired by the desire to rescue Indians from Spanish rule.

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IN THAT YEAR of 1500, . . . the King determined to send a new governor to Hispaniola, which at the time was the only seat of government in the Indies. The new governor was fray Nicolás de Ovando, Knight of Alcántara, and at that time comendador of Lares.

. . .

At first, the Indians were forced to stay six months away at work; later, the time was extended to eight months and this was called a shift, at the end of which they brought all the gold for minting. The King's part was subtracted and the rest went to individuals, but for years no one kept a single peso because they owed it all to merchants and other creditors, so that the anguish and torments endured by the