Nature's "Rude Garden": English and Indians as Producers and Consumers of Food in Early New England

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Connecticut is the "Lord's waste," wrote John Winthrop. What he meant by this is that the Indian inhabitants of Connecticut and of New England in general had not made proper use of the land by tilling it intensively as God had intended man to do. Opinions such as Winthrop's have left a double legacy which continues up to the present day. On the one hand, Americans tend to visualize the Indians as hunters and gatherers, who were canny in knowing the ways of the forest and its creatures, but whose technology was limited to bow and arrow. The other half of the legacy perpetuates the idea that, while native Americans had respect for the land, they were replaced by Europeans whose attitudes toward nature were completely exploitative, and whose actions were characterized by a ruthless stripping of the land of its resources. This essay proposes to examine both halves of this legacy, by analyzing Indians and Englishmen as rival exploiters of nature. Both cultures lived on food and equipment which were derived from nature, so each group lived by exploiting nature. Both societies were sedentary and agricultural, and both saw the land and nature's riches as having been made by God for man's use. Both saw man's role as one of using and conserving, as exploiters and guardians.

New England had never received the public praise showered on Virginia by the well-organized Virginia Company before its dissolution in 1624. The forbidding coast of New England, a snow-covered "Desart," was said to have frightened prospective colonists, so that that region was "unregarded." When men began to write to interest Englishmen in investing in New England, whether in purse or person, they argued urgently to overcome this picture, stressing the abundance of flora and fauna, and the fruitfulness of the soil. William Bradford castigates those who doubt...
New England’s abundance as “ridiculous.” John Brereton said that in comparison to those goods which God and nature have bestowed on New England, “the most fertile part of all England is (of its selfe) but barren.”

Not all are as enthusiastic as Brereton, but virtually every writer reported in strong terms that New England is indeed fruitful. All were aware, however, that great harm had been done in the past by overpraise of America. Overpraise caused men to come with inadequate supplies for the initial establishment of homes, and lured men as colonists who were not prepared for colonization’s rigors. Great expectations also caused commercial companies sponsoring colonies to expect quick and easy return on their investment and made them unwilling to continue to supply colonists who could not pay their way. Therefore, writers on New England, acutely aware of the notorious starving times in Virginia, stressed that New England’s abundance was neither unlimited nor unqualified. Many writers, Puritans and Anglicans alike, emphasized that the potential plenty of New England could be realized only with hard labor. William Wood earnestly corrected a claim he had seen published that boys of ten or twelve could earn their keep, “that cannot be, for he must have more than a boy’s head, and no lesse than a man’s strength, that intends to live comfortably.” Moreover, hard work was said to be able to ensure a “sufficiencie” of provisions, not plenty. Many writers stressed that New England was no place for men who wanted an easy life. Edward Winslow urged people to consider carefully before deciding to emigrate. New settlements offered the hardest life. Though John Underhill praised the fertility of Connecticut, John Winthrop recorded the famine and difficulties endured by the first settlers from Massachusetts Bay in the Connecticut Valley.

Finally, the writers qualified the general picture of fruitfulness by stressing that everything is available in its proper season, which meant that he who intended to make a success of planting there must plan his life and not think he can find everything instantly available to his hand. John Smith reduced this lesson to an often-quoted simile: “But if a man will goe at Christmass to gather Cherries in Kent, he may be deceived; though there be plentie in Summer: so, heere these plenties have each their seasons, as I have expressed.” Smith’s implication is that those who have called New England barren have had expectations as ludicrous as these.

Connecticut and all of New England, then, was a land where a
man who was willing to work hard could make a good life for himself and his family. It was not a place for those who dreamed of fast and easy wealth: Christopher Levett ridiculed a compendium of false claims made for New England:

And to say something of the Countrey: I will not doe therein as some have done, to my knowledge speake more than is true: I will not tell you that you may smell the come fields before you see the Land, neither must men thinke that corn doth growe naturally (or on trees,) nor will the deare come when they are called, or stand still & look one a man, untill he shute him, not knowing a man from a beast, nor the fish leape into the kettle, nor on drie Land, neither are they so plentiful, that you may dip them up in baskets, nor take Codd in netts to make a voyage, which is no truer then that the fowles will present themselves, to you with spitts through them.

