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## Captive Women among the Iroquois

W. Scott Ebhardt

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**CAPTIVE WOMEN AMONG THE IROQUOIS**

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

W. Scott Ebhardt

2001


## APPROVAL SHEET

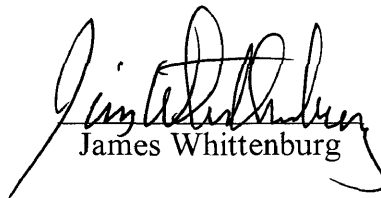
This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of  
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Approved, April 2001

  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Indian and white women captured by the Iroquois and to illustrate opportunities available to women who assimilated into their new Iroquois families.

The Iroquois targeted young women for capture because they ensured the continuance of Iroquois life and culture, and these captive women often found fulfilling lives in their adoptive society. Iroquois men captured young women of neighboring tribes because they were the source of life and sustenance; furthermore, Iroquois men coveted captive women for wives. The capture, adoption, and assimilation process was a long and arduous one, and some women resisted. But those women who accepted their new Iroquois roles found that women held powerful positions in their new culture and enjoyed complementary, non-coercive relationships with Iroquois men.

Iroquois men also sought white women for capture, and these women often found fulfilling lives among their adoptive people. The stories of the capture and adoption of Eunice Williams and Mary Jemison illustrate the assimilative power of the Iroquois. Most important, the experiences of these white women illuminate the starkly different (and often preferable) life available to women in Iroquois society in comparison to contemporaneous white society.

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CAPTIVE WOMEN AMONG THE IROQUOIS

**CAPTIVE WOMEN AMONG THE IROQUOIS**

## Introduction

In the distant past, all the earth was covered by deep water, and the only living things there were water animals. There was no sun, moon, or stars, and the watery earth was in darkness. People lived above the great sky dome. A great ever-blossoming tree grew there in the cloud world, where it shaded the councils of the supernaturals. One day the Great Chief became ill, and he dreamed that if the tree were uprooted he would be cured. He further commanded that his pregnant daughter, Sky Woman, look down at the watery darkness. He told her to follow the roots of the tree, and to bring light and land to the world below. The fire dragon that floated in the hole gave her maize, a mortar, a pot, and firebrands for cooking. Then the Great Ruler wrapped her in the light of the fire dragon and dropped Sky Woman through the hole.

The animals of the cloud sea were stirred into action by the descending light. Waterfowl rose to cushion Sky Woman's descent with their wings. Beaver dove to find earth to make dry land for Sky Woman. But Beaver drowned and floated lifelessly to the surface. Loon, Duck, and others all tried and failed as well. Finally Muskrat tried, and came back with a paw-full of earth that would spread and grow. "Who will bear it?" he asked. Turtle rose to bear the growing earth, and the waterfowl gently guided the falling Sky Woman to the new land. Turtle, the Earth Bearer, is still restless from time to time, and when he stirs there are earthquakes and high seas. Time passed and Sky Woman gave birth to a daughter. The daughter grew rapidly, and when she reached maturity she was visited by a man. He placed two arrows within her, one tipped with chert and the other not. The daughter in turn bore twins. The handsome good twin was born first the usual way, and he was called "Sapling" [maple sprout]. The ugly evil twin forced himself out through his mother's armpit, killing her in the process. He was called "Flint." In grief, Sapling created the sun from his mother's face. The Evil Twin made darkness to drive the sun west. Sapling drew the moon and the stars from his mother's breast, and created great mountains and straight rivers to grace the land. Flint jumbled the mountains and made the rivers crooked. Sapling set forests on the hills and the fruit trees in the valleys, but Flint gnarled the forests and hurled storms against the land. Sapling created human beings, and planted maize, tobacco, and other useful plants. Flint created monsters, and made weeds and vermin to attack the plants made by Sapling. Sapling built a fire, which made Flint's legs flake. Sapling threw more wood on the fire and son Flint's entire body began to flake, and he ran away. Eventually, Sapling defeated his brother, striking him with deer antlers, and banishing him to an underground cave. Yet



Flint can still send out wicked spirits, and their persistence ensures that there is both good and bad in all things.<sup>1</sup>

The Iroquois origin myths (there are more than forty versions) each reflect essential cultural and moral themes, central to Iroquois life. Among the most prevalent themes, aside from the coexistence of good and evil, are those that explain the relationships between the Iroquois people: the reciprocal responsibilities between men and women in Iroquois society, the sexual division of labor, and patterns of kinship. But most important to this thesis, the central characters of the Iroquois origin myth are women—actually a lineage of women.

Sky Woman and her daughters are responsible for bringing all life to earth, except the few animals already in existence who helped her in her task. From Sky Woman's body, her grandsons formed the most important features of the earth and heavens. Her grandsons then formed the humans, plants, and animals that would spread over the Iroquois world. Iroquois women were the source of life and sustenance; Iroquois men took what was provided by the women and shaped the outside world.<sup>2</sup> In their daily lives, the Iroquois people in the seventeenth century reflected the values of their origin myths. Women represented the essence of Iroquois life and culture. To assure that women's pivotal roles would be filled, the Iroquois targeted young Indian women from neighboring tribes for capture and adoption. Iroquois men took these captive Indian women for wives. And because the capture and adoption process tended to make captives more docile, and less costly in terms of marriage obligations, than natal Iroquois women, Iroquois men sometimes preferred captive wives. The capture, adoption, and

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<sup>1</sup> This is an abbreviated and paraphrased composites of several Iroquois creation myths, quoted from Dean R. Snow, *The Iroquois* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994), 2-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

assimilation process was a long and arduous one, and some women resisted passively or faced death in an attempted escape. But the women who fully assimilated in their new families found that Iroquois women occupied powerful positions in their culture.

Women and men had complimentary roles and reciprocal obligations in Iroquois society. Whereas men—in their roles as hunters, diplomats, and warriors—had dominion over Iroquois life outside of the village and clearing; women—as the source of life and sustenance—had dominion over the village and clearing. As such, women played important economic, social, and political roles in Iroquois society. Many captive Indian women found fulfilling lives in their adoptive Iroquois society.

Iroquois men also sought white women for capture and adoption, which occurred throughout the colonial period. And in the late seventeenth century, Anglo-French conflict gave Indians new incentive to capture white colonists. When Catholic Mohawks from a French mission town raided Deerfield, Massachusetts, they captured many townspeople for their ransom value, but they slated seven-year-old Eunice Williams and other Deerfield children for adoption. The story of the Deerfield captives' trek to Canada illustrates the psychological trauma endured by white captives when captured by Indians. The Indians, however, treated Eunice Williams and many other Deerfield children gently from the outset of their journey. Eunice Williams spent the remainder of her life as a Catholic Mohawk; her story illustrates the assimilative power of Iroquois methods and the attraction of the Catholic faith.

A half-century after the Deerfield raid, fourteen-year-old Mary Jemison was captured and adopted into a Seneca family. Jemison spent her remaining seventy-three years with the Indians, repeatedly refusing the offer to return to white society. Her story

illustrates the powerful effects of traditional Iroquois methods of capture and adoption on white women; furthermore, the story of her life with the Indians illuminates the starkly different (and often preferable) life available to women in Iroquois society in comparison to contemporaneous white society.

When Indian and white women captives became one with the Iroquois, they found themselves, like Sky Woman, revered by their families as the source of life and sustenance for their people.

## Chapter One

### Captive Indian Women among the Seventeenth-Century Iroquois

Before European contact and throughout the seventeenth century, warfare was an integral part of the culture of the Iroquois and their neighbors. These Northern Iroquoians warred among themselves and with neighboring tribes over external disputes but also because of the demands of their society.<sup>1</sup> The Iroquois and other Indian cultures took part in a process known as the "mourning-war," which helped them restore lost population, ensure social continuity, and deal with death.<sup>2</sup> The best way to maintain population and the only way to ensure social continuity in the matrilineal Iroquois society was to secure a stable and sufficient population of women in the village. For this reason, the Iroquois targeted for capture and adoption the young women of the neighboring tribes.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Iroquois men prized captive women as wives, often preferring them to women native to their own tribes. Although finely balanced by the separate and complementary roles of men, Indian women—captive and natal to the Iroquois—had important economic, social, and political roles in their society.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 40 (Oct. 1983), 528-29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>3</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896-1901), 36:177 (hereafter cited as *JR*).

When an Iroquois died, the household went into ten days of “deep mourning” followed by one year of “formalized grieving.” If this did not assuage their grief, “women of the mourning household could demand... a raid to seek captives who, it was hoped, would ease their pain.”<sup>4</sup> Anthropologist and psychiatrist Anthony F. C. Wallace explained that the grief could be assuaged in three ways: “by bringing back the scalp of a dead enemy (this scalp might even be put through an adoption ceremony); by bringing back a live prisoner (to be adopted, tortured, and killed); or by bringing back a live prisoner to be allowed to live and even to replace in a social role the one whose death had called for this 'revenge.’”<sup>5</sup> When the war party returned to Iroquoia, village leaders would distribute any captives to clans who were grieving over their dead. The clan matron then decided whether the captive would live or die. Her decision rested upon several factors: the sex of the captive (women and children were likely to be spared while adult males would usually be killed); the depth of grief of the family; and the initial impression made by the captive.<sup>6</sup> She had to decide whether the household and village would be better served by the emotional release of a ritual execution or by the adoption and requickening of their family member in the person of the war captive. If she chose to allow the captive to live, in the requickening ceremony “the deceased’s name—and with it the social role and duties it represented—was transferred to [the] successor.”<sup>7</sup>

The sustaining role that women played in Iroquois village life made them special targets for capture and adoption. Iroquois societies were based on a matrilineal kinship structure and matrilocal residence patterns—the Iroquois village was a woman's world.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York, 1970), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 35.

