FEATURE ESSAY

The Children Who Refused to Come Home Captivity and Conversion

The spread of terrorism throughout the modern world and reports of journalists and civilian workers captured in war zones have forced many Americans to contemplate a deeply unsettling question: How would they behave if they were kidnapped by members of a group hostile to the fundamental values of the United States? Such concerns are not new. During the colonial period, New Englanders who settled along the frontier with French Canada knew that at any moment they might be carried away to Quebec or Montreal as captives and under fearful conditions might discover the fragility of their own ethnic and religious identities.

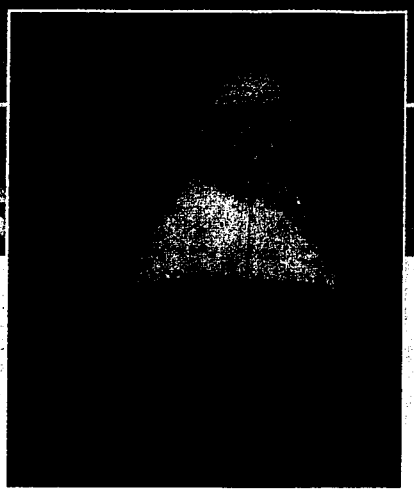
Between 1675 and 1763 the French and British empires waged almost constant war. Often the conflicts turned on dynastic rivalries in Europe, but whatever the causes, the fighting extended to North America, where in an effort to contain the expansion of English settlement, the French and their Indian allies raided exposed communities from the coast of Maine to western Massachusetts. During these years, approximately 1,641 English colonists were taken captive—nearly half of them children—and many other people died in the violent clashes. On the long trek back to Canada, the French and Indians killed those prisoners who resisted or who were too weak to keep up the pace. The Reverend Cotton Mather, New England's most influential late-seventeenth-century minister, invited his parishioners to imagine the terrifying experience of capture: "[The] *Captives* . . . are every minute looking when they shall be roasted alive, to make a sport and a feast, for the most execrable cannibals . . . *Captives*, that must see their nearest relations butchered before their eyes, and yet be afraid of letting those eyes drop a tear."

Although the French aimed to advance their imperial designs through attacks on English settlements, their Indian allies often entered the frontier wars for different reasons. The Abenaki, for example, harbored grievances against the English colonists from earlier conflicts and hoped with the help of the French to reap vengeance on them. Other Indian groups regarded the English captives as a source of revenue. After all, someone from Massachusetts was sure to offer a ransom for an unfortunate relative, and as one might predict in such a market, the price of liberation rose substantially over time. The Mohawk Indians, however, viewed the captives as replacements for warriors killed in battle, and whenever possible, they worked to incorporate the New Englanders into their own culture. They knew from experience that children, especially young girls, offered the best prospects for successful adoption.

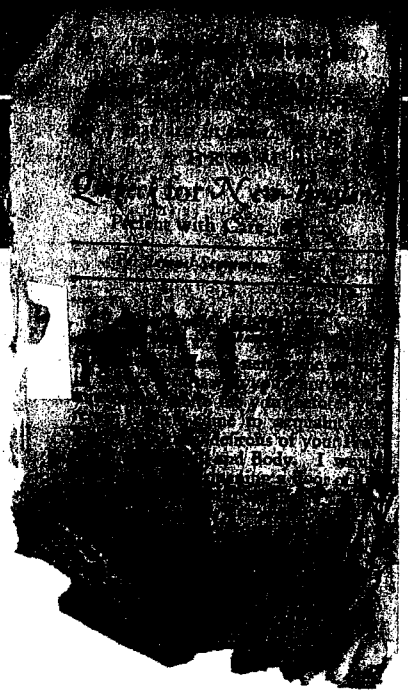
For the French and many of their Indian allies who had converted to Catholicism, religion served to justify frontier violence. French officials championed the Catholic faith, and they regarded New Englanders not only as representatives of the British Empire, but also as Protestant heretics. The English gave as good as they got. They accepted as absolute truth that Catholicism was an utterly corrupt religion and that priests, especially Jesuits, could not be trusted in spiritual matters. French religious and political leaders looked upon New England captives as possible converts to Catholicism, for in this ongoing imperial controversy, news that an English Protestant had given up his or her faith for Rome represented a major symbolic victory. As historian James Axtell explained, if the English could not preserve their religious identities as captives, then "their pretensions to the status as God's 'chosen people' . . . would be cast in grave doubt."

