

Book Reviews

White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier, by June Namias. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. xix, 378 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendix, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

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White Captives explores a fascinating issue in the history of Indian-white relations: the interplay of gender and race in the experiences and narratives of whites held captive by Indians. Exhaustively researched and chronologically comprehensive, *White Captives* offers insights into the entire range of captivity experiences, from John Smith's in colonial Virginia to Sarah Wakefield's in the mid-nineteenth-century Midwest, and including a passing reference to the captivity experience of Abbie Gardner Sharp from Spirit Lake, Iowa.

Namias took a two-pronged approach to what must have been a nearly overwhelming array of research sources. She begins the book by providing a typology of women's and men's captivity narratives and shows how these typical portrayals changed over time. She calls the standard types for women captives Survivors, Amazons, and Frail Flowers; the standard types for men are Heroes and White Indians. Then there is an interesting chapter on the relationship between race and sexuality in captivity stories, paintings, and illustrations. Sexuality *between* races was especially titillating because it was especially threatening. The second half of the book examines three case studies of white women taken captive: Jane McCrea in New York State during the American Revolution, Mary Jemison's long life of captivity among the Senecas in western New York State, and Sarah Wakefield's ambivalent six-week sojourn among the Dakotas during the U.S.-Dakota Conflict in 1862.

The last chapter on Sarah Wakefield is by far the most thought-provoking part of the book. Although it is the strongest chapter, it also encapsulates some of my confusions about Namias's overall

project. Her analysis of captivity narratives uses two contradictory approaches. She treats captivity narratives as formulaic and ideological texts that expressed white Americans' fears of the unfamiliar. But she also uses these texts to discuss what the captivity experience was really like. Rarely does she confront the issue of how the written narrative or painted picture recast actual experience.

Her three case studies hint at important differences between the three narratives: Jane McCrea's was the most fictionalized captivity story; Mary Jemison's was partly fictionalized; and Sarah Wakefield's seems to have been authored entirely by the woman captive herself. McCrea was held captive only briefly by Indians before being killed, and then she became the object of patriotic folklore and tragic romances in which her vulnerability, female stupidity, and whiteness were juxtaposed against brutal, murderous, dark men. Mary Jemison's account, transposed by a white man named Seaver, mixes together passages about the virtues of Indian family and village life with passages about savage warriors ruthlessly murdering white babies. But Sarah Wakefield's firsthand account of the U.S.-Dakota Conflict completely challenges the ways whites on the midwestern frontier wanted to see Indians. During her six-week captivity, a Dakota man, Chaska, repeatedly intervened to save her life and the lives of her children. In the vengeful aftermath of the conflict, as Minnesotans prepared to hang as many Dakotas as they could, Wakefield struggled to save Chaska's life and lost. In a tragic case of mistaken identity and callous disregard, Chaska was hanged with thirty-seven other men at Mankato. Wakefield then wrote her story. She probably satisfied some readers' desire for blood, gore, and murderous savages, but more likely her indictment of U.S. Indian policies made frontier folk uneasy as she laid the blame for the conflict entirely on the abominable treatment of the Dakotas in the years leading up to the war. Especially interesting in light of Namias's earlier chapter on sexuality is how Wakefield's white peers insisted on interpreting her defense of Chaska as sexual, even though there is no hint of either rape or consensual sexual relations between the Indian man and the white woman captive.

Thus, this thoughtful book could have gone even a little further by addressing what the case studies make apparent: when women captives controlled the telling of their own narratives, they seem to have told a different story from the typologized accounts of women captives constructed and popularized by white men.

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