Jesuit missionary Joseph François Lafitau described the potential position of a fully assimilated woman captive among the Iroquois: “If the captive is a girl, given to a household where there is nobody of her sex in a position to sustain the lineage, it is good fortune for this household and for her. All hope of the family is placed in this captive who becomes the mistress of this family and the branches dependent upon it.”<sup>8</sup> Women held a central position in Iroquois society because it was “they who really maintain the tribe, the nobility of blood, the genealogical tree, the order of generations and the conservation of families.”<sup>9</sup> Lafitau understood, as many of his Jesuit contemporaries did not, that Iroquois women, whether native or adopted, were far from slaves or drudges.

In addition to the essential role women played in Iroquois domestic and political life, they were especially attractive candidates for capture and adoption because of their potential as wives for Iroquois men. When the Iroquois raided the enemy for captives, they did not “usually harm the women or the children, except in their sudden attacks. Indeed, many a young man will not hesitate to even marry a prisoner, if she is very industrious; and thereafter she will pass as a woman of his country.”<sup>10</sup> If a woman captive appeared to be industrious, that could be the key to her acceptance by the clan matrons, who took great interest “as to the working capacities of the girls whom they wanted as wives for their sons.”<sup>11</sup> Lafitau noted that Iroquois men wanted wives who were “of a good reputation, hard-working and of a docile personality” and that every

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>8</sup> Father Joseph François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. and trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1974-1977), 2:171.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:69.

<sup>10</sup> *JR*, 9:25.

<sup>11</sup> A. A. Goldenweiser, "Functions of Women in Iroquois Society," *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 17 (1915), 376.

Iroquois man “wishes to have a wife who passes for being and, indeed, is, well behaved.”<sup>12</sup> Native Iroquois women with these attributes were not easy to come by; Lafitau observed that “a good wife is almost as rare in America as in Europe but the Indians do their best not to make mistakes.”<sup>13</sup> The powerful role that Iroquoian women played within the clearing may have made it difficult for an Indian man to find a docile wife; indeed, it may have been easier for the men to find these qualities in captive wives than in native Iroquoian women.

Sometimes even captive women were not docile and did not live up to the Iroquois men's expectations. According to a Jesuit observer, an Onondaga chief was driven to suicide by women he had adopted.

After he became a widower, he was at the mercy of an old woman, and of two other women whose lives he had formerly saved, and whom he had adopted in the place of his deceased sisters. Those slaves were not grateful for the kindness that he had shown them; they stinted his supply of fuel and provisions. This caused him vexation, that was all the keener because he remembered that he never, during his wife's lifetime, lacked anything. He took the resolution to rejoin her as soon as possible . . . .<sup>14</sup>

Whereas Iroquois men might have liked to have had docile wives, this was probably a rarity. Most important was that women respected their obligations to provide for husband and community.

Iroquois men prized captive wives for reasons other than expected docility. By marrying captive women before their assimilation into a matrilineal household, an Iroquois man both reduced his wife's power and his obligations in marriage. Eventually captive women “appear to have been fully enculturated into the Iroquois matrilineages,” but the marriage of captive women “in the short term may have been subversive of

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<sup>12</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:341; 1:351.

<sup>13</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:351.

<sup>14</sup> *JR*, 62: 61-65.

matrilocality."<sup>15</sup> Because of obligations to the wife's household, Iroquoian men may have "preferred marrying captive women because these marriages did not oblige them to work for their wives' families."<sup>16</sup> An Iroquoian man's obligations to his wife's household were substantial in a marriage to a woman native to his tribe. Traditionally, as soon as a marriage is decided upon "the husband's relatives send a present to the wife's lodge... Consist[ing] of wampum belts, skins, fur covers and other furnishings which go to the girl's kin of whom no dowry is demanded but only that she be willing to accept the husband offered her."<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the husband "had to make her a bunk, repair her lodge or make her a new one when the first falls into ruins" and for "the first year of marriage, all his hunt belongs rightfully to his wife's household."<sup>18</sup> By marrying a captive wife, the man could shift the usually delicate balance of mutual obligations in his favor by eliminating the support he would normally provide for his wife's lodge. The support that the wife provided for her husband remained the same. New wives always presented their husbands with symbolic gift of "marriage wood" and a "nuptial bowl of sagamité as a mark of their future obligation of making the provisions and preparing the meals for their husbands."<sup>19</sup> Life was much easier for married men, and they gained special advantages by marrying captive women. Nevertheless, their feelings for their new wives were not diminished because of their captive origins. Pierre Radisson relates that his adoptive Iroquois mother, who had been captured from the Hurons, was "well

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," *Pennsylvania Archaeologist*, 48 (1978), 62-63.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur T. Adams, ed., *The Explorations of Pierre Esprit Radisson* (Minneapolis, 1961), 26; Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Kingston, 1985), 274.

<sup>17</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:342.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>19</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:348-49, 344.



beloved of her husband, having lived together more than forty years and in that space [she] brought him nine children, five males and four females."<sup>20</sup>

The psychological conditioning of the capture and adoption process itself made captive women especially attractive candidates as wives. Indeed, the Iroquois "make no difficulty about espousing a stranger and a captive; nay even, there are some who love them more, because they are usually more obedient and pliable."<sup>21</sup> The psychological preparation of prisoners for inclusion into Iroquois society began with capture. "At the moment a prospective adoptee was seized," Richter explained, "he or she began a grueling trial crucial to the exchange of a former group identity for an Iroquois one."<sup>22</sup> The violence and brutality of an attack served to shock the potential captives into submission. The experience of a young woman captured by the Iroquois illustrates this point. The war party killed twenty-eight men, women, and children, leaving only the young woman and four others alive. Because the war party was afraid of pursuit, "they killed on the way those who did not walk fast enough. They say that this young woman, seeing them kill those who could not keep up, was at the head of the whole troop, enduring the fatigue better than a man."<sup>23</sup> While women and children usually escaped most of the physical torments endured by male captives on the return to the Iroquois villages, they "witnessed the torments of their male kin and might be forced to watch as their loved ones' scalps were turned into trophies."<sup>24</sup>

As soon as the war party had escaped pursuit, they made sure the male prisoners were incapable of resistance. If there were a male prisoner, "they gave him a few blows

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<sup>20</sup> Adams, *Explorations of Radisson*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> *JR*, 30:277.

<sup>22</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> *JR*, 9:255.

with cudgels, pulled out several of his fingernails, and perhaps cut off a finger or two; among other things, the last two acts prevented him from wielding a weapon and marked him thereafter as a captive.”<sup>25</sup> Because they were not enemy warriors and because of the important roles they could play in Iroquois society, captive women were treated more gently than men were. Yet, they were not immune to torture and even death at the hands of their captors. Prisoners knew that in order to survive they had to submit completely to the will of their captors. Indian women were prepared for the possibility that one day they might be captured and adopted since their tribes of origin would have adopted captives as well.

As the war party approached the Iroquoian village, the process of transformation to an Iroquois identity intensified. The war party announced their triumphant return with prisoners rather than scalps with a terrifying “live-shout.”<sup>26</sup> The captives were decorated with “traditional dashes of vermilion mixed with bear’s grease” and “belts of wampum are hung around their necks” and they are paraded into the village in a “war-like ceremonial.”<sup>27</sup> Captives next faced the ordeal of the gauntlet. Nearly everyone in the village, holding clubs, ax handles, sticks, or any other convenient weapon, formed two rows from the entrance of the village to its interior. The captives were forced to run, as best they could, through the gauntlet. “Men—but usually not women or young children—received heavy blows designed to inflict pain without serious injury.”<sup>28</sup> The intensity of the blows the captives received may have been in proportion to the “Indian perception of

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<sup>24</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> James Axtell, “The White Indians of Colonial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 32 (Jan., 1975), 70.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Richter, “War and Culture,” 533.

the captives various educability.<sup>29</sup> Historian James Axtell explained the purpose of the gauntlet: “Since the object of taking captives was to satisfy the Indian families who had lost relatives, the gauntlet served as the first of three initiation rites into Indian society, a purgative ceremony by which the bereaved Indians could exorcise their anger and anguish, and the captives could begin their cultural transformation.”<sup>30</sup>

After the gauntlet, virtually all the prisoners faced additional abuse. Since they were now separated from their previous life and kinship ties, the captives were in a “liminal state or nonhuman status” because “without kindred they had no identity.”<sup>31</sup> Often the men and women were stripped of their clothing and strapped to scaffolds.<sup>32</sup> “While to a woman the scaffold often brought only ‘derision,’ to a man it bequeathed additional sufferings, as older women led the community in tearing out the fingernails and assaulting sensitive body parts with sticks, knives, and firebrands.”<sup>33</sup> Eventually the village leaders would decide whether the captives would be tortured to death or given a new chance at life through adoption.

If the Iroquois leaders decided to adopt the prisoner, in a solemn adoption ceremony the captive was made to understand that he or she was now part of the Iroquois, a replacement for one who had died. The adoptee was taken to the house of his or her new family and greeted with an emotional outburst of grief over the relative they had lost.<sup>34</sup> But soon all the solemnity and grief of the adoption ceremony ended and was replaced with such an effusion of love and affection for the captive that he or she was

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<sup>29</sup> Axtell, “White Indians,” 70.

<sup>30</sup> Axtell, “White Indians,” 71.

<sup>31</sup> James Lynch, “The Iroquois Confederacy, and the Adoption and Administration of Non-Iroquoian Individuals and Groups Prior to 1756,” *Man in the Northeast*, 30 (Fall 1985), 85.