The key to the problem was the question referred to by Levett of whether the corn in America would grow "naturally." Englishmen were convinced that what New England needed was the technology of industrious colonists to bring America's promise of fertility to fruition. Nature, to seventeenth-century Englishmen, represented potential. New England was potentially fruitful, but not actually. That is, all nature is the raw materials from which man can make products necessary and useful for life. For this reason, the products of man and nature in combination were considered superior to nature alone. George Withers wrote that New England was a "rude Garden" in which it would be necessary to "order Nature's fruitfulness." John Brereton wrote that to be "artificial" was above the powers of nature. Artificial was a word of high praise, while natural meant simple, or simple-minded. John Smith was very clearly in this tradition when he, after discussing the greatest countries in the world, said they were not naturally superior to New England: "They are beautified by the long labor and dilligence of industrious people and Art. This is onely as God made it..."

Seventeenth-century writers, then, celebrated man's exploitation of nature. They did not see man as taking from nature and spoiling it in the process. Rather, they saw man as part of nature, as having a crucial and God-designed role in the development of nature's potential. God could have created the world with all species developed to perfection. He chose, instead, to create the possibility and the agent of perfection. George Hakewill presented this assumption clearly in his *Apology of the Power and Providence of God*:
It seems by this, that all things by labour and industry may bee made better than Nature produces them. And it is certaine that God so ordained it, that the industry of man should in all things concurre with the workes of Nature, both for the bringing of them to their perfection, and for the keeping of them therein being brought unto it.

He went on to say that species will degenerate if not tended by man. Just as the bee in its exploitation of the flower performs a crucial role in the transmission of life, so man was equally part of nature and equally important in his exploitation. Seventeenth-century writers would not have distinguished between a dam built by beavers and one built by man. Both would have been artificial and both natural.

Writers on New England often expressed this belief about man’s function in the form of an analogy with sexual reproduction. The name Virginia, which originally applied to the entire coastal area including New England, is the most well-known example of this imagery. Thomas Morton developed this imagery for New England explicitly when he compared New England to a “faire virgin” on her wedding night when English technology, “art and industry,” will bring her potential to fruition. If the English do not take up this masculine role, then the virgin’s womb will instead become a “glorious tombe.”

In writing of the important role of English technology in America, the writers consistently imply that the Indians have done nothing to develop her resources. This, of course, was not true and the writers knew it was not true. When they left the rhetorical heights and began to describe what they saw around them, they clearly communicated their understanding that the Indians were in fact an agricultural people, living a settled and sedentary life. Life was made much easier for the first colonists in New England by the fact that they were able to occupy and farm land which had been abandoned by their Indian predecessors. The Indian population of New England had been disastrously weakened by European diseases, which in many cases preceded the English colonists. The 10,000 years of isolation of the Americas following the closing of the Bering Strait land bridge had created a population without resistance to the diseases common in the rest of the world. Many Indians are thought to have died of these diseases after contact with early explorers, French, English, and Spanish, well before the actual colonists arrived. It is known that the rate of decline after colonization was catastrophic. Robert Cushman in the seventeenth century wrote that “the twentieth person is scarce left alive.”
most recent estimates of the rate of decline for the entire seventeenth century in New England range from seventy-five percent to as high as ninety percent dead. Squanto, who taught the Plymouth colonists to plant corn, was the last member of his tribe left alive. The ravages of disease explain why New England offered the English immigrants cleared land for the taking, but their use of Indian-cleared land also testifies to the status of the former Indian inhabitants as competent exploiters and developers of the land.