The odds of converting young New Englanders to Catholicism in these circumstances must have appeared extraordinarily small. The captives taken in war had come from highly religious communities, where they had received regular instruction in the basic tenets of Reformed Protestantism. As children, Puritans learned to equate the Pope with Satan. Their forefathers had traveled to the New World to cleanse the Church of England from practices associated with Catholicism. And yet amazingly, once they arrived in Canada a significant number of prisoners—perhaps as much as fifty percent—accepted the Catholic faith, married French or Indian spouses, and settled comfortably into the routines of life in Canada.

One such convert was Esther Wheelwright. Abenaki Indians captured her in Wells, Maine, in 1703 when she was only seven years old, and adopted her. She was later taken in by nuns who taught her French. She became a keen student of Catholicism. Over time, the sincerity of her new faith won her many admirers, and eventually Esther—renamed Esther Marie Joseph de l'Enfant Jesus—became an Ursuline nun. Some years later, she was appointed Superior of the entire Ursuline order in Canada. When New Englanders attempted to negotiate her release, they discovered that "she does not wish to return" because of the "change of



Portrait of Esther Wheelwright as an Ursuline nun.



Pastoral letter by Reverend John Williams to freed captives returning from Quebec.

SOURCE: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.

her religion." Esther's mother and father reluctantly accepted their daughter's decision. They even gave money to her convent, and in recognition of their generosity and forgiveness, she sent a portrait of herself as a nun to her bewildered Protestant family.

In the long contest for religious and cultural superiority, Eunice Williams posed an even more difficult challenge for New Englanders. After all, she was the daughter of a leading Congregational minister; no one doubted the quality of her religious instruction. Eunice's ordeal began on February 29, 1704, when a large force of French and Indians overran Deerfield, an agricultural community in western Massachusetts. Within a short time the raiders killed many inhabitants, including several members of her family. Her mother died during the long march to Canada. Eventually, the Reverend Williams negotiated his freedom as well as that of several surviving children. Eunice refused to join them. She had fallen in love with an Indian, and although friends and relatives begged her to reject Catholicism and life among the

Engraving of Indians with two prisoners after the 1704 attack on Deerfield, Massachusetts.

Kahnawake Mohawks, she politely, but firmly, rejected their pleas. Over the next several decades, Eunice and her Indian husband visited New England. On one occasion in 1741, her cousin the Reverend Solomon Williams pointed out in a sermon that Eunice had accepted the "Thickness of *popish* Darkness & Superstition." Lamenting her "pitiful and sorrowful Condition," he urged her to reaffirm the faith of her father. Unhappily for Solomon, Eunice had forgotten all that she once knew of the English language, and so the force of his shrill condemnation was lost on her.

No society easily accepts rejection. New Englanders struggled to comprehend why so many of their children would not come home, and they tried as best they could to explain to themselves why Eunice and the other captives refused to be redeemed. They assured each other that crafty priests had bribed—or even coerced—the children. A few ministers such as Cotton Mather and Eunice's father suggested that God had punished the Protestant communities for their sinful behavior. Whatever contemporaries may have thought of these accounts, modern historians have demonstrated that Catholic priests seldom employed force or promises of worldly goods in winning converts. Some captives may have felt gratitude to the French and Indians who had spared their lives. But undoubtedly, love, marriage, and a growing sense of security in a new society helped sever ties with a New England culture that slowly faded from memory.

The Reverend John Williams's own narrative of the Deerfield captives entitled *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion* (1707) addressed the crisis. It became a best-seller in a colony eager to hear the story of those redeemed from captivity, those returned to the fold. At the end of the day, however, the problem of abandoning one's nation and one's faith continued to haunt ordinary men and women who fervently identified with England and Protestantism. By turning their backs on European civilization, English culture, and the Protestant religion, these captives challenged foundational values even more powerfully than did the French and Indians.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **Would it be correct to conclude that the refusal of so many New England captives to return home represented a failure of Puritan religious education? Why or why not?**
2. **Why do you think that the French and Indians viewed English children, especially young girls, as the most likely converts?**