<sup>32</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 68.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

“regarded and treated almost as if they were the reincarnation of the dead.”<sup>35</sup> With adoption by the matron the captive shed his or her liminal status and became a real person because of their newly formed kinship ties.<sup>36</sup> When the requickening ceremony ended, “the women lavished their attention on the beneficiary, bathing and dressing wounds, providing garments of Iroquois style, and combing their new relative’s hair in imitation of Hiawatha and Sky Woman’s mother.”<sup>37</sup> The family then introduced the adoptee to everyone in the village, “who proceeded to shower them with gifts” and to treat them to expressions of love and kindness.<sup>38</sup> A Huron man illustrated the psychological impact of this conversion when he refused to escape his Iroquois captors, although he had the chance. He told his companions to go without him because “I love my mother too well: she has saved my life, and I cannot leave her.”<sup>39</sup> This purgative, transformative, and integrative process of symbolic death and rebirth into an Iroquois lineage, coupled with the relief that the captive felt upon being given a new opportunity at life, was a powerful tool for assimilation.

“The Iroquois were adept at using a combination of threat and rewards to make even adult prisoners identify with their adoptive kinsmen,” Trigger stated; “at first such identification was feigned, being motivated by terror, but later it often became genuine.”<sup>40</sup> However, the desire on the part of the captors for the adoptee’s assimilation was never feigned. The adoptee was treated as a genuine family member to such a degree that “convention does not even permit marriage with captives engrafted on this

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<sup>34</sup> Axtell, “White Indians,” 73.

<sup>35</sup> Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 103.

<sup>36</sup> Lynch, “Iroquois Adoption of Non-Iroquoian Individuals,” 85.

<sup>37</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Axtell, “White Indians,” 74.

<sup>39</sup> *JR*, 32:27

lodge for, as when they are given life, the name of a particular person of this family is requickenened in them, they are given all the rights of adoption and represent those resurrected as if they were these people in person."<sup>41</sup> The job of the captors was not an easy one. The Iroquoians had to play a dual role. They had to evaluate the adoptee's degree of assimilation, while at the same time projecting an atmosphere of love and complete acceptance. Lafitau observed that "their masters, although they feel their superiority, do not make them [the captives] feel it. On the contrary, they apply themselves to persuading the latter that being incorporated in their families, they are masters as if they were in their own and are entirely like them."<sup>42</sup>

Yet, the adoptee was wise to cooperate. "In truth," Lafitau explained, "the captives, if they are wise, should remember the status in which they have been and the favour done them. They should make themselves agreeable by their complaisance. Otherwise, their fortune might change even after many years of adoption especially if the families into which they have entered are numerous and can easily do without them..."<sup>43</sup> In fact, the new adoptee was undergoing a period of probation that "might end months or years later or never—during which new relatives and fellow villagers judged whether they had truly become Iroquois."<sup>44</sup> As Richter explains, not all adoptees passed this probation, "nor did all thoroughly absorb Iroquois values, yet an astonishing number became substantially integrated into the villages of the Five Nations"<sup>45</sup> The Iroquois accepted their adoptees if the latter successfully fulfilled their roles in their new society;

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<sup>40</sup> Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 274.

<sup>41</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:338.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:172.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:172.

<sup>44</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

"their new relatives apparently judged them primarily on the basis of external behavior rather than attempting to plumb the depths of the hearts."<sup>46</sup>

While male adoptees often had to go to heroic lengths to prove that they were not a threat to their new kinfolk, the requirements for women were far less stringent, merely having to fulfil the woman's role in Iroquoian society and "adequately performing the duties of the person she replaced."<sup>47</sup> Archaeological evidence from a mid-seventeenth-century Seneca site illustrates that the Iroquois were lenient in their assimilation requirements for women captives. At this site, pottery was produced from local materials, but it differed "radically in shape, temper, and decorative techniques" from traditional Iroquois style.<sup>48</sup> These artifacts, termed "captive pottery" by archaeologist Charles F. Hayes, illustrate that women captives often clung to some aspects of their natal cultures.<sup>49</sup>

Further indicating Iroquois leniency, a woman captive might marry according to the wishes of her new family, but she was not compelled to do so. "The weight of the evidence suggests that marriage was not compulsory for the captives, and common sense tell us that any form of compulsion would have defeated the Indians' purpose in trying to persuade the captives to adopt their way of life."<sup>50</sup> At bottom, though, the most important obligation the adoptee had during the probation period was loyalty to the lineage. An attempted escape was seen as a "renunciation of kindred ties, thereby placing the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>48</sup> Charles F. Hayes III, "An Overview of the Current Status of Seneca Ceramics," in Hayes, ed., *Proceedings of the 1979 Iroquois Pottery Conference* (Rochester, 1980), 89; Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 73.

<sup>49</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> Axtell, "White Indians," 77.

individual in a liminal nonhuman category."<sup>51</sup> Almost invariably, the penalty for an escape attempt was death.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the powerful assimilative tools of their new relatives, the cultural preparation for capture and adoption, and the ultimate sanction of death for an escape attempt, some captive women attempted to flee. Father Hierosme Lalemant noted that "there are unaccountable charms in the country of our birth, which do not allow men to lose the memory thereof," while relating the story of an Algonquin woman who attempted to flee Iroquoia for her native country which had for some years been "nothing but a field of dead and sick."<sup>53</sup> A woman adoptee, originally of the Algonquin people, illustrated the psychological struggle faced by captives who entertained escape. She "struggled with conflicting thoughts" because in her new life "she had a little son, aged about 7 or 8 years, for whom she entertained a singular love; her husband loved her dearly; she enjoyed full liberty in the Hyroquois villages, and her husband's relations looked kindly on her."<sup>54</sup> In her explanation to her son that he should remember that "thou hast a mother in the land of the Algonquins who loved thee with all her heart," we see the

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<sup>51</sup> Lynch, "Iroquois Adoption of Non-Iroquoian Individuals," 88.

<sup>52</sup> That the adoptees can never regain their liberty and that they are faced with the ultimate coercive factor of death is pointed to by William A. Starna and Ralph Watkins as evidence that all adoptees were actually slaves, and not just those who were not "measuring up to Iroquoian standards," as Richter suggests (*Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 69.) Starna and Watkins apply Orlando Patterson's model of slavery from his 1982 work *Slavery and Social Death* to the Northern Iroquoian adoption process and conclude that what has previously been described as an adoption complex was in fact a slave system. However, captives of the Iroquoians do not necessarily fit Patterson's model. Of the three broad requisite elements that Patterson lays out to define a condition of slavery—powerlessness, natal alienation, and loss of honor—the Iroquoian adoptee does not fill the first or third. Iroquoian captives often held important positions in their adoptive society—such as war chief, diplomat, and perhaps clan matron. Therefore, even within Patterson's broad definition of slavery, Iroquoian adoptees were not slaves. Starna and Watkins discount the fact that adoptees could fill important positions in Iroquoian society because they could never regain their liberty and previous identity. "Northern Iroquois Slavery," *Ethnohistory*, 38, no.1 (Winter 1991):35-57.

<sup>53</sup> *JR*, 30:255.

<sup>54</sup> *JR*, 35:249.

seeds planted for the persistent memories of adoptive origins.<sup>55</sup> These memories of adoptive origins were often passed down through the generations. Major John Norton illustrated this in his relation that "the late Colonel Brant, Thayendanegea, (who is descended from Wyandot prisoners adopted by the Mohawks both on the father and the mother's side,) told me, that his Grandmother was taken prisoner, when the Wyandots inhabited the country about the Bay of Quinty, on the northern shore of lake Ontario."<sup>56</sup>

Although some captive women resisted, the estimable psychological tools for assimilation, the important position of women in Iroquoian society, and the inclusive nature of the Iroquoians led many more captive Indian women to full assimilation. Women fully assimilated into Iroquois society were neither the slaves nor the masters of men—they held a much more attractive position. Iroquois men and women each held sway in their separate domains, and the role each played was equally essential to the survival of their society. The social relationships between Iroquois men and women were based not on control of political power or economic resources but on reciprocal obligations.<sup>57</sup> The social roles of Iroquois men and women were non-competitive.<sup>58</sup> "The Iroquoian view focused on the interdependence and harmony among individuals," explained Nancy Bonvillain, "women and men had separate roles, but each was accorded prestige."<sup>59</sup>

The Iroquoian attitude toward divorce aptly illustrates the non-coercive nature of male-female relations. Jesuit father Hierosme Lalemant noted that among the Hurons the

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<sup>55</sup> *JR*, 35:251.

<sup>56</sup> Carl F. Klink and James J. Talman, eds., *The Journal of Major John Norton, 1816* (Toronto, 1970), 105.

<sup>57</sup> Elisabeth Tooker, "Women in Iroquois Society," in *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, ed. Michael K. Foster et al. (Albany, 1984), 118.

<sup>58</sup> Nancy Bonvillain, "Iroquoian Women," in *Studies in Iroquoian Culture*, ed. Nancy Bonvillain, *Occasional Publications in Northeastern Anthropology*, No. 6 (1980), 48.



dissolution of marriage and the freedom to seek another spouse was "more frequent and easy here than it is in France for a master to take another servant, when the one he has does not please him."<sup>60</sup> The Iroquois husband and wife pledged nothing more than to live together as long as they fulfilled their mutual obligations.<sup>61</sup> If either the husband or the wife failed to live up to these obligations, "divorce is considered reasonable on the part of the injured one," and the "other party who has give occasion for it is blamed."<sup>62</sup> Most Jesuit missionaries lamented that in matters such as divorce, Iroquoians lived "in such a state of liberty that they never submit to any Laws and obey no other impulse than that of their own will."<sup>63</sup> This Iroquoian individualism allowed husband and wife to regard and respect each other "as masters of their own actions and themselves."<sup>64</sup> Unlike his Jesuit brethren, Lafitau saw this individualism as a source of strength in Indian marriages. He noted that "respect for human beings which is the mainspring of their actions, serves no little to keep up their union."<sup>65</sup>

Although men and women enjoyed balanced roles in Iroquois society, some scholars have incorrectly concluded that women in Iroquois society were superior to men.<sup>66</sup> George P. Murdock stated in 1934 that "of all the people of the earth, the Iroquois approach most closely to that hypothetical form of society known as the matriarchate,"

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> *JR*, 28:51.