Not only did the Indians practice agriculture, but they produced a crop which the English thought was just short of miraculous. *Mourt's Relation* records the Pilgrim’s first sight of Indian corn, "some yellow, and some red, and others mixt with blew, which was a very goodly sight." One reason why they felt "Better grain cannot be then the Indian corne..." was its tremendous yield. William Morrell said one grain of maize yields one pint of corn at Harvest. Francis Higginson’s enthusiasm spilled over in print:

> The abundant encrease of Corne proves this Countrey to be a wonderment. Thirtie, fortie, fiftie, sixtie, are ordinarie here: yea Josephs encrease in AEgypt is out-stript here with us. Our Planters hope to have more then a hundred fould this yeere: and all this while I am within compasse; what will you say of two hundred fould and upwards? It is almost incredible what great gaine some of our English Planters have had by our Indian Corne.

Another marvelous aspect of the Indian corn was the variety of uses to which it could be put. Modern research reinforces this set of assertions. Over the world, the average yield from maize which had been hybridized from a tiny wild maize ear, is about double that of wheat, and maize produces more calories in a shorter growing season than most other food plants.

Not only was their grain superior, but some writers indicated that in the American environment Indian cultivation methods were also superior. Every American is familiar with the story of how Squanto taught the Pilgrims to plant corn with a fish in the bottom of each hole because they were using "old grounds." Though the Pilgrims faithfully practiced Indian methods, they admitted they were less successful than the Indians, because they were not yet skilled in American techniques. William Wood made it clear that the contribution of New England’s natives to the agricultural understanding of the English was more than just the use of fish for manure:

> Many wayes hath their advice and endeavour been advantageous unto us; they being our first instructors for the planting of their Indian Corne, by
teaching us to cull out the finest seede, to observe the fittest season, to keepe distance for holes, and fit measure for hills, to worme it, and weede it; to prune it, and dresse it as occasion shall require.31

Many writers are quick to argue that their use of the Indian method of setting corn with fish should not be construed as meaning that New England is less fertile than Virginia. In fact, they say, it shows just the opposite. New Englanders fertilize with fish because the fish is so plentiful that if they do not use it, they will be wasting New England’s abundance. In a more sober mood, they do admit that the fish manure allows them to continue to use the same old Indian fields year after year instead of going to the labor of clearing new lands.32

Though they lacked salt, the Indians did preserve food for the winter. Thomas Morton told how they first dried the corn in the sun and then buried it in holes each of which would hold a hogshead. These “barnes” were lined with mats and the corn was stored in great baskets. All was covered with earth, “and in this manner it is preserved from destruction or putrifaction; to be used in case of necessity, and not else.” Morton compared the Indians to a favorite seventeenth-century example from nature, the industrious and civilized Ant and Bee.33

Though the English were happy to learn and borrow from the Indians, there is also evidence of conflict between the two technologies from the beginning. Some writers felt that the cultivation of maize was a temporary phase which the colonies would pass through, after which they would be able to revert to their more familiar grains.34 William Wood believed that the delicate English grains could not be grown until some of the richness of the soil had been drained by cultivation of maize: “Such is the rankenesse of the ground that it must bee sowne the first yeare with Indian Corne: which is a soaking graine, before it will be fit for to receive English seede.”35 In fact, early attempts to grow English grain crops were failures, with yields in Plymouth colony falling to the level of thirteenth or fourteenth-century England. Yields of English grains began to improve when the farmers were able to equip themselves with draft animals and more sophisticated plows to break up the soil more finely. The historian of agriculture in Plymouth argues that part of the reason for low yields must be attributed to English unwillingness to do the arduous work that the Indian women did in the fields.36 Domesticated farm animals came to New England for the first time with English colonists and this created another conflict between Indian and

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English agricultural technology. The Indians did not fence their fields and the English were not accustomed to fencing in their animals. There were repeated incidents of destruction of crops by cattle and swine which were adjudicated in the courts during the early period until responsibility was settled for erection of fences. Sometimes these cases were between Indian and English, sometimes between English and English.

