Captive State

BY JULIE FLAVELL

IN "The Taking of Jemima Boone," the historical mystery author Matthew Pearl makes his nonfiction debut with a factual thriller about the kidnapping of the famous frontiersman Daniel Boone's daughter Jemima in 1776. Once a popular subject of 19th-century artists and authors, and the inspiration for James Fenimore Cooper's "The Last of the Mohicans," the episode will be less familiar to most 21st-century American readers.

As Pearl's narrative opens, 13-year-old Jemima Boone is canoeing on the Kentucky River on an idyllic summer day, along with the two teenage daughters of a fellow settler, Richard Callaway. The girls were taking a risk by straying from the wooden fortification of Boonesboro that their families — led by Daniel Boone — had carved out of the wilderness only the previous year. Native Americans had already issued a brutal warning against settler incursion into the Kentucky region in a 1773 attack that involved the torture and killing of Boone's son James.

THE TAKING OF JEMIMA BOONE
Colonial Settlers, Tribal Nations, and the Kidnap That Shaped America
By Matthew Pearl
272 pp. Harper. $27.99.

The abduction of the three girls took place 10 days after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and was a continuation of a struggle over lands west of the Appalachians involving settlers and Native American tribes, as well as politicians and armed forces, both British and American. The surprising intimacy of life on the frontier, despite a backdrop of violence and mayhem, is encapsulated in the moment the captives were brought to shore, where the Cherokee leader Hanging Maw awaited them: "The fact that he and Jemima already knew each other could mean salvation or death."

The ensuing rapid trek through the wilderness by Hanging Maw's small band of warriors, pursued by a rescue party from Boonesboro, has become the stuff of frontier romances.

Hanging Maw and the four Shawnee braves in his party knew they had valuable hostages: "We have done pretty well for old Boone this time — got all his young squaws," as Hanging Maw supposedly put it. They aimed for the Shawnee townships, and Boone and his men soon picked up their trail. The several days' chase has all the elements of popular American Indian captivity narratives: The feisty girls took risks as they left signs for their rescuers to follow; the Native warriors adopted ruses to thwart the uncanny pathfinding skills of their white pursuers; conflict broke out among the captors, with some arguing that the girls should be killed for having left clues behind them.

Hanging Maw took the lead in protecting them, and it is at this juncture that Pearl introduces another, romantic thread into the narrative. Might the Cherokee brave have found Jemima attractive? Her long dark hair signaled "spiritual strength" in his tribal tradition, and he began to call her "my squaw." He requested her to comb through his own hair for lice, something Jemima did willingly as she hoped to "conciliate" him and delay the whole party as much as possible.

The notion that Hanging Maw "fell in love with Jemima," and perhaps thought of making her his wife, was propagated in the aftermath of the abduction and was a popular motif in 19th-century renderings of the episode. From a storytelling point of view, it is irresistible; one suspects that the Boone family found it flattering. One of Jemima's cousins composed a poem depicting Hanging Maw as a worthy suitor for Jemima in terms that evoked the "noble savage" trope: "a Chief in Manhood's vigorous prime." In her old age, Jemima continued to thrill younger generations with stories of the moment when she groomed the Indian warrior's black locks.

There is no reason to question that the warriors treated the girls as well as they could under the circumstances, but the rumor that Hanging Maw was besotted with Boone's daughter seems to be entirely a construct of white settler gossip in the published and unpublished sources consulted by Pearl. More revealing are the parallel accounts of captured settlers that Pearl weaves into his narrative to provide historical context, in particular the well-known story of Mary Jemison, abducted with her family in rural Pennsylvania in the mid-18th century and adopted by Seneca Indians. Her biography exposes the inadequacy of the conventional depiction of westward expansion featuring white victors and doomed Native American resisters. Jemison opens a window into a vanished frontier world of blurred family lines and shifting loyalties, as white captives were sometimes adopted by tribesmen in compensation for kinsmen lost in the frontier wars.

