

John Lawson's assessment of the Tuscarora

WITH COMMENTARY BY DAVID WALBERT

John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of That Country: Together with the Present State Thereof. And a Journal of a Thousand Miles, Travel'd Thro' Several Nations of Indians. Giving a Particular Account of Their Customs, Manners, &c.* (London, 1709).

As you read...

MIXED MOTIVES

In his book *A New Voyage to Carolina*, John Lawson gave as fair and balanced an account of American Indian people and culture as any Englishman had written to that point. He praised their medicine, in particular, and noted their many “virtues.” He blamed the English for their unchristian behavior in selling the Indians alcohol and cheating them in trade. He even claimed — just a few years before the Tuscarora War erupted — that “all the Wars, which we have had with the Savages, were occason’d by the unjust Dealings of the Christians towards them.”

At the same time, Lawson wanted the Indians to convert to Christianity, adopt English ways, and live in colonial society. He wanted colonists and Indians to be allies and live together — but under English rules. He referred to Indians as “savages,” as most English did at this time, and threw in a remark about Jews that would be found offensive today.

To make sense of Lawson’s account of the Tuscarora, we have to remember that he was a product of his time. He believed strongly in the superiority of European culture, English government, and the Christian religion. But he was also an honest man who was genuinely interested in learning about — and learning from — the people he met in America. If we have trouble reconciling those two sides of John Lawson, it may be because he had trouble reconciling them, too.

Now, as I before hinted, we will see what grounds there are to make these People serviceable to us, and better themselves thereby¹.

On a fair Scheme, we must first allow these Savages² what really belongs to them, that is, what good Qualities, and natural Endowments, they possess, whereby they being in their proper Colours³, the Event may be better guess’d at, and fathom’d.



Figure 1. The stalking head Lawson praises was a deer head and skin worn by a hunter to camouflage himself while hunting.

First, they are as apt to learn any Handicraft, as any People that the World affords; I will except none; as is seen by their Canoes and Stauking Heads⁴, which they make of themselves; but to my purpose, the Indian Slaves in South Carolina, and elsewhere, make my Argument good.

Secondly, we have no disciplin'd Men in Europe, but what have, at one time or other, been branded with Mutining, and Murmuring⁵ against their Chiefs. These Savages are never found guilty of that great Crime in a Soldier; I challenge all Mankind to tell me of one Instance of it; besides, they never prove Traitors to their Native Country, but rather chuse Death than partake and side with the Enemy.

They naturally possess the Righteous Man's Gift; they are Patient under all Afflictions, and have a great many other Natural Vertues, which I have slightly touch'd throughout the Account of these Savages.

They are really better to us, than we are to them;⁶ they always give us Victuals at their Quarters, and take care we are arm'd against Hunger and Thirst: We do not so by them (generally speaking) but let them walk by our Doors Hungry, and do not often relieve them. We look upon them with Scorn and Disdain, and think them little better than Beasts in Humane Shape, though if well examined, we shall find that, for all our Religion and Education, we possess more Moral Deformities, and Evils than these Savages do, or are acquainted withal.

We reckon them Slaves in Comparison to us, and Intruders, as oft as they enter our Houses, or hunt near our Dwellings. But if we will admit Reason to be our Guide, she will inform us, that these Indians are the freest People in the World, and so far from being Intruders upon us, that we have abandon'd our own Native Soil, to drive them out, and possess theirs; neither have we any true Balance, in Judging of these poor Heathens, because we neither give Allowance for their Natural Disposition, nor the Sylvian Education, and strange Customs, (uncouth to us) they lie under and have ever been train'd up to; these are false Measures for Christians to take⁷, and indeed no Man can be reckon'd a Moralist only, who will not make choice and use, of better Rules to walk and act by: We trade with them, it's true, but to what End? Not to shew them the Steps of Vertue, and the Golden Rule, to do as we would be done by. No, we have furnished them with the Vice of Drunkenness⁸, which is the open Road to all others, and daily cheat them in every thing we sell⁹, and esteem it a Gift of Christianity, not to sell to them so cheap as we do to the Christians, as we call our selves. Pray let me know where is there to be found one Sacred Command or Precept of our Master¹⁰, that counsels us to such Behaviour? Besides, I believe it will not appear, but that all the Wars, which we have had with the Savages, were occason'd by the unjust Dealings of the Christians towards them. I can name more than a few, which my own Enquiry has given me a right Understanding of, and I am afraid the remainder (if they come to the test) will prove themselves Birds of the same Feather.

INDIANS AVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY.