<sup>61</sup> *JR*, 28: 51-53.

<sup>62</sup> *JR*, 28: 53.

<sup>63</sup> *JR*, 28:51.

<sup>64</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:300.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 1:300.

<sup>66</sup> Anthropologist J. N. B. Hewitt, for example, concluded that Iroquois women shared "plenary power" in their society "in striking contrast" to the slight power of Iroquoian men. J. N. B. Hewitt, "Status of Women in Iroquois Polity Before 1784," *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for 1932* (Washington, 1933), 475, 488.

spurring great interest in the position held by women in Iroquois society.<sup>67</sup> But as anthropologist A. A. Goldenweiser correctly pointed out in 1915, "there is no necessary connection between maternal descent and matriarchate."<sup>68</sup> Dean Snow observes that "the central role of Iroquois women in food production and in the appointment of sachems . . . has also been used to support arguments that would have mystified the Iroquois of four centuries ago."<sup>69</sup> In 1970, Judith K. Brown concluded that Iroquois women were included in Iroquoian public affairs, beyond the level of household and community concerns, because of their control of the "economic organization of the tribe."<sup>70</sup> She argued that "Iroquois matrons enjoyed unusual authority in their society, perhaps more than women have ever enjoyed anywhere at any time" because of their control of agricultural production and because they held the right to distribute the tribe's food.<sup>71</sup> A closer look at the development of Iroquois matrilineal residence and matrilineal descent reveals the true relationship between men and women in Iroquoian societies.

Archeologist and historian Bruce G. Trigger points out that Iroquois society has not always been strongly matrilineal.<sup>72</sup> The archeological evidence shows that the Indians who would become the Northern Iroquoians followed a seasonal cycle in which they banded together in the summer for fishing and dispersed into smaller groups in

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<sup>67</sup>Quoted in Judith K. Brown, "Economic Organization and the Position of Women among the Iroquois," *Ethnohistory*, 17 (1971), 153; Martha L. Sempowski presents archeological data on the diversity of grave offerings that "does not support the belief or contention that women held a position of elevated status relative to that of men in traditional Seneca society." Martha L. Sempowski, "Differential Mortuary Treatment of Seneca Women: Some Social Inferences," *Archaeology of Eastern North America*, 14 (Fall 1986), 41.

<sup>68</sup> Goldenweiser, "Functions of Women in Iroquois Society," 377.

<sup>69</sup> Dean R. Snow, *The Iroquois* (Cambridge, 1994), 65.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, "Economic Organization," 151-65; Archeologist and historian Bruce G. Trigger disputes this view which follows the "longstanding ethnological tradition" of attributing the rise of matrilineal and subsequent matrilineal institutions to the belief that women's contribution to the tribe became more important than that of the men upon the development of horticulture. Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," 55-56.

winter for hunting.<sup>73</sup> Indian men and women lived and traveled together in these times, and because of the importance of hunting these Indians of the Middle Woodland period "tended to be virilocal and patrilineal."<sup>74</sup> Gradual increases in the degree to which summer bands exploited resources such as shellfish and wild rice illustrated their efforts to remain together longer before being forced to disperse in winter.<sup>75</sup> Trigger found that the main advantage of the development of a sedentary horticulture economy was that "eventually it permitted a group of people to inhabit a single site year around."<sup>76</sup> This sedentary horticulture economy ushered in many changes in the Iroquoian life style; most important was the sharp delineation of the roles of men and women in Iroquoian society.

Women did not control Iroquois society; instead, a "delicate balance of mutual obligations between men and women . . . was maintained by a strict sexual division of labor."<sup>77</sup> The key to this balance was that in Iroquois society "men and women occupied different domains: the forest and the clearing."<sup>78</sup> The men were responsible for hunting, warfare, and diplomacy, all of which took them away from the clearing for long periods; "the land beyond the clearing, the forest, was the domain of men."<sup>79</sup> The women were responsible for "all of the agricultural work of planting, tending, and harvesting of crops"; therefore, "the whole clearing (village and fields) also was regarded as the domain of women," as were the houses because of the practice of matrilineal residence.<sup>80</sup> Although the women supplied all of the agricultural products for the Iroquois, the men's

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<sup>71</sup> Brown, "Economic Organization," 156.

<sup>72</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," 56.

<sup>73</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," 58.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>78</sup> Tooker, "Women in Iroquois Society," 119.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 119.

role in the economy "such as clearing fields, hunting, fishing, and procuring skins for clothing must have involved as much labor and been recognized as being as important as were the growing of crops, the collecting of wild plants, and the care of children."<sup>81</sup> The recurring theme in Iroquois folklore, "they went to the woods to hunt for meat, illustrates the importance of hunting in their culture."<sup>82</sup> Anthropologist William N. Fenton states: "Next to warfare and attending council, hunting enjoyed great prestige. Going into the forest meant risking one's life and perhaps having a supernatural encounter."<sup>83</sup>

Matrilocality developed, not because of the superior contribution of women to Iroquois economy, but because of the "almost year around residence and permanent face-to-face association of women in their villages and the prolonged absences of men from them."<sup>84</sup>

Wallace fittingly describes an Iroquois village as a "collection of strings, hundreds of years old, of successive generations of women, always domiciled in their longhouses near their cornfields in a clearing while their sons and husbands traveled in the forest on supportive errands of hunting and trapping, of trade, of war, and of diplomacy."<sup>85</sup>

These sexual divisions, extolled in Iroquoian mythology, provided the groundwork for the Iroquois social and political structure, termed "*ne skennon*" 'harmony.'<sup>86</sup> Harmony is achieved through the synthesis of the male (wolf) and female (bear) identities, and together they form the turtle which mediates between the two sides."<sup>87</sup> Anthropologist James Lynch explains that "the adjudgment process of the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," 60.

<sup>82</sup> William N. Fenton, "Northern Iroquoian Culture Patterns," In *Handbook of North American Indians*, gen. ed. William C. Sturtevant, Vol. 15: *Northeast*, ed. Bruce G. Trigger (Washington, 1978), 298.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," 60.

<sup>85</sup> Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 28-29.

<sup>86</sup> Lynch, "The Iroquois Adoption of Non-Iroquoian Individuals, 83-84.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 84.

Confederacy always involved a dialogue between the male and female sides, whether it be matrilineage, clan, nation, or Confederation moieties."<sup>88</sup> "Traditionally, the male side (wolves or warriors) acted as an externally oriented group, while the females (bears or life givers) tended to focus upon matters of internal or domestic import."<sup>89</sup> Iroquoian men managed public affairs. They traveled outside the clearing, defending and providing for the village and creating links to the outside world through trade and diplomacy. The women remained within the clearing, focusing on community and family matters and becoming the guardians of village traditions.<sup>90</sup>

A woman in Iroquois society could play an important role in political life, especially as the head of a clan or a household. While it was probably rare for adoptive women to reach the highest levels of female leadership, these positions were within their grasp. The women who attained these positions were not necessarily the "oldest woman of the line, but the one with most leadership and diplomacy."<sup>91</sup> Women with the proper attributes may have been groomed for these positions. Martha Randle explained in 1951 that there "must have been an incentive toward developing these qualities and some conscious effort made to attain them."<sup>92</sup> The first role clan matrons played was in the nomination of chiefs of the great intertribal league of the Iroquois. Upon the death of one of these fifty chiefs, the senior woman of his clan nominated his successor. This clan mother closely watched the behavior of the new chief, and if he proved unsatisfactory in

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>90</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliny," 61.

<sup>91</sup> Martha C. Randle, "Iroquois Women, Then and Now," *Symposium on Local Diversity in Iroquois Culture*, ed. William N. Fenton, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 149 (Washington, D.C., 1951), 171.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

his new office, she could “dehorn” him—take away his powers as chief.<sup>93</sup> Randle noted that the powerful political positions of Iroquoian women can be traced to the symbolic extension of the Longhouse as the conceptual basis of the League" and that the "extended family structure of the Longhouse, symbolized in the League, accounts for the function of the matrons to hold the chiefs' names in their clans and their consequent right to appoint and depose chiefs."<sup>94</sup> Although women did not speak in the council directly, they could still influence its decisions. Because council decisions required unanimity, "any proposal unpopular with the matrons could be hindered by their disapproval."<sup>95</sup>

Women also played an important role in village decision-making. But their obligation to familial and community concerns was balanced by the men's outward-looking obligations.<sup>96</sup> Both men and women attended the town meetings. “While men were the chiefs and normally did the public speaking, the women caucused behind the scenes and lobbied with the spokesmen.”<sup>97</sup> Lafitau observed that “the women are always the first to deliberate or who should deliberate according to their principles on private or community matters. They hold their councils apart and, as a result of their decisions, advise the chiefs on matters on the mat, so that the latter may deliberate on them in their turn.”<sup>98</sup> In fact, these councils of high-ranking women were quite influential in village

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 154; The significant role played by the clan matron, however, does not imply a diminution of the power of the male chiefs. J. N. B. Hewitt implied a superior role for women when he portrayed male League chiefs as mere titular leaders: “Although the male federal chieftains were chosen by her from among her brothers and sons to consider and decide public affairs, they did not act for themselves but only as representatives and delegates of the woman in those matters which did not seemingly require her presence (Hewitt, *Status of Women*, 488).

<sup>94</sup> Randle, "Iroquois Women, Then and Now," 171.

<sup>95</sup> Randle, "Iroquois Women, Then and Now," 172.

<sup>96</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney." 62.

<sup>97</sup> Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 29.