It is interesting and instructive to compare the diet of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishmen with that of contemporary native Americans. American Indians ate a basic diet of maize and beans, supplemented by hunting and fishing, as well as squashes, pulses, sunflower seeds and other vegetables and berries. Neither maize nor beans is a complete protein when eaten alone. That is, neither contains all of the eight amino acids which the human body cannot manufacture for itself. However, when eaten together, they do form superior complete proteins, increasing the protein content of the ingredients by fifty percent. Further, growing beans and corn together as the Indians did increases yield, because the beans, as legumes, fix nitrogen in the soil.

Enjoying one's food was a great virtue for early modern Englishmen. Often writers commending the American climate will offer the good appetites of the colonists as their best proof of healthfulness. They were glad to note that the Indians ate happily. Thomas Morton says the Indians "delight in" roast fish and explains, "the aire doeth beget good stomacks, and they feede continually." William Wood agrees that they eat with relish, but says they eat enormous amounts "till their bellies stand south, ready to split with fulnesse," and then do not eat for two or three days. When they do eat, their "hunger-sawced stomacks" cause them to eat quickly and greedily without "trenchers, napkins, or knives," eating from the "verdent carpet of the earth which Nature spreads them."

Many of the writers were interested in preparation of meals. James Rosier, probably keeping one of the attributes of the Medieval Wild Man in mind, specifically asserts that they "eat nothing raw," either fish or flesh. Fish and flesh were universally presented as being roasted over or by the fire, either on spits or racks. Even more popular among the Indians as reported by colonists was a sort of stew made by boiling some combination of fish, flesh, grains, and vegetables together. Wood says the Americans insist everyone partake of their "high-conceited delicates" and sample their stew with everything boiled together:
"some remaining raw, the rest converted by over-much seething to a loathed nash, not halfe so good as Irish Boniclapper." Depending on the age of the grains, maize was either eaten fresh or dried as used as cornmeal. James Rosier described the making of cornbread.45

When the Indians traveled, their diet reportedly became simpler. They carried a powdered dried corn which they would mix with water as they found it.46 William Wood thought this Nocake even less palatable than Indian stew:

...they take thrice three spoonefulls a day, dividing it into three meales. If it be in Winter, and Snow be on the ground, they can eate when they please, stopping Snow after their dusty victuals, which otherwise would feed them little better than a Tiburne halter. In summer they must stay till they meete with a Spring or Brooke, where they may have water to prevent the imminent danger of choaking.47

Some of the writers mention flavoring and unusual foods. James Rosier, for instance, is unique in asserting that the Indians make cheese from the milk of "Rain-Deere or Fallow-Deere which they have tame as we have cowes." Both the making of cheese and the keeping of domesticated animals are found only in this source. Rosier says they hang whale meat in their houses and use the fat for flavoring their pulses, pease, and maize.48

Colonists may have longed for their familiar English diet, but there is no evidence that that diet was nutritionally superior. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English people of the poorer classes subsisted largely on bread, with the grain content varying according to region.49 People of gentry status or above, concentrated their diet on meat.50 Neither group ate much fruit or vegetables.51 People in general suffered from Vitamin A and D deficiencies and from anemia, while the high-meat diet of the upperclasses led to a frequent incidence of bladder stones.52 The great tranquilizer and dietary supplement was beer, of which the daily Elizabethan ration for every man, woman, and child was one gallon.53 Even so, Lawrence Stone argues that the high level of interpersonal violence in early modern England can be traced in part to the fact that "the poor were victims of chronic malnutrition, the rich of chronic dyspepsia from over-indulgence in an ill-balanced diet: neither condition is conducive to calm and good humor."54

Some Englishmen who described the American Indian for those at home presented the Indians as an ideal society. Chief among the reasons given for this praise was that society’s lack of covetousness and its temperance in eating and drinking. William Wood at-
tributes Indian long life and good health to the fact that they "are not brought downe with suppressing labour, vexed with annoying cares, or drowned in the excessive abuse of overflowing plenty." They are not covetous, because they want only useful things and no more of those than are necessary to them.

