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# “A Perfect & Lawful Right”

Kathryn M. Wilmot

*To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823–1839.* Edited by Theresa Strouth Gaul. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

In 1825, the community of Cornwall, Connecticut was in an uproar over the impending marriage of Harriett Gold, the daughter of one of its leading citizens, to Elias Boudinot, member of the Cherokee Indian Nation and former student of the town’s assimilation-focused Foreign Mission School. The second white woman in the community to establish a relationship with a Foreign Mission School student, Harriett’s determination to marry Elias resulted in an exchange of heated correspondence among her family members. Theresa Strouth Gaul’s book, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823–1839*, affords a fascinating and personal glimpse into nineteenth-century attitudes toward intermarriage, the complexity of the assimilation movement, and the Cherokee removal policies. As Gaul states, the “letters in this volume restore richness and vitality to a family story played out on the larger stage of two nations’ histories.”<sup>1</sup> In spite of the dissenting voices of Harriett’s family—her brother Stephen burned her in effigy on the village green—Harriett and Elias married and subsequently relocated to the Cherokee Nation in Georgia. Their letters to family members back home offer insight into Harriett’s adjustment to life among the Cherokee people, Elias’s employment as editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix* and promoter of the removal Treaty of New Echota, and the couple’s contented marriage.

Gaul thoroughly explains her editorial method for the edition, describing the location of the original source texts and their formats, other publications in which the letters have appeared, and proofreading and transcription techniques used, including the retention of “original spellings, punctuation, cap-

<sup>1</sup>Theresa Strouth Gaul, ed., *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823–1839* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 66.

italization, abbreviations, and errors.”<sup>2</sup> This method, in addition to the retention of superscripted and crossed out words, is consistent with Mary-Jo Kline’s suggestion that “any edition of such sources should strive to preserve the communicative intention and/or effect of the original.”<sup>3</sup> Gaul regularizes paragraphs, dashes, and underlining; adds letters to clarify certain words (e.g.: sh[e]; [h]ave); and adds [missing] or [illegible] if words are obscured by wax marks, tears and/or holes, or cannot be accurately interpreted. All of these methods improve the letters’ readability and flow.

In regard to her selection process, Gaul only includes family correspondence that mentions the marriage of Elias and Harriett, a sound decision. She indicates there are fragments of letters not included, but doesn’t offer an explanation for their exclusion. This sparks curiosity—how many fragmentary letters are there and why did Gaul deem them unworthy of inclusion? If Gaul did not want to interrupt the chronological nature of the full-text letters, perhaps an appendix of fragments would have been appropriate. In addition, Gaul states, “I have not recovered . . . any of the letters that passed between Elias and Harriett during their courtship,” yet fails to mention in the introduction a 30 July 1825 letter from Harriett’s sister, Catharine, to their sister Flora stating, “every letter that [Harriett] ever had from, Elias or Sarah, has been taken from Mr. Northrops, she has not seen them for more than 2 months, the one that has got them has had sufficient time to read them, & I think he ought to return them.”<sup>4</sup> Gaul should have included this in the introduction as a means of explaining the lack of extant letters between Harriett and Elias. Perhaps these letters were destroyed by the person who possessed them in 1825. In addition, Gaul does not explain why there are no letters between 1832 and 1836 in this edition. Are they not extant or did she decide not to include them? What happened during this period of time?

Gaul provides a lengthy introduction to the edition. The comprehensive nature of her research is apparent as she situates the letters within historical contexts such as “The Foreign Mission School,” “Racial Attitudes in Connecticut,” “Familial and Gender Negotiations,” and the all-too-often ignored native viewpoint in “Cherokee Reactions to the Inter marriages.” She provides background on the letter-writers, their relationship to the family, the conflicts among them, and the evolution of their attitudes toward the

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>3</sup> Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Gaul, 3; Ibid., 112.

marriage. Most of Harriett's family came to accept the marriage, with the exception of her sister Abigail Gold Everest and Abigail's husband Cornelius. However, acceptance came only after harsh criticism, and letters such as the one from her brother-in-law Hermann Vaill stating, "I do say she had as well die, as become the cause of so much lasting evil as the marriage will occasion" must have been hard for Harriett to bear.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Harriet remained unshaken in her devotion to Elias, stating, "I feel as though I had wronged no one. I have done nothing but what I had a perfect & lawful right to do."<sup>6</sup>

Gaul's annotations are fairly systematic and scrupulous, identifying persons mentioned within the letters, items such as *Webster's Spelling Book*, and the origin of various scriptures and hymns. Gaul misses a few opportunities to clarify words. Herman Vaill's letter of 2 August 1825 uses the word "Xtian" numerous times and a note to the word "Christian" would be helpful. In addition, Flora Gold Vaill's 19 September 1825 letter to her husband states that Stephen "is as chirk as ever."<sup>7</sup> An Oxford English Dictionary definition of chirk as "lively, cheerful, in good spirits" should have been included.<sup>8</sup> Within the notes, Gaul incorporates textual decisions as well as directing the reader to further resources. One negative aspect of Gaul's annotation system lies in the fact that notes are located at the end of each chapter, rather than at the bottom of each page, thus inconveniencing the reader, especially when letters encompass four, five, or twelve pages.

On a positive note, the format of the letters pleases the eye. Author and recipient names are presented in all capital letters in the headnote, provenance details such as address and postal information on the envelope are included, and the location of marginal notes via the use of [LM] or [RM] is well-thought out. Copies of some of the original letters, maps, a genealogical chart, and photographs and miniatures of the family, the Mission School, Harriett's childhood home, and her gravesite, are well-chosen.

Gaul does not mention her intended audience, but from the content of the introduction, this edition clearly is not intended for the layperson. Sentences such as "in her study of antebellum benevolence, Susan Ryan explains that while sentimental identification relies on a perceived similarity

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>8</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "chirk."

with the object of sympathy, benevolence conversely depends on ‘distancing rhetorics’” are not conducive to attracting a popular audience.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more pertinent are Gaul’s historical explanations of the importance of letters as a material form and genre, describing the evolution of letter-writing, the effect of postal rates, marginal insertions, and the like.

Unfortunately, Harriett and Elias’s marriage lasted only a decade. Harriett’s letters end in 1836 when she dies three months after giving birth to her sixth child. Elias includes a moving tribute to Harriett in his letter to her parents announcing her death. Fired as the editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix* and viewed as a traitor by some of his people for advocating Cherokee removal from Georgia, Elias was murdered in 1839.

Overall, *To Marry an Indian* is a historically significant edition with sound editorial decisions and much to offer the scholarly reader. In addition to providing a greater understanding of historical issues of assimilation, Indian removal, and intermarriage, this edition reveals the personal dynamics of the Gold and Boudinot families. Throughout the correspondence, Harriett’s conscious decision to reject conventional life and her satisfaction with that decision are evident.

<sup>9</sup>Gaul, 7.