<sup>98</sup> Lafitau, *Customs of the Indians*, 1:295.

decision-making; village elders would "decide no important affair without their advice."<sup>99</sup> The women viewed village or tribal problems as issues related to their extended families, while men looked at the same issues as problems in the relations between clans, villages, or tribes.<sup>100</sup> "These complementary perspectives," explained Trigger, "allowed men and women belonging to the same local clan to cooperate in formulating public policies that were more effective than they would have been had such policies been worked out by men or women alone."<sup>101</sup>

Women played a crucial third role in Iroquois politics: they had the right to "demand publicly that a murdered kinsman or kinswoman be replaced by a captive from a non-Iroquois tribe."<sup>102</sup> That this responsibility fell upon the women of the tribe was consistent with their sexual division of labor because women had the "responsibility for the welfare of the family household."<sup>103</sup>

Captive Indian women faced the powerful assimilative tools of the Iroquois, but in the end these women had to choose for themselves to resist or submit. Women who chose to assimilate were welcomed as if they were native to the Iroquois. These new members of the Iroquois family found fulfilling lives among a people who revered women.

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<sup>99</sup> *JR*, 54:281.

<sup>100</sup> Trigger, "Iroquoian Matriliney," 62.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 29.

## Chapter Two

### White Women Captives among the Iroquois

Iroquois men sought women for capture because of the crucial roles women played in their society. As captive Indian women came from tribes culturally similar to the Iroquois, they, to some degree, were prepared for the physical and psychological rigors of the capture and adoption process. But in the late seventeenth century, Anglo-French conflict increased, providing new incentives for Indians to capture white colonists. Unlike captive Indians, white captives were entirely unprepared for the Iroquois capture and adoption procedures. An examination of the captivity narratives of Eunice Williams and Mary Jemison reveals the effectiveness of Iroquois cultural conversion methods upon white women captives. Moreover, these women's stories illustrate how some white women captives found their new lives with the Iroquois so starkly different—providing freedom, equality, and rights unknown to their colonial contemporaries—that to remain among the Indians was, in many cases, preferable to returning to white society.

The Iroquois (and most Indians throughout the Northeast) took white settlers captive throughout the colonial period. Indians were most likely to adopt both male and

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<sup>103</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 306, n. 28.



female children and "young women, often the mothers of the captive children."<sup>104</sup> But in New England, as the seventeenth century proceeded, Puritan expansion and warfare drove the Indians of New England northward and into alliances with the Catholic French. In addition, many of the Iroquoians voluntarily joined the French Jesuits and converted to Catholicism at missionary towns such as Caughnawaga. Together, the French and Indians tried to halt English expansion. Whenever Anglo-French warfare broke out, New Englanders prepared for the combined French and Indian raids that swept down from the north.<sup>105</sup>

The French-allied Indians, like those allied with the English, cooperated with the Europeans when it served their interest. The Indians played by their own rules and, "according to Indian rules, captives of all ages and of either sex could—indeed must—be taken."<sup>106</sup> As the seventeenth century progressed, the capture of white colonists became monetarily rewarding for the Indians. Since the first New England captives were carried to Canada in 1677 and redeemed by the French, the Indians depended on this ready market for their captives.<sup>107</sup> Captives were now especially valuable: "if they were not adopted into the tribe they could be ransomed."<sup>108</sup>

Accordingly, when Indians from Canada raided New England's frontier, they brought the extra moccasins and snowshoes captives would need on their trek back to

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<sup>104</sup> James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial America* (New York, 1981), 172.

<sup>105</sup> Colin G. Calloway, "An Uncertain Destiny: Indian Captivities on the Upper Connecticut River," *Journal of American Studies*, 17 (Aug. 1983), 194.

<sup>106</sup> Alden T. Vaughan and Daniel Richter, "Crossing the Cultural Divide: Indians and New Englanders, 1605-1765," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 90 (1981), 73.

<sup>107</sup> Emma Lewis Coleman, *New England Captives Carried to Canada: Between 1677 and 1760 during the French and Indian Wars*, 2 vols. (Portland, Me., 1925) 2:33; Vaughan and Richter, "Crossing the Cultural Divide," 77-80; Calloway, "Uncertain Destiny," 195.

<sup>108</sup> Calloway, "Uncertain Destiny," 194.

Indian country.<sup>109</sup> The lure of ransom money was the primary interest of the French-allied Indians, but they would not pass up the opportunity to adopt a particularly appealing captive.<sup>110</sup> For the Iroquois, whose population had been decimated by disease and continual warfare, adoption of captives was a necessity. In fact, the Iroquois adopted captives so readily that in some tribes "adoptees came to outnumber pure-blooded Iroquois."<sup>111</sup>

Even when capturing prisoners for ransom, the Iroquois followed the cultural edicts of the "mourning-war."<sup>112</sup> However, white captives perceived the procedures dictated by the mourning-war custom far differently than did Indian captives. Whites were physically unprepared for the rigors of capture and culturally unprepared for Iroquois adoption processes. An examination of the 1704 French and Indian (primarily Catholic Mohawk) raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts reveals the extreme psychological trauma faced by the whites during their capture and the long trek back to Canada.<sup>113</sup> Reverend John Williams's captivity narrative, *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, illustrates the trauma experienced by white prisoners of the Iroquois. Moreover, the story of the Deerfield captives illustrates the cultural conversion that began on the trail back to the Indians' settlements, especially for those captives chosen for adoption.<sup>114</sup> The Indians concentrated their assimilative efforts on a selected few of the captives, who received

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<sup>109</sup> Calloway, "Uncertain Destiny," 194; Vaughan and Richter, "Crossing the Cultural Divide," 72.

<sup>110</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 172-73.

<sup>111</sup> Calloway, "Uncertain Destiny," 194.

<sup>112</sup> Vaughan and Richter, "Crossing the Cultural Divide," 76-77; see also Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 40 (Oct. 1983), 528-559.

<sup>113</sup> For a thorough discussion of the various Indian groups who participated in the Deerfield raid and their particular motivations, see Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive: New Perspectives on the 1704 Attack on Deerfield," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser. 52 (Jan. 1995), 3-46.

<sup>114</sup> John Williams, *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion . . .* (Bedford, Mass. 1993 [1853]).

special treatment from the outset of the journey—the most notable of whom was Eunice Williams, the seven-year-old daughter of the town's Congregational minister.

The war party of 200 Indians and 48 Frenchmen traveled three hundred miles across the frozen lakes and rivers between Caughnawaga and Deerfield, the northernmost English settlement on the Connecticut River.<sup>115</sup> "They came on snowshoes, bringing more for their captives' use on the return."<sup>116</sup> To travel quickly, the war party carried only essential supplies. With their few provisions soon exhausted, the game that the Indian hunters killed en route provided their only food.<sup>117</sup> Suffering the traditional privations of Indians on the warpath, the party reached its destination "half-starved."<sup>118</sup>

Just before dawn on February 29, 1704, relying on the element of surprise, the Indians "came in like a flood" upon the town.<sup>119</sup> They awoke the Rev. John Williams "by their violent endeavors to break open doors and windows, with axes and hatchets" and burst into his bedroom "with painted faces, and hideous acclamations."<sup>120</sup> The Indians quickly disarmed the minister, and while he stood bound and naked, the attackers carried "two of [his] children to the door and murdered them, as also a negro woman."<sup>121</sup>

Attacks like this on the town's minister and his family occurred throughout the town; the Indians, using surprise and stealth, caught the colonists when they were most vulnerable. The whites felt secure in their homes (they later realized their watch had been "unfaithful") and were unprepared to be pulled out of their beds by the ferocious

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<sup>115</sup> Haefeli and Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive," 6-7; see also John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America* (New York, 1994).

<sup>116</sup> Coleman, *New England Captives*, 42.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Williams, *The Redeemed Captive*, 10.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Indians.<sup>122</sup> The attackers did their work with such speed and ruthlessness that many of the colonists were stunned into passivity.

After killing 47 townspeople, the Indians took 109 captives and prepared for their journey back to Canada.<sup>123</sup> The war party led the "grief-stricken" colonists to the "foot of the mountain" within sight of the still-burning town.<sup>124</sup> Here the Indians took away the captives' shoes and gave "in the room of them Indian shoes," to prepare the colonist for the journey ahead.<sup>125</sup> Later Williams noted, "My master made me a pair of snow-shoes," because the minister "could not possibly travel without, the snow being knee-deep."<sup>126</sup> Williams remarked that with his snowshoes (and after being threatened with scalping) he traveled "forty or forty-five miles" in one day.<sup>127</sup> "Such an introduction to the superbly adapted technology of the Indians alone would not convert the English," historian James Axtell explained, "but it was a beginning."<sup>128</sup>

Williams described what he believed to be the wanton cruelty of the Indian captors, especially during the first days of the journey. The day after his wife was killed (the Indians eventually killed eighteen), Williams noted in desperation:

In our march they killed a sucking infant of one of my neighbors; and before night a girl of about eleven years of age. I was made to mourn, at the consideration of my flock being, so far, a flock of slaughter, many being slain in the town, and so many murdered in so few miles from the town; and from fears what we must yet expect from such who delightfully imbrued their hands in the blood of so many of His people.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> Haefeli and Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive," 6.

<sup>124</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 12-13; Coleman, *New England Captives*, 43.

<sup>125</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>128</sup> Axtell, *The European and the Indian*, 180.

<sup>129</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 17; Coleman, *New England Captives*, 43.

In their treatment of white captives, individual Indians might be benign or cruel, but on the whole, their actions were driven by the pragmatic need to avoid capture. The Indians had traveled too far and taken too many risks to capriciously waste the lives of their valuable captives. Yet, the psychological effect of these methods on white captives, who were physically unprepared for the rigors of Indian travel and culturally unprepared for capture, was profound. Williams commented that no one could know the "sorrows that pierced" the captives' souls as they traveled with "the snow up to the knees, and we never inured to such hardships and fatigues."<sup>130</sup> On the third day of the journey, Williams noted that the captives "were made to scatter one from another into smaller companies; and one of my children was carried away with Indians belonging to eastern parts."<sup>131</sup> Indians separated family members from one another to break the bonds of their former lives but also to discourage escape attempts. Later, the Indians would again separate the captives in order to make "a more equal distribution" of the spoils of their raid.<sup>132</sup> Most psychologically unsettling to the captives was that the Indians killed those who could not keep up or would not survive the journey. For a time, each of the adults on this forced march probably expected their strength to fail, followed quickly by execution.