There is a pervasive feeling in English writings on America that gluttony was the most serious sin in the catalogue of English habits. James Rosier says the Indians, by contrast, eat and drink no more "than seemed to content nature." Thomas Hariot returned frequently to this theme: "They are verye sober in their eatinge, and drinkinge, and consequentlye verye longe lived because they doe not oppress nature." Wood's claim that the Indians fell sick if they adopted the "plenty of England's fuller diet," is supported by modern research. Wilcomb Washburn reports on studies which show that some groups of Indians metabolize starches differently from Europeans and therefore may be made sick by a diet high in refined sugar. Symbolic of all that was wrong with English society for these writers was the devising of "variety of Sauces to procure appetite." Smith says "they never trouble themselves with such variety of Apparell, Drinkes, Viands, Sawses, Perfumes, Perservatives, and niceties as we; yet live as long, and much more healthfull and hardy." Robert Cushman also warns of the danger to health of "mixtures upon the stomach." Hariot cries out most strongly against English gluttony. Even when they "make good cheere together," the Indians "are moderate in their eatinge wher by they avoide sicknes. I would to god wee would followe their example. For wee should bee free from many kynes of diseasyes which wee fall into by sumptuous and unseasonable banketts, continuallye devisinge new sawces, and provocation of gluttonnye to satisfie our unsatiable appetite."

As modern concern for the interaction between man and the environment grows, some writers have asserted that the first in a long chain of ecological disasters occurred with the entrance of Europeans into America. The "first ecologist," as Wilcomb Washburn calls the Indian, was, according to these authors, replaced on America's eastern coast by the European who thought in terms of exploiting nature, and of using her resources to make up for European deficiencies. The Indians, by contrast, according to Wilbur Jacobs, had "respect for animal life and reverence for the land." The ecological concern of the American natives was most clearly seen in the care they took in hunting to harvest just enough
animals for their needs, never endangering the herd by over-
hunting. This care is contrasted with the ruthless depletion of beaver in the later seventeenth century by Indian hunters who hunted for Englishmen.⁶³

It is undeniable that English writers of this period thought of the natural world as given to man by God for man’s use. Not to develop nature’s resources was seen by them as sinful. The modern reader shudders at William Crashaw’s assertion that it is “no great offence” to disturb trees which have grown for a thousand years.⁶⁴ However, this does not necessarily mean that they thought of exploitation in terms of ruthless depletion of resources. English writers exhibited real concern for the development and conservation of resources. Furthermore, they were sometimes critical of observed Indian practices as wasteful of natural resources.

One such practice was the annual or semi-annual burning of the woods. As William Wood described it, “it being the custome of the Indians to burne the wood in November..it consumes all the underwood, and rubbish, which otherwise would over grow the Country, making it unpassable, and spoile their much affected hunting.” Thick underbrush is seen only in swampy areas.⁶⁵ Many writers remark on the open, parklike quality of American woods, and several mention this practice of burning. Martin Pringe saw Indians burn an area a mile long.⁶⁶ John Smith remarked on the same practice in Virginia, where a man could ride a horse through the woods.⁶⁷ Modern authorities agree that Indian burning was a beneficial practice. Not only did it facilitate movement and hunting, but it also made possible the growth of a great variety of food-producing plants—fruits, berries, and nuts—and attracted animals, such as deer, elk, and buffalo, which would not live in a dense forest. Finally, the burning also drove away some unwelcome animals, such as reptiles.⁶⁸ The burning generally destroyed underbrush, but not large trees. It could not, however, be controlled. Thomas Morton pointed out how dangerous the fires were. He says the timber in the high ground in New England has all been spoiled, so good trees must be sought in the low wetlands. He also describes his own practice of carefully burning the land around his own house so that, if the Indian fires come near, the house will not be in danger. “For when the fire is once kindled, it dilates and spreads it selfe as well against, as with the winde; burning continually night and day, untill a shower of raine falls to quench it.” Morton does go on to say the “firing of the country” is what makes...
the woodlands resemble parks, "and makes the Country very beautifull, and commodious." Nicholas Hoskin described a great fire that covered ten miles and burned for a week. 'I know not who, or what he was that gave fire to it, but I think he was a servant hired by the divell to doe that wicked deed..." Plymouth colony forbade use of Indians as wood cutters because their methods were so wasteful.