As we are in Christian Duty bound, so we must act and behave ourselves to these Savages, if we either intend to be serviceable in converting them to the Knowledge of the Gospel, or discharge the Duty which every Man, within the Pale¹¹ of the Christian Church, is bound to do. Upon this Score, we ought to shew a Tenderness for these Heathens under the weight of Infidelity; let us cherish their good Deeds, and, with Mildness and Clemency, make

them sensible and forwarn them of their ill ones; let our Dealings be just to them in every Respect, and shew no ill Example, whereby they may think we advise them to practise that which we will not be conformable to ourselves: Let them have cheap Penniworths (without Guile in our Trading with them) and learn them the Mysteries of our Handicrafts, as well as our Religion, otherwise we deal unjustly by them. But it is highly necessary to be brought in Practice, which is, to give Encouragement to the ordinary People, and those of a lower Rank, that they might marry with these Indians, and come into Plantations, and Houses, where so many Acres of Land and some Gratuity of Money, (out of a Publick Stock) are given to the new-married Couple; and that the Indians might have Encouragement to send their Children Apprentices to proper Masters, that would be kind to them, and make them Masters of a Trade, whereby they would be drawn to live amongst us, and become Members of the same Ecclesiastical and Civil Government we are under; then we should have great Advantages to make daily Conversions amongst them, when they saw that we were kind and just to them in all our Dealings. Moreover, by the Indians Marrying with the Christians, and coming into Plantations with their English Husbands, or Wives, they would become Christians, and their Idolatry would be quite forgotten, and, in all probability, a better Worship come in its Stead; for were the Jews engrafted thus¹², and alienated from the Worship and Conversation of Jews, their Abominations would vanish, and be no more.

Thus we should be let into a better Understanding of the Indian Tongue¹³, by our new Converts; and the whole Body of these People would arrive to the Knowledge of our Religion and Customs, and become as one People with us. By this Method also, we should have a true Knowledge of all the Indians Skill in Medicine and Surgery¹⁴; they would inform us of the Situation of our Rivers, Lakes, and Tracts of Land in the Lords Dominions, where by their Assistance, greater Discoveries may be made than has been hitherto found out, and by their Accompanying us in our Expeditions, we might civilize a great many other Nations of the Savages, and daily add to our Strength in Trade, and Interest; so that we might be sufficiently enabled to conquer, or maintain our Ground, against all the Enemies to the Crown of England in America, both Christian and Savage.

On the web

A New Voyage to Carolina

<http://learnnc.org/lp/editions/john-lawson/>

Account of the inhabitants, natural resources, and agriculture of Carolina written by British naturalist and explorer John Lawson during his 1700–1701 journey through the colony and first published in 1709. This web-based critical edition includes extensive commentary, historical context, photographs, illustrations, and maps.

John Lawson

<http://learnnc.org/lp/pages/4901>

John Lawson (1674? – 1711) was a British explorer, naturalist and writer. He played an important role in the history of colonial North Carolina. Little is known definitively about his early life...

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Notes

1. Lawson's goal is clear: He wants to make the Indians "serviceable" to the English colonists — helpful and cooperative. Though Lawson was respectful of Carolina's native peoples and their cultures, he wanted them to convert to Christianity and assimilate into colonial society — blend into it and adopt English ways. But Lawson also genuinely believed that the Indians would be better off with English religion and culture.
2. English writers used the term *savage* to refer to any native person who had not converted to Christianity. Although the term was hardly a compliment, Lawson didn't mean to imply that Carolina's Indians were particularly violent or bloodthirsty.
3. That is, when they are presented in their "true colors" or the way they really are.
4. In his journal entry of Thursday, January 9, 1701, Lawson provides a detailed description of an Indian's "stalking head," the hollowed-out head of a male deer worn when hunting.
5. Here, to *murmur* against someone is to complain quietly about them or to plot secretly against them.
6. This isn't an especially harsh condemnation, but it's often quoted, because Lawson was one of very few Englishmen to point out how badly the colonists treated native Carolinians.
7. Here Lawson accuses his countrymen of not behaving like Christians. So while he would have liked to see Indians converted to Christianity, he also blames the English for not converting them or setting an example of Christian behavior.
8. Most American Indians did not make or drink alcohol before Europeans arrived, but it quickly became a valuable commodity in trade. Since alcohol had no place in native cultures and there were no social rules or guidelines to limit its use, many Indians abused alcohol. It also isn't surprising that alcohol abuse could be a problem at a time when disease and European colonization were wiping out native communities and forcing Indians off their land.

It's also important to note that white Americans at this time consumed massive quantities of alcohol by today's standards. At the end of the eighteenth century, the average adult male drank a half-pint of hard liquor every day, and what we would now call binge drinking was expected at social gatherings.

Throughout the 1700s, Indian leaders asked colonial officials to stop the trade in alcohol. Most colonies passed laws against it at one time or another, but colonial laws were hard to enforce on the frontier, and traders looking for quick profits easily found ways around the law.

(For more information, see "Alcoholism" by Jerrold E. Levy in *The Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (see <http://www.learnnc.org> <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/34669430>.)

9. A common practice among European traders was to give Indians alcohol, get them drunk, then buy their goods (such as furs) for far less than they were worth.
10. Jesus.

11. In this context, “pale” means limits or boundaries — hence the saying “beyond the pale.”
12. That is, if Jews were grafted or inserted into Christian society.
13. Language.
14. Elsewhere in his book, Lawson praised Indian medicine as being more effective than European medicine.

About the author

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EverGreene Painting Studios, Stalking Deer. 1993–1994. Capitol Rotunda, Washington, D.C. Original image available from U.S. Capitol Complex (http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/cox_corr/w_exp/stalking.cfm). This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.