

JOHN ELIOT

Apostle to the Indians (1645-1690)

From *Fifty Missionary Heroes Every Boy and Girl Should Know*<sup>1</sup>

By JULIA H. JOHNSTON

COME, let us take a thought-journey back over two hundred and fifty years. Can you do it? Of course you can. You can think back thousands of years to the Flood, or to the Garden of Eden, for that matter. You can think back much farther than you can remember.

Let us imagine that we are about eighteen miles southwest of Boston, on the Charles River, in the town with the Indian name, Natick. There seems to be something interesting going on in this little place, with woods around it. Look at the people coming together, why – they are red men. Yes, they are Indians. Let us not be afraid of them. They are red, but they do not look fierce and wild. Now, see! A horseman is coming near. What a good face he has. He has come from Roxbury, we hear, where he has long been the pastor of a church. How kindly he greets the Indians. And now we hear what is to be done to-day. These Indians are to be formed into a church of their own. It is the minister, Pr. John Eliot, of Roxbury, who has gathered the red men together. Every two weeks he comes to preach to them. In ten years we find that there are fifty of these “Praying Indians,” as they are called.

Surely we wish to know something about the good man who has done so much for these children of the forest, who were in our land when the Pilgrims came.<sup>2</sup>



John Eliot was born in England in 1604.<sup>3</sup> The father died before the son was very far along in his education, and he left eight pounds a year to be used, for eight years, in keeping his boy at Cambridge University. After finishing at Cambridge, John Eliot taught [in a] school. He became a minister of the Church of England

1 New York, 1913. Some of the expression in this missionary tale might not be quite what we would use today but they were perfectly acceptable in 1913. I have let the author's words stand as they are.

2 The author is an American writing for American children.

3 The picture shows Cuckoos Farm, Little Baddow, Eliot's home around 1629. CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=33273351>

when he was twenty-seven years old, and soon after that came to America with three brothers and three sisters. Miss Hannah Mumford, to whom he was engaged, came the next year, and they were married – the first marriage to be put down in the records of Roxbury, Massachusetts. For sixty years this good minister was settled over Roxbury church.

But his heart yearned over the Indians. He believed that they had souls to be saved, and he felt that he must tell them of the Saviour. It was not easy to win them at first, but the minister was so kind and friendly that by and by the red men became devoted to him. Across the country he went, once a fortnight, as you know, riding on horseback to preach to his Indians. One after another he formed more settlements of Praying Indians. He taught them other things besides the Bible. He showed them how to raise crops, to build bridges, to make houses and homes, and how to clothe themselves properly. He made them comfortable, and by getting help from others, he made it possible for them to work, and to live as did their civilized brothers.

The red men had a government of their own among themselves, and it was wonderful how well they got on. Mr. Eliot was forty-one when he began to preach to them. In fourteen years there were thirty-six hundred Praying Indians. The government set apart six thousand acres of land for them. After preaching a while, and explaining the Word of God, Mr. Eliot thought that these people ought to have the Bible in their own language. A very queer language it was, and hard to learn, but the good minister was not discouraged by that. He had the help of an Indian, taken captive in the Pequot War,<sup>4</sup> in the work of translation. It was



finished and printed in 1663, and was the very first Bible ever printed in America. Later, a revised version was printed at an expense of nine hundred pounds. Mr. Eliot gave towards this from his own small salary, the rest of the money coming from England. There are very few copies of this Indian Bible to be found now. One sold for five hundred and fifty pounds a while ago in England. Some words had to be supplied; the Indians had no word for “salt,” nor for “Amen.”

Three years after the first printing of the Bible the busy missionary printed the

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4 1636-8.

grammar for the Indians. At the end of it he wrote this sentence which has become historic everywhere: "Prayer and pains, through faith in Jesus Christ, will do anything." Do you not wish to stop right here, and say that over [again], until you know it by heart? Please do. It will help you.<sup>5</sup>

There are only fourteen or fifteen copies of the first edition of this grammar now to be found.

Mr. Eliot had a salary of only sixty pounds for his work in Roxbury and fifty for his Indian work, but he was one of the most generous men that ever lived. One time the treasurer, on giving him the money then due, tied it up in a handkerchief to keep him from giving away any of it. Visiting a poor family on the way home, and wishing to help them, the minister found the knots too hard to untie, and gave the kerchief to the mother, saying, "God must have meant it all for you."

He died in 1690, at the age of eighty-six, but is still unforgotten.

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<sup>5</sup> "pains" means being "painstaking" or making an effort.