Yet, those who endured the hardships early in the journey slowly realized they were not going to die. What Williams (and white captives in general) did not realize was that the Indians confined their "cruelties," for the most part, to the first days of the journey. Williams's master threatened "to dash out [his] brains and take off [his] scalp" when the minister would not run; yet the minister refused, and his master merely sent him

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<sup>130</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 12.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

"away, alone on the ice."<sup>133</sup> After evading initial pursuit, the Indians "resorted to acts of cruelty and threats of murder to urge failing prisoners along."<sup>134</sup>

Eventually, the captives realized not only that they were going to live but that their captors treated them as well as they could. The Indians had no food to spare, but they shared what little they had equally with the captives. Williams stated that the Indians were, "after a manner, kind to me, and gave me the best they had" and that he "never wanted a meal's meat" during his captivity.<sup>135</sup> When each captive realized that he or she was not going to die and that the Indians were treating them kindly, each began to feel gratitude toward their captors.

The Indians preserved the lives of the adult male captives, primarily because they could be ransomed, but other captives received special treatment from the beginning of the journey. Most of those treated to lessons of kindness were children and young women destined for adoption. Although John Williams attributed the Indians' care for the children to God, he commented that "though [the Indians] had several wounded persons of their own to carry upon their shoulders," they "carried our children, incapable of travelling, in their arms, and upon their shoulders."<sup>136</sup> The Indians pulled Williams's son and other children on sleighs.<sup>137</sup> Williams noted that Eunice "was carried all the journey, and looked after with a great deal of tenderness."<sup>138</sup> For those captives destined for adoption, the process of cultural transformation started almost immediately upon capture. "Although Indians were known for their patience, they wasted no time in

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<sup>133</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 24.

<sup>134</sup> Calloway, "Uncertain Destiny," 198.

<sup>135</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 25, 23.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 22.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

beginning the educational process that would transform their hostile or fearful white captives into affectionate Indian relatives."<sup>139</sup>

When the Deerfield captives' journey ended in Canada, all but thirty were redeemed, including all of John Williams's children, except Eunice.<sup>140</sup> The Indians took Eunice to Caughnawaga, and a Catholic Mohawk woman adopted her to replace her own lost child. The Catholic Mohawks who captured Eunice were motivated by mourning-war, and their Christianization "did little to weaken [their] mourning-war customs."<sup>141</sup> Historians Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney explain that the grieving Mohawk woman who adopted Eunice after she arrived in Canada "exhibited the classic signs of the behavior that launched mourning-wars."<sup>142</sup> After the death of her daughter by birth, the Mohawk woman was "inconsolable," her relatives saw that she was in such a state of depression that they doubted she would survive.<sup>143</sup> But when Eunice replaced her lost daughter, the Mohawk woman "took much notice of her," and she instructed the other children to treat Eunice as "one of the family."<sup>144</sup> "Other young captives taken at Deerfield very likely fulfilled similar needs in other Mohawk families."<sup>145</sup>

When John Williams petitioned the Jesuits to see his daughter, he was told that he "should not be permitted to speak with or see" his child, and if he were to see her, his "labor would be lost" because the Mohawks "would as soon part with their hearts" than give up the child.<sup>146</sup> Williams and the governor general of New France, Philippe de

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<sup>139</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 180.

<sup>140</sup> Coleman, *New England Captives*, 44; Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 35.

<sup>141</sup> Haefeli and Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive," 38; Vaughan and Richter, "Crossing the Cultural Divide," 77.

<sup>142</sup> Haefeli and Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive," 38.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Williams, *Redeemed Captive*, 35-36.

Rigaud de Vaudreuil, both tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Mohawk family to give up Eunice.<sup>147</sup> The Indian family consistently refused offers of money or girls to replace Eunice.<sup>148</sup> But within three years, Eunice herself was doing the refusing. She had become so fully assimilated into the Indian culture that she had no desire to return to her white family.<sup>149</sup> Eunice fell in love with a Mohawk man and was married (after threatening the reluctant priest that they would live together otherwise) at sixteen years of age.<sup>150</sup> The next year her father made his final attempt to persuade Eunice to return with him, but she flatly refused.<sup>151</sup> Her father lamented that Eunice was "obstinately resolved to live and dye here, and [would] not so much as give me one pleasant look."<sup>152</sup> Eunice had three children by her Indian husband and lived with the Mohawks for more than eighty years until her death in 1785.<sup>153</sup>

The story of Eunice Williams's cultural conversion provides only a glimpse of the effect of the Iroquois capture, adoption, and assimilation methods on white captives. The Iroquois began Eunice Williams's transformation upon her capture in Deerfield, and her complete assimilation occurred within three years of her adoption in Caughnawaga. However, Eunice's assimilation within the Iroquois community at Caughnawaga "was not based entirely on Iroquoian traditions of adoption."<sup>154</sup> In this case, the lure of the Catholic faith blended with the assimilative ability of the Iroquois to produce her complete assimilation into the Mohawks' lifestyle. The strict Catholic piety that she

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<sup>147</sup> Coleman, *New England Captives*, 54-56.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>154</sup> Haefeli and Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive," 38.



adopted did much to sever her from the life she had led as a Puritan minister's daughter.<sup>155</sup> When Eunice's husband was asked why she did not return to white society, he responded that it was because her father had married twice.<sup>156</sup> Of the female captives captured by the Iroquois at Deerfield and adopted in Canada, only Eunice Williams's story was recorded; yet, at least four others remained in Caughnawaga, choosing the Indian lifestyle and marrying Indian men.<sup>157</sup> The stories of women adopted in these mission towns illustrate the assimilative power of the Iroquois and the attraction of the Catholic Faith.<sup>158</sup>

In addition to their desire to capture colonists for adoption, "economic calculations" and "strategic considerations" motivated the Indians who raided Deerfield.<sup>159</sup> But a half century later at the beginning of the Seven Years' War, the "long peace in the Middle Atlantic colonies collapsed" and "the Indians of Pennsylvania, southern New York, and the Ohio country had no Quebec or Montreal in which to sell their human chattels."<sup>160</sup> Therefore, the Indians reverted to their original reasons for capture and adoption. When they captured English settlers, they did so "largely to replace members of their own families who had died."<sup>161</sup> The story of Mary Jemison's captivity and assimilation into a Seneca family, as told by Jemison in her seventy-ninth

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 163.

<sup>157</sup> Coleman, *New England Captives*, 54-58.

<sup>158</sup> For an explication of the extremely successful efforts of the French and Indians in capturing English settlers and converting them to the Catholic faith, see James Axtell, "The English Apostates," chap. 12 in *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York, 1985).

<sup>159</sup> Haefeli and Sweeney, "Revisiting the Redeemed Captive," 38.

<sup>160</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 173.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

year to James E. Seaver, illustrates the traditional methods by which the Iroquois captured and assimilated white women captives.<sup>162</sup>

In 1758, a Shawnee raiding party captured fourteen-year-old Mary Jemison at her parents' farm near present-day Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>163</sup> In the surprise attack, the Shawnees quickly killed the only person who was armed, a man who was visiting Jemison's family along with his sister-in-law and her three children. The Indians then rushed in the house and secured Jemison's father. The Indians then "without the least resistance" gathered up the Jemison's mother, Jemison, and three of her siblings (two were hidden in the barn), the neighbor woman, and her three children. To avoid discovery, the Indians quickly forced their captives to march into the woods. As the Indians took Jemison to Fort Pitt at the forks of the Ohio River for adoption, she suffered traumas much like those faced by the Deerfield captives, including the killing of her family and neighbors—all but one of the neighbor boys.<sup>164</sup> Unlike Indian captives who could return to the communal support of their village if they managed a successful escape, white captives (children especially) often lost every human tie they had to their old lives when captured by Indians.

The Indians took Jemison and the other child, to Fort Pitt. But before entering, the Indians started to prepare the children for their new Indian lives by combing their captives' hair and painting their faces and hair red, "in the finest Indian style."<sup>165</sup> The terrified girl, bereft of family and friends, then spent a sleepless night at Fort Pitt, but in the morning she found succor. "It was not long before I was in some measure relieved by

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<sup>162</sup> James E. Seaver, *A Narrative of the life of Mrs. Mary Jemison . . .* (New York, 1961), 37.

<sup>163</sup> For explanation of the 1758 date of capture, which is at odds with Seaver's, see June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 280.

<sup>164</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 37.

the appearance of two pleasant looking squaws of the Seneca tribe," who examined her and spoke to her "former masters", who gave me to them to dispose of as they pleased." The women took Jemison by canoe (they sat with the girl while her original captors stood in the stern, carrying "the scalps of [her] former friends" strung on a pole) down the Ohio toward their village. As they passed a Shawnee town, Jemison saw the various body parts of "some white people who had just been burnt."<sup>166</sup> Jemison, like the Deerfield captives, saw the Indians who took her captive as wantonly cruel. When they arrived at the Seneca town, Jemison noted in relief that her captors "went on; which was the last I ever saw of them."<sup>167</sup> Whereas Jemison was probably wary of the Seneca women, she knew that they had taken her from her captors and that they were trying to show her kindness.

Before the Seneca women let Jemison out of the canoe, they took another step in Jemison's transformation to Iroquois culture. Jemison noted, "they went to their wigwam" and "returned with a suit of Indian clothing, all new, and very clean and nice."<sup>168</sup> Whereas the transformation process had begun on the trail, the adoption ceremony now began in earnest. Jemison did not mention going through a gauntlet, but white captives, like Indian ones, usually went through this ordeal.<sup>169</sup> However, it is apparent that Jemison was already clinging to the Seneca women as protectors and deliverers from her "former Indian masters."<sup>170</sup> Perhaps the kind Indian women could see that the girl already looked upon them as surrogate relatives, and so they spared her from

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>169</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 185-87.

