

John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994).

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The *Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* follows the journey of the Williams family in 18th century New England during their years of captivity and eventual release. In the early morning of February 29, 1704, Deerfield, Massachusetts, came under a surprise attack by a joint band of French and Native skirmishers. The Puritan families that occupied the town were ruthlessly struck down by their attackers, and many were subsequently taken captive. What followed was a grueling ordeal for these families as they forcibly marched two hundred miles through the freezing snow into Canada, where the French and Natives dwelled. John Williams, the much-respected minister to Deerfield, witnessed the murder of much of his family, as did many members of his community, at the hands of Natives who did not hesitate to kill any prisoners that could not make the arduous journey through the snow. Throughout his time in captivity, Mr. Williams struggled to understand the meaning behind his town's predicament through the framework of his Puritanical beliefs. Their stringent faith caused many in the community of Deerfield to question God's role in their dire situation. Many began to believe that they had somehow failed their Lord and deserved this righteous punishment. From a Puritan perspective, John Williams saw the pitiable state of his family's captivity. He came to the belief that to be "redeemed" in God's eyes, he, along with the surviving residents of Deerfield still held captive, must be freed from their captors and taken back to their home.

Their Native "masters" allowed John Williams to deliver a sermon to his people during their forced march. He read a passage from the Book of Lamentations that stated, "The Lord is

righteous, for I have rebelled against his commandment... My virgins and my young men are gone into captivity". Williams' chosen excerpt demonstrates his belief that his family and community had somehow strayed from their faith and were receiving their just punishment (94). The Puritanical perspective of life for New England was that God was constantly testing his followers, giving them trials so that they may demonstrate their unwavering faith. This notion drove the Deerfield captives to believe that it was God's will for them to be taken from their homes in such a terrible manner, and the suffering they experienced at the hands of the Natives was but a trial to prove their faith. People who lived close to Deerfield were stunned to hear news of the massacre and the subsequent captivity of many of its inhabitants. One pastor in the nearby town of Windsor, Connecticut, is documented as saying that the massacre was the "awful and dreadful dispensation of God's hand" and that the people of Deerfield had "[provoked] God to do such things" due to their sins (111). John Williams' predicament of being in captivity only reaffirmed his faith, for he believed that if he and his people took their dire situation as an opportunity to reform themselves in hopes that they would redeem themselves in God's eyes.

During the 18th century, France and England routinely sent warring parties against each other to capture prisoners that could potentially be used as bargaining chips for prisoner exchanges. After some time in captivity, many were finally sent back to New England in the prisoner exchanges between the French and English. In a way, this was just the status quo of war on the frontier, with both sides constantly demonstrating concern over their captured and imprisoned kin. To the average person in New England, captivity was an unfortunate circumstance and a grim reality of life. However, in the eyes of the Puritans, those that returned home from captivity and rejoined the community were considered "redeemed". They regained not just freedom when released but redemption, for they suffered through God's tribulation and

made it through with their faith intact. John Williams was one of the last to be returned home, rejoining his fellow townspeople after nearly three years of captivity. Deerfield and the surrounding communities were overjoyed to see the return of their family members, especially their acclaimed pastor.

John Williams wrote a narrative of the events that transpired from the initial attack on Deerfield to the grueling march into Canada and his time spent in Montreal as a prisoner to the French. He titled his work *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, demonstrating that he viewed his arduous journey as a trial from God and saw his home amongst the faithful Puritans as Zion (133). Therefore, in the eyes of the Puritans, the ordeal of captivity was a pathway to right their wrongs against God and being allowed to return home was evidence of their redeemed status in God's eyes. Redemption was essential to making amends for their sins, and those that remained captives had not done enough to earn their redemption. Unfortunately, despite all the redeemed Deerfield residents who made it back, many were still held in captivity by Natives, including John Williams' seven-year-old daughter, Eunice.

