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HIST 2415 US History to 1877

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Critical Book Review

*The Unredeemed Captive; A Family Story from Early America*

John Demos – Critical Book Review

This is a critical book review of “The Unredeemed Captive; A Family Story from Early America”, written by author and historian John Demos. The story is a dedicated and elaborate reconstruction of events using primary sources spanning 133 years. Beginning with the ‘Deerfield Massacre’ and closing with the descendants of ‘the unredeemed captive’ visiting the burial site of their ancestors.

The ‘unredeemed captive’ is Eunice Williams, taken into captivity at the age of 3, dying ‘unredeemed’ among her captors, the Kanahwake, at age 79. In order to understand the long life of one of many captives, one must frame her life within the conflicts of her time. The violence throughout the story is palatable, “the killing, the maiming, the terror extended quite impartially on both sides”<sup>1</sup>. The implication that the conflict has only two sides is looking at it with the broadest of strokes. The two sides aforementioned are New England and New France. The colonies in conflict mirror the empires to which they serve, Britain and France. Amid the colonial powers in conflict at the time are also the Spanish, Portuguese and the Dutch. These are mostly unmentioned but for the Dutch outpost of ‘Orange’, or Albany, a site of black market enterprise much to the dismay of the French and the English, “in short, the [fur] trade with the

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<sup>1</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive; A Family Story from Early America*, Vintage Books a division of Random House Inc, New York USA 1994 p.217

‘Orange’ (Albany) was a smuggler’s operation, through and through”<sup>2</sup>. Within these empires there is a religious schism, each ever righteous condemning the other to eternal hellfire. There are the Luthers and Calvins, Christians, Catholics and Protestants, Jesuits, shamans and priests<sup>3</sup>. The New England Protestant, for example, judge “the Roman Church (the Catholics) [as] a society where ye Sodomy, blasphemy, incest, Adulteries, Sorceries, murders, treasons etc. etc. are not only comitd, but countenanced”<sup>4</sup>, as preached by Stephen Williams, son of Reverend John Williams, ‘redeemed’ captive and political target of the Deerfield Massacre. The righteous judgement of Protestants by Catholics was equally damning, or judgement of the Jesuits etc.

133 years of near-perpetual conflict; where do the indigenous lay their allegiances? Complex, misunderstood social networks spanned the continent. Tribal warfare was an ongoing conflict where captivity was ritualistic. “The Indians approach to taking captives was a fluid mix of cultural inheritance, personal whim, and vigorous pursuit of main chance [...] there was the matter of ‘adoption’, of incorporating (some, not all) captives into particular Indian families. This was an old practice among Native peoples of the North American woodlands, and clearly it survived among the ‘French Indians’ of Canada”<sup>5</sup>. The British and French had wholly different reason for taking captives. Prisoners were taken and used as leverage for military and political exploits. A contest in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century’s negotiations between Vaudreuil (French Governor) and Dudley (English Governor) waged in the form of ‘diplomacy’.

Elegantly phrased in the preface, “Captivity, after all, meant ‘contact’ of a particularly vivid sort”<sup>6</sup>. Captives would be forced to cross cultural and religious lines, and their ‘contact’

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<sup>2</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.131

<sup>3</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.29

<sup>4</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.224

<sup>5</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.80-81

<sup>6</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.xii

would change their lives forever. “Captivity will come to feel more personal, as individuals on both sides are forced closely together”<sup>7</sup>.

The “Deerfield Massacre”; a dark winter night in 1703. A siege on a fortified settlement. The fortifications are rendered useless by heavy snowfall, and a raiding party of French and their ‘domiciled Indians’ attack. Their primary target, “Reverend John Williams, an important English prisoner”<sup>8</sup>. The collateral damage; “captured, 112 [...] “slaine”, altogether 48. This is Deerfield’s ‘Night of Woe’<sup>9</sup>. Of the captured, 92 will survive the three-month long march to Canada. 3 out of 4 infants will be killed, 10 out of 26 women will perish on the journey, 31 of 35 children (including Eunice) will survive, as do all 21 teenagers. 4 men do not see Canada<sup>10</sup>.

Negotiations between Governors Vaudreuil and Dudley see many captives ‘redeemed’, returned. This happens over the course of several years. The most dramatic case of ‘redemption’ is one John Carter, released and returned to New England after 32 years of captivity<sup>11</sup>.

How did Eunice Williams stay lost to her family, and history for so long? She was ‘requickenened’, meaning she took the name of a tribal relation deceased, in accordance with Kahnawake (Iroquois) tradition, as A’ongote. She ‘replaced’ (literal translation) another, possibly high-ranking tribe member. She was then baptized as Marguerite, then given another traditional name, becoming Eunice A’ongote Gannenenstenhau Williams<sup>12</sup>. Tracking her through any formal channels with the complex naming system was almost impossible.

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<sup>7</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.33

<sup>8</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.16

<sup>9</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.24

<sup>10</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.39

<sup>11</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.185

<sup>12</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.162

After years of searching, negotiations, rumor and private inquiry, a Dutch ambassador to Rev. John Williams “tested by terrible adversity”<sup>13</sup> by the name of Schuyler is finally face-to-face with Eunice, now in her twenties. Schuyler appealed to her reason, her sanity, her duty, her familial obligation, her piety, her basic humanity. Every tactic he could employ to have her rejoin her kin in New England, be ‘redeemed’. He spoke and pleaded for two hours receiving only wary silence from Eunice, finally she spoke, two words... “Jaghte oghte”, maybe not<sup>14</sup>.

Eunice Williams will disappear and re-appear sporadically over her life of 89 years. She will marry and have children within the Kahnawake. She will not return to collect her substantial estate. She will remain a bridge between cultures, she will choose a life of “elaborate, unmistakable ‘syncretism’”<sup>15</sup>. A set of beliefs formed of several faiths simultaneously. Her story would enthrall, delight and terrify Canadian and American ‘spectators’ during her near century of captivity, and serve as a model of tolerance, shared beliefs, racial openness and mutual alliance for generations to come. This is a story with multiple beginnings and multiple endings.

From the words of Eunice’s father, the Reverend, “If we are different, we are better, Tested in the fires of adversity. Strengthened. Wiser and deeper than we were before”<sup>16</sup>.

Footnote: The ‘wilderness’ uncharted by settlers has been home for centuries to dozens of unique tribes. The ‘empty wilds’ were but ‘pulsing with activity’: the Abenaki, Kennebees, Norridewoks, Penobscots, Wawenoks, Androscoggins, Cowasucks, Mississquois, Piqwateds, Pennacook, Mihicans, Pocumtucks, the Iroquois Confederates, Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca,

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<sup>13</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.64

<sup>14</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.107

<sup>15</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.76

<sup>16</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.76

Onandada, Cayuga and Tuscarora<sup>17</sup>. Eunice's captors and kin and tribe were the Kahnawake.

This story belongs to them as much as she. The indigenous are the unsung heroes of the colonies, which would have certainly perished without the cooperation and acquiescence of their indigenous counterparts. All have rich histories, elaborate cultures, languages, customs, rituals of the spirit and faith.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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<sup>17</sup> Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive* p.25