<sup>170</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 42.

any harsh treatment in the gauntlet. On the other hand, the gauntlet may have been conducted in such a gentle way that Jemison either forgot it or perhaps mistook it for merely a greeting by the town's Indians.

The two Indian women next threw Jemison's old clothes into the river "and washed [her] clean."<sup>171</sup> Through this ritual bathing, European captives were "symbolically purged of their whiteness."<sup>172</sup> Jemison was then dressed in "the new suit" the Indians "had just brought, in complete Indian style."<sup>173</sup>

With the outward changes accomplished, the adoption procedure suddenly became solemn. The Indian women sat the Jemison in the middle of a wigwam, and she wondered what would happen next as "all the Squaws in the town" came and surrounded her. Before long, all of the women "immediately set up a most dismal howling, crying bitterly, and wringing their hands in all their agonies of grief for a deceased relative."<sup>174</sup> Jemison witnessed the women's freely-flowing tears and "signs of real mourning," after which a speaker eulogized the deceased Indian man.<sup>175</sup> The girl, who did not understand the Indians' words, "sat motionless, nearly terrified to death at the appearance and actions of the company," expecting at any moment to be killed.<sup>176</sup> As the half-spoken, half-sung eulogy came to an end, the speaker told the grieving crowd to "dry up" their tears because the deceased Indian's spirit had sent "a helper whom with pleasure we greet."<sup>177</sup> (Jemison later learned that the two "squaws," her protectors, had lost a brother in "Washington's

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>172</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 187.

<sup>173</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 44.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

war," and that now she had replaced him in the family.)<sup>178</sup> The speaker then called Jemison by her new Indian name, Dickewamis "pretty or handsome girl" and proclaimed that "in the place of our brother she stands in our tribe."<sup>179</sup>

As the ceremony progressed, Jemison noticed a drastic change in the attitude of the Indians. The outpouring of grief that the Indians had shown changed to looks of love directed toward their new sister. "Joy sparkled in their countenances, and they seemed to rejoice over me as over a long lost child."<sup>180</sup> The Indians then employed "every means" for the girl's "consolation and comfort." After her adoption, Jemison "was ever considered and treated by them as a real sister, the same as though I had been born of their mother."<sup>181</sup> William Smith, a soldier in Colonel Henry Bouquet's army during the Seven Years' War and a shrewd observer of Indian ways, comments on their adoption practices: "When [the Indians] once determine to give life, they give every thing with it . . . . No child is otherwise treated by the persons adopting it than the children of their own body."<sup>182</sup> "Treatment such as this—and it was almost universal—left an indelible mark on every captive, whether or not they returned to English society."<sup>183</sup>

Jemison had endured the fear of death between her capture and her salvation at the hands of the Seneca women. In the adoption ceremony she again felt the fear of death, followed by elation when she realized she was going to live and that she had a new, loving family. Perhaps thinking back to her adoption, in a later circumstance where she was saved from almost certain death, Jemison stated: "I felt such a kind of relief as no

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>182</sup> William Smith, *Expedition Against the Ohio Indians*, (Ann Arbor, 1966), 14-29; Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 28.

one can possibly experience, unless when under the absolute sentence of death he receives an unlimited pardon."<sup>184</sup>

Jemison was provided a home and given light work to do as her sisters diligently taught her the Indians' language and ways.<sup>185</sup> Her sisters jealously guarded her from Europeans who took notice of the white girl living with the Senecas. When white traders inquired about her when her Seneca family visited Fort Pitt, Jemison noted that "so great was [her sisters'] fear at losing me, or of my being given up in the treaty, that they never once stopped rowing till they got home."<sup>186</sup> After being with the Indians for "something over a year," Jemison had become considerably habituated to their mode of living, and attached to [her] sisters"; yet, she still had thoughts of returning to white society.<sup>187</sup>

When her sisters felt the time had come for Jemison to marry, they told her that "she must go and live with" a Delaware warrior named Sheninjee.<sup>188</sup> Jemison noted that she married "with a great degree of reluctance" because she did not dare to "cross" her sisters, "or disobey their commands."<sup>189</sup> On the surface, this compulsion to marry seems at odds with the non-coercive Iroquois methods of cultural transformation, since the Iroquois forced neither Indian nor white captives to marry. However, Jemison's sisters did not force her to marry; they persuaded her. In her two years as a captive, Jemison had witnessed nothing but love from her protectors, and they, in return, had earned her respect and devotion. Upon a later reunion with her sisters, Jemison testified that "the warmth of their feelings . . . and the continued favors that I received at their hands,

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<sup>183</sup> Axtell, *European and the Indian*, 189.

<sup>184</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 70,

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

riveted my affection for them so strongly that I am constrained to believe that I loved them as I should have loved my own sister had she lived, and I had been brought up with her.<sup>190</sup> Susan Walsh suggests that Jemison's reluctance to marry might have been the result of "a young woman asked to admit a strange man into a protective sorority, to extend allegiances, and to complicate, if not attenuate, the mother-daughter connection at the very core of Iroquois culture."<sup>191</sup>

Jemison recounted to Seaver her initial hesitation to marry and her feelings about her husband:

Sheninjee was a noble man; large in stature; elegant in his appearance; generous in his conduct; courageous in war; a friend in peace, and a great lover of justice. He supported a great degree of dignity far above his rank, and merited and received the confidence and friendship of all the tribes with whom he was acquainted. Yet, Sheninjee was an Indian. The idea of spending my days with him, at first seemed perfectly irreconcilable to my feelings; but his good nature, generosity, tenderness, and friendship towards me, soon gained my affection; and, strange as it may seem, I loved him!—To me he was ever kind in sickness, and always treated me with gentleness; in fact, he was an agreeable husband, and a comfortable companion. We lived happily together till the time of our final separation . . . .<sup>192</sup>

Seaver's editorial hand is clear in this passage as he emphasized for his audience what he purported to be the great changes that had taken place in Jemison's "animal and mental constitution" because of the trials, cruelties, and pains she endured during her captivity.<sup>193</sup> Perhaps only to Seaver's audience would it have seemed "strange" that Jemison (who would choose to spend the seventy-three years after her capture with the Senecas) would love her Indian husband. Although she may have been initially hesitant to marry, Jemison's love for her husband grew as she came to admire him as a person but also as she realized that Iroquoian marriages were built upon a foundation of mutual obligations

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>191</sup> Susan Walsh, "'With Them was My Home': Native American Autobiography and A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison," *American Literature*, 64 (March 1992), 54.

<sup>192</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 52-53.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., iv.

and respect. Jemison's sisters would have long since explained that women of the Iroquois could freely divorce if their husbands did not live up to their obligations or treat their wives well. But she found no reason to divorce her husband; in fact, an Indian husband's love for his white captive wife might have been among the strongest assimilative tools the Iroquois possessed. June Namias contends that for white women captives, "the sexual bond created by her Indian marriage formalized her acculturation, permanently separating her and transforming her culturally into 'them.'"<sup>194</sup> "The power of a new culture along with those bonds was enough to cut her off from her ethnic origins and her own family."<sup>195</sup>

After four years with the Iroquois and two years of marriage, Jemison had a son. She had "now become so far accustomed to [the Indians'] mode of living, habits, and dispositions" that her desire to leave "had almost subsided."<sup>196</sup> After Sheninjee died a year after the birth of their son, she remarried an Indian named Hiokatoo and had six more children with him.<sup>197</sup> She remained married for nearly fifty years until he died at 103 years of age.<sup>198</sup> Jemison noted that Hiokatoo afforded her, "according to Indian customs, all the kindness and attention that was my due as his wife," and "although war was his trade from his youth till old age and decrepitude stopt his career, he uniformly treated [her] with tenderness, and never offered an insult."<sup>199</sup> She summed up her commitment to remain with the Iroquois: "With them was my home; my family was there I had many friends to whom I was warmly attached in consideration of the favors,

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<sup>194</sup> Namias, *White Captives*, 91.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 51.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*



affection and friendship with which they had uniformly treated me, from the time of my adoption."<sup>200</sup>

Within a year of the birth of her first child, Jemison demonstrated her complete assimilation into the Iroquois by refusing to return to white society. When a Dutch trader who frequented the village resolved to take her to Niagara, redeem her, and collect his bounty, Jemison noted that she "carefully watched his movements in order to avoid falling into his hands."<sup>201</sup> On the following day she had to run and hide herself for three days to avoid the Dutchman, and she applied to village chiefs for help.<sup>202</sup> The chiefs resolved that she should not be redeemed without her consent and "that as it was [her] choice to stay," she should "live among them quietly and undisturbed."<sup>203</sup> But when one of the chiefs changed his mind, deciding to take Jemison to Niagara for redemption himself, her Indian brother told the chief "that sooner than [she] should be taken by force, he would kill [her] with his own hands!"<sup>204</sup> After more than twenty years with the Indians, Jemison's Indian brother offered his adopted sister her liberty, but she would not leave her children, nor would she take them back to white society where they would be despised and treated as enemies. She resolved to "stay and spend the remainder of my days with my Indian friends, and live with my family" as she had "heretofore done."<sup>205</sup>

The whites who inquired about the English girl living with the Indians and those who tried to drag her back to white society could not understand why Jemison chose to stay. Anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell noted, "What aroused the astonishment of the

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<sup>200</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 55.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-02

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

early American colonists was the fact that captives often refused to be redeemed."<sup>206</sup> As in Eunice Williams's case, Mary Jemison had freely chosen to live among the Indians rather than to return to white society. These two women represent many others who made that same choice but for whom few records exist.

