

John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts Bay (Review)

BRIAN FEHLER

Texas Woman's University

John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts Bay: Communities and Connections in Puritan New England, by Kathryn N. Gray. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013. Pp. 192. \$70. ISBN: 9781611485035.

Scholars in fields such as colonial American history and literature, religious studies, and rhetoric will welcome Kathryn N. Gray's *John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts Bay: Communities and Connections in Puritan New England*. Eliot is best known to history as the "Apostle to the Indians," a colonial missionary in New England, one who used his voice and sermons to persuade the Native population. Eliot was also a man of letters, one who used his pen to write letters to correspondents across the Atlantic and produce a grammar and Bible in the Massachusetts language.

The first chapter of the book, "Private Petitions and Transatlantic Discursive Communities," tells the story of Eliot's correspondence with his patrons and supporters in England. Gray argues that "the promotional agenda of Eliot's first surviving letter [of 1633] reveals something of the man who would go on to spend around fifty years of his life tirelessly promoting his missionary cause by petitioning friends, clergymen, and patrons in England for sufficient money and goods to allow him to devote his time to the conversion of Algonquins to Christianity" (3). Many of Eliot's letters during those long years of correspondence were published as tracts, especially those written to the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel. In these published letters, especially, Gray persuasively argues, Eliot invented the image of the "praying Indian" an entirely "new cultural type" (22). The image of the praying Indian helped Eliot convince his readers that New England was, in fact, a fertile ground for conversions. The rhetorical power of the image of the praying Indian, as employed by Eliot, is convincing and adds to our understanding of Eliot's rhetorical skill.

Chapter 2, "Dedicated Dignitaries and the Christian Reader," presents, in its most fascinating parts, a picture of the work that took place between Natives and those colonials who took down in writing the Native oral religious confessions. Missionaries to the Indians, not only Eliot, realized that the Natives' words needed to be presented in such a way that supporters were likely to be compelled by the accounts. Thus, Gray writes, the interpreters' "own ideological motives are often thinly veiled by their apparent objectivism, and the written words become part of a cultural performance" (41). The cultural performance of a similar or different kind, of course, could certainly be traced back to the oral performance of the praying Indian, but Gray rightly recognizes the special performative nature of the written narratives.

Chapter 3, "Speech, Space, and Religious (Re-)Affirmation," continues the discussion of speech acts, here with attention to the spaces, such as churches, and their relationship to speech etiquette. When Eliot spoke at the Cambridge Synod, an institution itself that was a "powerful and controversial feature of religious and civil governance in New England," Natives were invited to listen (64). During these times, listeners were permitted to question the speaker, and

agency was “given over to the Algonquin participants as they are granted the right to challenge and question their colonial interlocutor” (64). Other spaces, such as penitents’ own homes, provided less formal speech opportunities, yet Gray shows that the coming together of colonials and Natives in particular spaces shaped the interactions that occurred in those spaces.

In Chapter 4, Gray turns her attention, as the title suggests, to “Christian Indian Women in Seventeenth-Century New England.” In the accounts Eliot wrote of Native conversions, women were unnamed, but, as Gray writes, the “influence of women over their families’ faith is notable from the earliest of Eliot’s accounts of tribal life” (91). Gray shows that women had influence in their roles as mothers and healers, even though their conversion accounts were not recorded as often as those of the men of the tribe. Still, Eliot did give more than occasional attention to the work of the women, including providing in a letter an eyewitness account of one Christian Indian woman during the crisis of King Philip’s War. Gray successfully shows that, though “voices of Christian Indian women are buried deeply in the documents, letters, and narratives of colonial ministers and missionaries,” they appeared nonetheless (116). Gray especially contributes to our understanding of Eliot’s mission by showing that “women were consciously constructed as a separate and influential reception community for his religious teachings” (116). Women needed to accept his missionary message, Eliot rightly supposed, for his conversion efforts to be successful; therefore, Eliot “courted” the “unique influence” of women on the life of the mission (116).

In the last chapter, “A Reading Community,” Gray takes up the topic of Native literacy. Noting that some Natives attended school and others had developed a system of marks, Gray writes: “From the academic excellence of the college students to the marks of Narragansett leaders, the spectrum of literacy in Native communities in the Massachusetts Bay area was great indeed” (123). Natives had various opportunities to learn to write in English or their own language: using Eliot’s grammar as a guide, working as scribes, even attending Harvard’s Indian College. Gray effectively shows that the Native writers, once able to communicate in text and print, eventually learned to control their own messages; though John Eliot represented the praying Indians in his own writings for decades, they would eventually be able to take up the pen for themselves and in increasing numbers.

Kathryn N. Gray’s *John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts Bay* provides a fresh insight into this famous missionary’s work. By concentrating on the communities involved in the mission work—his own religious peers in New England, sponsors in England, Native men and women—Gray allows us to appreciate the varied rhetorical negotiations achieved in each case. In doing so, Gray presents us with an Eliot who emerges as a skilled orator in New England, as we already knew, but also a persuasive writer who kept his varied audiences firmly in mind.