

# BOOK REVIEWS



## ***Americans Recaptured: Progressive Era Memory of Frontier Captivity***

By Molly K. Varley

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Students of the early American frontier often find themselves indebted to late 19th- and early 20th-century historians for compiling and publishing a vast array of valuable primary source material. However, they may also wonder why such a volume of relevant information was reissued in the decades just prior to World War I. Historian Molly K. Varley explores this interesting question in *Americans Recaptured: Progressive Era Memory of Frontier Captivity*. As she reveals, the answer concerned a crisis of identity brought on by the recent loss of two critical elements of the American experience: the frontier and its allegedly “vanishing” Native inhabitants.

As Varley explains, the official declaration in the 1890 census that the frontier region had ceased to exist sparked widespread concern among Americans, who considered both the place and the concept to be defining elements of the national character. In addition, the massacre of a band of Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Sioux by U.S. cavalrymen in the same year brought to an end a centuries-long chain of Indian wars, implying—it was feared—that both the

battleground and the worthy, but “savage,” foe would soon fade into memory.

The resulting damage to the American psyche, and the need to repair it, brought forth the learned opinions of everyone from wealthy industrialists, to politicians, anthropologists, and even eugenicists. Varley paints a picture of concerned progressives, such as Theodore Roosevelt, who worried about the difficulty of transmitting the values of the frontier to future generations, many of whom had only recently arrived on American shores from southern and eastern Europe.

While opinions on how to sufficiently Americanize recent immigrants and the children of native-born citizens alike varied, many agreed that familiarity with frontier tales was essential, particularly the narratives of those who had been captured by Indians. To progressives, these captives were Americans in the purest sense of the word. Primarily European in ancestry, their close contact with Indians, however brief, had transformed both the captives and their subsequent offspring into a new and vital people. But what of individuals such as Mary Jemison and Frances Slocum, adopted white captives who willingly chose to live and die with their Indian families? The problem presented by these *unredeemed* captives challenged the imaginations of progressive Americans, who struggled, just as their colonial forebears did, to understand why anyone would choose Indian society over that of Anglo-America.

Varley’s account, which explores the progressive rationale for not only accepting these female captives, but vesting in them all of the essential values of “true” Americans, is supported by a variety of statements from progressives of every stripe. However, her familiarity with some of the primary captives in

her narrative and some aspects of the genre in general, is less developed. Twice, she states that Frances Slocum, who lived much of her adult life as a Miami Indian woman, was captured by the Miami, though Slocum herself stated that it was the Delaware who initially took her from her home in eastern Pennsylvania, later adopting her into the tribe. In addition, Varley, like some other scholars of the genre, is drawn to the use of problematic archetypes, which tend to downplay the complex reality of captivity, at one point categorizing adopted captives into those who permanently “went,” versus those who temporarily “played” Indian. Despite the occasional misstep, *Americans Recaptured* successfully chronicles the ways in which progressives used historical captives to justify everything from new bronze monuments to pseudo-scientific theories of white supremacy. Read with a critical eye, the book brings together diverse voices from a dynamic era in American political history, and serves as a potent reminder of the many ways the past can be manipulated by those with the self-assured belief that right is on their side.

Visit the Fort Pitt Museum to see the *Captured by Indians: Warfare and Assimilation on the 18th Century Frontier* exhibition, on view until May 22, 2016. 