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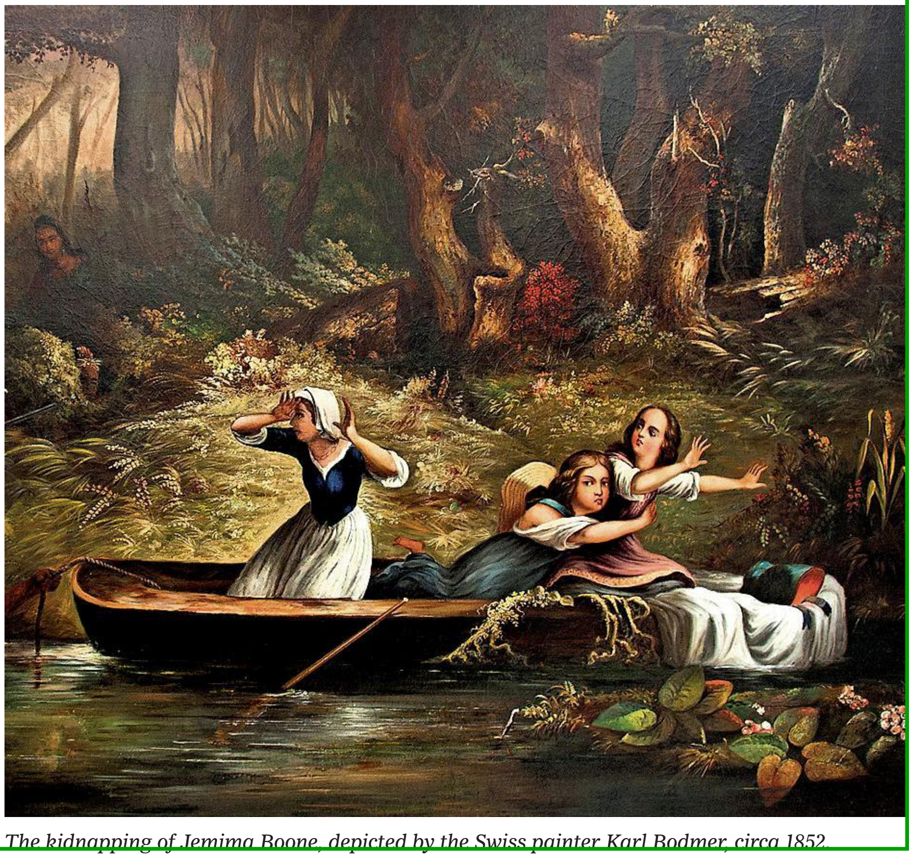
Pearl meticulously reconstructs this world of tribes and settlers, caught between British and American military ambitions, interacting in a Kentucky that for a brief moment functioned virtually as a "shared space." "The Taking of Jemima Boone" presents a fascinating picture of frontier Kentucky in which, contemporaneously with incidents of violence and atrocities, Native Americans and settlers intermarried, raised interracial offspring, traded, shared survival skills and changed alliances, as all struggled to survive.

Jemima's rescue takes place less than halfway through the book, and she recedes into the background as the story shifts to conflict between Daniel Boone and two men: the Shawnee leader Blackfish, whose son was killed, possibly by Boone, during the rescue, and Richard Callaway, who competed with Boone for leadership of Boonesboro and who would subsequently accuse him of trying to sell out the struggling fortification to the British. These conflicts are intertwined with the geopolitical ambitions of Britain and the United States in the War of Independence; as the two nations vied for control of Kentucky, the survival of Boonesboro was seen as pivotal to the outcome.

All this is a lot for the reader to take in. Pearl opens "The Taking of Jemima Boone" with a quote to the effect that while a novelist can resort to his imagination, a historian is "fettered down to the record before him." But effective history writing is more than just stringing together facts, and a novelist's techniques can and should be used. In his historical mysteries, Pearl skillfully introduces back story by taking the reader on the emotional journey of a main character, whose private musings seamlessly move between the present and the past. In "The Taking of Jemima Boone," by contrast, he has a tendency to interject essential historical context into the story rather abruptly, diverting us from the characters and events at hand. New characters are introduced frequently, together with their back stories — even in the midst of action scenes, such as those recounting Boone's pursuit of the three girls — with the result that the suspense is punctured and narrative momentum is lost.

Pearl writes that literary and artistic interpretations of Jemima's kidnapping fail to capture the full "verve, excitement and stakes of these original events," telling us, in effect, that fact is often stranger than fiction. This is true, but fact is also usually much more complicated. That is a challenge for historians who wish to tell a compelling story, and their problems are further multiplied if they choose, as Pearl has done, a period and events that have dropped from the realm of common knowledge.

The story of Jemima's abduction, an exciting and revealing episode in the history of America's westward expansion, deserves to be retold. To his credit, Pearl resists oversimplifying a history that has been too often presented as a frontier romance, showing us that it is as much about the women, children and Native Americans who played a part in it as the famous men who ensured it would be remembered. ☐



The kidnapping of Jemima Boone, depicted by the Swiss painter Karl Bodmer, circa 1852.

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