The records of prisoner exchanges with the Indians provide information about other white captives who wanted to remain with their adoptive Indian relatives. After the Seven Years' War came to a close, Colonel Henry Bouquet compelled by treaty the defeated Senecas, Delawares, and Shawnees of the Ohio Valley to give up all of their captives.<sup>207</sup> William Smith described the anguish felt by Indians and their adopted white relatives as they were wrenched apart at Bouquet's orders: [The Indians] delivered up their beloved captives with the utmost reluctance; shed torrents of tears over them, recommending them to the care and protection of the commanding officer."<sup>208</sup> The Indians visited their relatives every day and brought them presents, accompanied by "all the marks of the most sincere affection."<sup>209</sup> They followed their relatives all the way to Fort Pitt, and as Smith recalls, one Iroquois man went even further to show his love for his wife:

A young Mingo carried this still further, and gave an instance of love which would make a figure even in romance. A young woman of Virginia was among the captives, to whom he had form'd so strong an attachment, as to call her his wife. Against all remonstrances of the imminent danger to which he exposed himself by approaching to the frontiers, she persisted in following her, at the risk of being killed by the surviving relations of many unfortunate persons, who had been captivated or scalped by those of his nation.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> A. Irving Hallowell, "American Indians, White and Black: The Phenomenon of Transculturation," *Current Anthropology*, 4 (Dec. 1963), 525.

<sup>207</sup> Smith, *Expedition Against the Ohio Indians*, 174.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Smith, *Expedition Against the Ohio Indians*, 27.

Smith commented also that the children "who had been carried off young . . . . parted from the savages with tears."<sup>211</sup> Smith continued, "But it must not be denied that there were even some grown persons who shewed an unwillingness to return." Some women "who had been delivered up, afterwards found means to escape and run back to the Indian towns. Some, who could not make their escape, clung to their savage acquaintance at parting, and continued many days in bitter lamentations, even refusing sustenance."<sup>212</sup> J. Norman Heard noted that in the surrender of prisoners to Bouquet, "the fact that some of the women showing reluctance to be redeemed had both white and half-Indian children proves that [the women] had been captured as adults and had *submitted* to Indian marriages."<sup>213</sup>

Jemison's story not only illustrates the powerful Iroquois assimilative processes that culturally converted so many women captives, but illuminates the starkly different (and often preferable) life available to women in Iroquois society in comparison to contemporary white society. Iroquois scholar Harriet Converse wrote in 1908: "Labor and burdens may have been the condition of the Indian woman. She may seem to have been a creature only and not a companion to the red man, yet by comparison with the restrictions, to characterize it by no stronger term, obtaining among *civilized* people, the Iroquois woman had a superior position and superior rights."<sup>214</sup> The word "seem" is crucial in Converse's statement. To whites it might have appeared that Iroquois women, captive or native, were "creatures only" and not "companions to the red man," but the

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> J. Norman Heard, *White into Red: A Study of the Assimilation of White Persons Captured by Indians* (Metuchen, 1973), 102 (my emphasis).

<sup>214</sup> Harriet Maxwell Converse, *Myths and Legends of the New York Iroquois*, ed. Arthur C. Parker, New York State Museum *Bulletin* 125 (Albany, 1974), 138.

stories of Mary Jemison, Eunice Williams, and the Indian women captives of the Iroquois paint a far different picture.

Jemison preferred the "labor and burdens" of Iroquois women to those of white women. She explained that Iroquois women's labor "was not severe; and that of one year was exactly similar, in almost every respect, to that of the others, without the endless variety that is to be observed in the common labor of white people."<sup>215</sup> Whereas Iroquois women had many work responsibilities, their tasks "were probably not harder than [those] of white women."<sup>216</sup> Further, Jemison preferred the mutual support of the women's work groups. Iroquois women kept their children with them while they worked, "had no master to oversee or drive" them, and could work as "leisurely" as they pleased.<sup>217</sup>

In Indian society, Jemison enjoyed advantages that white women in colonial society would not enjoy for more than a hundred years. Jemison had two hundred acres of land she called her own, and at her death, she could pass the land on "for the benefit of her children."<sup>218</sup> While the individuals among the Iroquois did not consider property rights in the same way the English did, the Indians controlled the property they used and had de facto ownership. According to Converse, when an Iroquois woman entered a marriage, or left one, she retained her property "and could dispose of it at her pleasure."<sup>219</sup> Further, among the Iroquois, a woman's rights were "included in the laws"

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<sup>215</sup> Seaver, *Mary Jemison*, 55.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>219</sup> Converse, *Myths and Legends*, 136.

and "forever protected."<sup>220</sup> And although Iroquois men demanded respect "for his own rights," they regarded women's "civil claims as sacred"; "her legal rights were never interfered with."<sup>221</sup>

In contrast to the lot of Indian women, white women in English colonial society (after the first half-century of settlement) lived in an increasingly patriarchal world, where their rights decreased as the settlers shaped America into a more English form. Historian Mary Beth Norton explains that after 1660 the colonial governments acted increasingly to maintain civil order and promote strong family structures through legislation that increased the authority of parents over children and husbands over wives.<sup>222</sup> This statutory authority underlined the customary powers of patriarchal heads of households and was especially evident in property laws.<sup>223</sup> Although reality often mitigated the law, when a woman married in eighteenth-century British America she became a "feme covert," which according to Blackstone's famous dictum meant that "the husband and the wife are one and that one is the husband."<sup>224</sup>

This view of white women's status in colonial America stands in stark contrast to the independence and mutual respect shared between Iroquois men and women. Iroquois women enjoyed greater rights and responsibilities in their communities. Iroquois women nominated their people's leaders and had a voice in all public councils, negotiated marriages and governed households, governed their children without interference,

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 135; also see Elisabeth Tooker, "Women in Iroquois Society," in *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, eds., Michael K. Foster, et al. (Albany, 1984), and Judith K. Brown, "Economic Organization and the Position of Women among the Iroquois," *Ethnohistory*, 17 (1971), 151-167.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 135-36.

<sup>222</sup> Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review*, 89 (June, 1984), 602.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 603.

bestowed the clan title of her name upon her children and their descendents forever, controlled the land and agricultural produce of their village, and authorized all ceremonies of condolence.<sup>225</sup>

Iroquois women, captive and natal, enjoyed political, social, maternal, and religious rights that their sisters in white society could not imagine. Moreover, Iroquois women had a different relationship with their husbands than did their white contemporaries: an Iroquois husband was a partner, not a patriarch. The Iroquois methods of assimilation did much to bind captive women to their new Indian communities, and some, like Jemison, lived long and contented lives with their new Indian families, repeatedly refusing the opportunity to return to white society.

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<sup>224</sup> Joan R. Gunderson and Gwen Victor Gampel, "Married Women's Legal Status in Eighteenth-Century New York and Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 39 (Jan. 1982), 114, 133-34.

<sup>225</sup> Converse, *Myths and Legends*, 138.

## **Conclusion**

In order to successfully capture prisoners, the Iroquois struck quickly, shocking their victims into submission. Those captives who were deemed capable of a fast march back to Iroquoia were spared unnecessary cruelty, but those who slowed the party's retreat were killed. When the captives arrived at the Iroquois villages, their fate was decided by a clan matron: they would be tortured unmercifully or they would be given another chance at life—if they chose an Iroquois life. In the event that they were saved, the captives would have to prove their fidelity to their new people.

The Iroquois aggressively sought captives, especially young women, Indian and white, to sustain their population, provide sustenance for the community, and ensure cultural continuity. On their trek back to the Iroquois villages, women captives were treated more kindly than were men. From the outset young women captives, like children captives, had the advantage of being prime candidates for adoption. They faced the rigors of the adoption process, but, since they were not a threat to Iroquois warriors, they were rarely tortured or maimed. Since they were not a threat to their new kinfolk, women further avoided a stringent test of their loyalty to the clan. The psychological effect of the Iroquois capture, adoption, and assimilation procedures was formidable, but in the end the decision to assimilate or not lay with the captive.

Women captives were accepted by the Iroquois if they fulfilled their roles in their new society; yet each woman had to weigh her life with the Iroquois against the life that she remembered when deciding to truly become one of the Iroquois people. The love and acceptance women felt from their adoptive families went far in helping them make their decision. The important roles that women played in Iroquois economic, political, social, and religious life allowed captive women who decided to assimilate to become part of a powerful sisterhood; even those captives who never attained high-status positions in their village nevertheless were part of a supportive, influential female sodality.

Women were so powerful within the village and clearing that Iroquois men often preferred to marry a captive rather than a local woman. Men sought captive wives not for what they brought to the community but for what they did *not* bring. Men who married outsiders could avoid heavy obligations to a mother-in-law's clan, at least until his wife was fully assimilated. Men might also, for a time, expect a more docile and pliant wife—until she began to consider herself an Iroquois woman. The relationship between men and women, in any case, was free of coercion and structured by reciprocal obligations. Both women and men were free to divorce without penalty if their spouse did not fulfill his or her obligations. The benefits of this type of relationship was evident to white captives, especially children who grew up in the restrictive, patriarchal households of the colonial period.

Modern Americans can make little claim to live in a society marked by balanced relations between men and women. Yet, some early twenty-first-century Americans aspire to structure gender relations in a more egalitarian manner, allowing the same opportunities to both men and women. Clearly, gender relations still hinge upon male



dominance. Women are underrepresented in important positions in government and business. Many women have been pushed into low-paid jobs in the service sector, and often face a "double-day" as they also perform the lion's share of housework and childcare. Women do not control their own reproductive rights; instead a male-dominated government controls these rights. Women who divorce are often left in poverty, without property of their own and with little means of adequate support. The cost of day care often precludes women's reentry into the workplace.

By examining Iroquois women's lives, even captive women among the Iroquois, we can at least imagine some of the benefits of coercion-free, balanced roles for men and women in society.

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