More of a problem is Indian treatment of animals. Did the Indian as the "first ecologist" carefully harvest the deer according to his need alone? Several writers were concerned about this issue. Thomas Hariot both exhibits his concern about stimulating over-hunting and his estimate of Indian takes when he says the English can trade for thousands of deer skins yearly, "and no more wast or spoyle of Deare then is and hath beene ordinarily in time before." Ralph Hamor believes that the fecundity of America is an example of the special providence of God. Were it not for this fruitfulness, "the Naturalls would assuredly starve." Hamor seems shocked by their hunting practices, as he says they kill deer "all the yeer long, neither sparing yong nor olde, no not the Does readie to fawne, not the yong fawnes, if but two daies ould." New England reports give the same impression. Mourt's Relation reports finding "a good deer killed." The Indians had cut the deer's horns off and left the carcass, which was being eaten by a wolf. So many deer are killed at hunting time, according to Thomas Morton, that the Indians "have bestowed six or seaven at a time, upon one English man whome they have borne affection to."

The evidence demonstrates that the Indians were not averse to making massive changes in the natural world, as in their burning, when they felt the result would favour their livelihood. It does not prove that the English were superior in their ecological concerns. It does demonstrate that neither side had a unique grasp of the complexities and responsibilities in man's relationship to the natural environment. At least some late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Englishmen were very concerned about establishing a responsible relationship to this environment. In both cultures man was the exploiter and the conservator.

English colonists pursued their perceived duty of making the land fruitful by spreading out from Massachusetts Bay and along the Connecticut River to found Hartford, "a very fine river and a most fruitful place," as John Winthrop called it. By 1638, John Wiswall could conclude his catalogue of New England's plantations by
saying: "There are at Conectichute, there are some pretty plantations. But to wind up all in one word, things prosper well, and men of pretty parts God sends over, both for church and common-wealth."

"Brereton, Brieje and true Relation, p. 8.


"Cushman, Sermon, sig. A3.


"See Mourt's Relation, pp. 42-43.

"Ibid., p. 6.


"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 70.


"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 12.


"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 67.

"James Rosier, A True Relation of the most prosperous voyage made this present yeere 1605, by Captaine George Waymouth (London, 1605), sig. B3v.


"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 68.

"Rosier, True Relation, sig. E3.

"Mourt's Relation, p. 34.

"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 68.

"Rosier, True Relation, sig. E3v.


"Ibid., pp. 94-95.

"Ibid., pp. 93 and 147.


"Thomas, Religion and Decline of Magic, pp. 21-22.


"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 63.

"Rosier, True Relation, sig. Cv.


"[Robert] [Hushman], Reasons and considerations touching the lawfulness of removing out of England into the parts of America, in Mourt's Relation, p. 72.

"Hariot, Notes, in Roanoke Voyages, ed. Quinn, I, 438.

"Washburn, Indian in America, p. 11 and 56; Jacobs, Dispossessing the American Indian, pp. 19-30, 126-127, and 159-160; Jennings, Invasion of America, p. 87.


"Wood, New Englands Prospect, p. 15.

"Martin Pringe, A Voyage set out from the Citie of Bristol...for the discoverie of the North part of Virginia, in Hakluyus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, ed. Samuel Purchas (1625; rpt. Glasgow, 1906), XVIII, 329.


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"Mourt’s Relation, p. 30.
