

A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity: Dispatches from the Dakota War

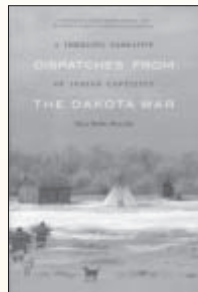
Mary Butler Renville, edited by Carrie Reber Zeman and Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 375 p. Cloth, \$60.00.)

Despite its lurid title, the University of Nebraska Press edition of *A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity: Dispatches from the Dakota War* is anything but sensationalist. At the heart of the book is Mary Butler Renville’s account of being held captive during the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862. Mary, who was white, and her husband John, who was Dakota, were forced by the war to leave their home at the Upper Agency mission and live among the “Peace Party” Dakota. While living among their Dakota friends, neighbors, and fellow church-goers, the Renvilles found themselves unable to escape from southern Minnesota as bands sympathetic to Little Crow surrounded them on all sides. For their own protection, Mary and her family adopted Dakota dress and lived in a tipi—a practical choice, since the mission buildings were ransacked and burned. Besides caring for her family—cooking, childcare, and laundry waited for no one—Mary kept a journal of what happened in the camp and kept copies of letters she penned on behalf of key leaders such as Paul Mazakutemani and Simon Anawangmani. These became the substance of *A Thrilling Narrative*, first published in 13 installments in the *Berlin City Courant* in 1863.

Taken alone, Mary Renville’s narrative would be of limited usefulness to contemporary readers wanting to know more about the U.S.–Dakota war. Mary admitted that she could not readily remember all the details of her time with the Peace Coalition and was forced to rely on the memory of others to fill in gaps. In addition, her account relies to a degree on the familiar tropes of captivity narratives as a genre: barbarous savages, the protection of a Christian God, and the ominous specter of rape.

This is where the new introductions in this volume are of lasting value. Carrie Reber Zeman, an independent historian, offers a lengthy and meticulously researched historical introduction to the text, placing Mary’s narrative in the context of Dakota history, the fur trade, the establishment of mission stations by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, immigration to the region, and the U.S.–Dakota war itself. Zeman’s footnotes demonstrate the breadth of her research, drawing from Dakota oral testimony; the Northwest Missions Manuscript Collection, the ABCFM Papers, and the Pond Papers at the Minnesota



Historical Society; the Riggs Family Papers at Augustana College, South Dakota; and numerous key secondary works, including Gary Clayton Anderson’s *Little Crow* and Mary Wingerd’s *North Country*. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola’s literary introduction to the text, while shorter, is just as valuable, tying Mary’s narrative to other captivity narratives, mining her word choices for revealing information about her beliefs and hopes, and analyzing the storytelling conventions that give structure to the text. Together, Zeman and Derounian-Stodola offer a fantastically detailed annotation of the narrative, explaining the political, economic, and kinship connections between Dakota and non-Dakota figures alike and explaining the identities and histories of even the most glancingly mentioned individuals in the text.

Taken together, the introductions, annotations, and foreword by Gwen Westerman transform Mary Renville’s captivity narrative from an apparently “simple” statement of experience into a deeply contextualized historical document. The book will be of interest to anyone curious about the nuances and complexities of the U.S.–Dakota War and particularly to scholars of the era. It is highly recommended for university and college libraries and would be a particularly fruitful book for use in undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

Reviewed by Catherine J. Denial, associate professor of history at Knox College in Illinois. Her book, Making Marriage: Husbands, Wives, and the American State in Dakota and Ojibwe Country, is forthcoming (MHS Press, Fall 2013).

Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon

Cindy Ott

(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012. 323 p. Cloth, \$26.95.)



In this volume, the lowly field pumpkin becomes an explanatory symbol of man’s relationship to the land and the changing American attitudes toward agrarian society. Cindy Ott traces the squash’s influence from Pilgrim settlement to modern-day truck farms in her well-researched and intriguing book.

The pumpkin is ripe for this analysis, as it has been commonly harvested for more purposes than any other crop. Ott examines the three key facets of pumpkin usage: its early and important role as a vegetable crop, feeding farmers and their animals; the popularity of pumpkin pie for

iconic Thanksgiving celebrations, beginning in the nineteenth century; and nonfood uses of the squash, specifically as jack-o-lanterns or as mammoth varieties raised for display and growers' contests. Each of these facets has a long and complex history. Ott weaves them together in a mostly chronological manner.

Pumpkin is comprehensively footnoted and has an extensive bibliography. Although based on historic records, observations, and some data, it is a cultural exploration rather than a strict history. Ott's main thesis is that, for the last century, Americans have celebrated the pumpkin as symbolic of the "mythic and long revered rural way of life." She considers the power these myths can have in changing "the natural world and how markets and farms operate." She demonstrates that the ways pumpkins are grown and sold today are "actually helping to revitalize the very thing it has long symbolized—the small family farm."

Ott deploys critical analysis of paintings, magazine illustrations, poetry, literature, and even seed catalogs to build her consideration of the pumpkin's role over time and its importance to the development of the American national character. Her analytical approach takes its roots in the difficulty of sorting out pre-eighteenth-century terminology: the early spelling, "pompion," and "squash" were used seemingly indiscriminately and interchangeably. Ott forthrightly reminds the reader that the "pompion" in any particular source may be one of many winter squashes and not the round field pumpkin at all. For example, Native Americans used a wide variety of squash, and telling one from another in their stories or recorded foodways is nearly impossible. Still, she traces the pumpkin's appearance in Old World literature, showing how the word became synonymous with rural bumpkins, suggesting European disdain for the uncultured world across the Atlantic Ocean—"pumpkinhead" being a common term of ridicule.

The narrative, along with the iconic importance of the

pumpkin, pick up steam in the chapters focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She recounts the Civil War designation of the national November Thanksgiving holiday and the attendant attention to pumpkin pie. In her exploration of more recent pumpkin culture she describes fields of pumpkins grown for canned pie filling in central Illinois and considers the impact this has had on small, family farmers. She recounts anecdotes of others who took advantage of the desire of city folks to engage in rural nostalgia and grew pumpkin patches for pick-your-own harvest adventures. She reports data on the economic viability of those farms.

At times Ott's summary narrative overreaches or misstates. Amelia Simmons, author of the first cookbook written for American cooks and ingredients, did not "create the pumpkin pie" and Abraham Lincoln did not "propel it into becoming a national dessert." Ott's explanation of the symbiosis in shared-field plantings of corn, beans, and squash (in both native and colonial American gardens) asserts that all the plants provide benefits to the soil, whereas only beans have the capacity to fix nitrogen. The others are heavy feeders.

Ott's book is at its best when exploring the pumpkin as a way for modern city and suburban families to reconnect with the mythic family farm of our national identity by visiting a picking patch or roadside stand or simply carving a jack-o-lantern. In the end, her analysis certainly leads to a deeper consideration of this simple vegetable and how it is that Americans may still consider the country a farming nation, although the number of farmers has declined dramatically since colonial days when survival depended on growing foods—and pumpkins were for eating in stews, not pies.

Reviewed by food historian Rae Katherine Eighmey, whose newest book for MHS Press is Soda Shop Salvation: Recipes and Stories from the Sweeter Side of Prohibition (Fall 2013).



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