Catholic Jesuits sought to convert their Deerfield captives from their Puritanical faith in French-controlled Canada. Those in New England detested the Jesuits' "popish" beliefs and feared for the souls of their captive neighbors, especially the young ones such as Eunice Williams. She faced a great deal of pressure from their captors to convert to Catholicism due to her impressionable young age (144). The English feared for their captive sons, wives, and daughters, for in their eyes, death was only but a slight worry on their minds. If the French converted their Puritan loved ones to Catholicism, or even worse, if they willingly decided to live among the Native "heathens," redemption would be impossible. It would be a direct refusal of God's trial and a demonstration that their time on Earth was "misspent". John Williams could

not help but think that those left behind somehow deserved their fate for straying from their faith in God, as he viewed captivity as a "purifying experience" that left him and his people "refined" and "cleansed" (147).

John Williams' daughter, Eunice, was never returned from her captivity. Instead, she chose to stay with her Native captors and integrate into Mohawk society. She earned a new name among the Mohawk, calling herself A'ongote, and converted to Catholicism. She even married a Native man named Francois-Xavier Arosen. News of this severely disheartened her family in New England, as they viewed her captivity as an unfulfilled trial that stood as an obstacle on her path to redemption. After hearing the news, Peter Schuyler, the mayor of Albany and a friend of John Williams, felt that Eunice was "below the worst of Indians". Many viewed her refusal as a betrayal of her family, community, and faith (276).

John Williams eventually passed away without ever seeing his daughter "redeemed" from her captivity. During his memorial, a sermon of Williams was read, titled *The Privilege and Duty of the Children of Godly Parents*. He discusses in this sermon the extreme privilege his children had in being born to such devout parents and a faithful community. He goes on to say in his sermon that the best way to appease such "pious parents" is for their children to "exalt God", and that "children who fail in these obligations must be roundly condemned" (407). It is easy to imagine that his sermon was chosen based on his experience with Eunice's captivity, as she had forsaken her home and faith for a new life. He goes further in this notion, insinuating that his daughter committed "damnable heresies," demonstrating a "disobedient, stubborn, and ungrateful spirit," and that these acts reflect his choices as a father. Williams' sermon displayed his hopeful side as well, as he states that God "invites even backsliding Children to return", revealing how he yearned for Eunice to not only return to her family but to her faith as well (409).

During Eunice's time in "captivity", many throughout New England prayed for her to be "redeemed" from her Mohawk captors. Decades passed until Eunice finally returned to New England, this time with her husband and children, much to the joy of her surviving family members and community. Eunice's brother, Stephen, had never given up hope on Eunice and had attempted many times to find and retrieve her. He had faith that her captivity would end one day, and when it finally did, he was overjoyed and believed that God had brought Eunice one step closer to redemption. Around this same time, the Great Awakening occurred in the American colonies. Eunice's return was the subject of many public sermons, which used her as a talking point to demonstrate the power of prayer to God. Her return to the community seemed to answer the prayers of many in New England who yearned for her safe deliverance, reaffirming their faith in God, as well as God's faith in them. Sermons would discuss Eunice's "long time" spent "in a miserable Captivity with a barbarous and heathen people". Eunice's condition, presumably as not yet redeemed, was due to her time living "in the Thickness of popish darkness" and therefore did not know any better (475).

The Christian beliefs of Deerfield's residents transformed the otherwise common occurrence of warring parties capturing settlers on the frontier into a struggle for their redemption. Eunice's redemption was inherently tied to the Puritan community she hailed from, for their redemption from the trials and tribulations God had placed upon them could not be complete until hers was. Not only was Eunice an "unredeemed captive", but so, too, was the entire community of Deerfield, as they never truly regained everyone that they lost during the tragic year of 1704. The Puritans of Deerfield embraced the notion that they could not achieve redemption until they were all freed, which kept them hopeful and active in seeking the return of their loved ones. Eunice's return to Puritanism from her "miserable captivity" among the

"heathens" is the redemption that her community prayed for but would not receive, for Eunice's life belonged to her Mohawk family and had been so for her entire life.

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