

Filson's Boone: Frontier Narrative in the New Republic

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In the Preface to his largely forgotten work *Kentucke*, published in 1784, John Filson claims he writes to “inform the world of the happy climate, and plentiful soil of this favored region” (5-6). Denying “lucrative motives” (5), Filson, following conventions of the day, argues his truthfulness by virtue of both his personal acquaintance with Kentucky and his own principles. He seeks “to avoid every species of falsehood,” and he challenges travelers to Kentucky that there is “nothing mentioned or described but what they will find true” (6). Preceding Filson’s Preface is a testimonial signed by Daniel Boon [sic], Levi Todd, and James Harrod, commending the volume as “exceeding good performances, containing as accurate a description of our country as we think can possibly be given” (3).

Undoubtedly, these authenticating statements pertain as well to the items Filson lists on the title page as the Appendix to his essay on the topography and natural history of Kentucky. First listed in the Appendix is “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon,” which Filson presents as Boone’s autobiography; in keeping with the claim of truthfulness, using the conventional first-person of autobiography is itself a self-authenticating ploy. The Appendix also includes Filson’s map of Kentucky, his great pride in the map evidenced in its public dedication to President George Washington, who, as every schoolchild knows, could not tell a lie.¹ From this context of authenticating strategies of truth emerges today in the popular mind a firm picture of Daniel Boone, long rifle in hand, coonskin cap on head, confident, fearless, alone, blissfully wandering the forests in search of game. So too, on the campus of Eastern Kentucky University, legend has it that if a student rubs the shoe of Boone’s statue before an exam, he is sure to receive a good grade. In short, Boone today is an American folk hero, a Romantic loner of giant proportions, a cultural icon. Although in the popular mind the legal entanglements of Boone’s life are murky, at best, and personal details incorrect (he never wore a coonskin cap, for instance, and often his identity is merged with that of Davy Crockett, the folk hero from Tennessee who died at the Alamo), Boone is always praised as an American hero and specifically linked with Kentucky. One wonders how this highly colored construction of Boone emerges from Filson’s text, a text which one of Boone’s most recent and reliable biographers, John Mack Faragher, endorses: “Other evidence confirms most of the details of Boone’s life in Filson’s text” (7). If the details of Filson’s text are correct, how did the popular image of Boone become so distorted?

The most apparent answer lies in the publication history of the text. Quite simply, the *Autobiography* of Boone took on a literary life of its own. Despite the remarkable success of Filson's *Kentucke*, it was not Filson's essay on the beautiful land of Kentucky that seized the imagination in the time of the early republic so much as it was the story of Boone. This story, Boone's autobiography, appeared in print in a new version in 1786. This 1786 edition, published by John Trumbull in Connecticut, constituted a retelling and repackaging of the original Boone account and initiated the long process of distortion. Trumbull drastically shortened Filson's original autobiography, focusing on the events, actions, and Indian conflicts, and most significantly, he completely eliminated Filson's essay on Kentucky and the map of which Filson was so proud. Instead, Trumbull packaged the Boone narrative with a captivity narrative, "A Narrative of the Captivity and Extraordinary Escape of Mrs. Francis Scott; An Inhabitant of Washington-County Virginia; who after the Murder of her Husband and children, by the Indians, was taken Prisoner by them; on the 29th of June, 1785" (Jillson, *facsimile* title page 17). It was Trumbull's abridgement of Filson's *Boone Autobiography*, a plagiarized text made possible by the absence of copyright laws, that most Americans read in 1786 and in subsequent reprints and editions. Trumbull's abridged edition and repackaging explains the romanticized characterization of Boone that persists in American folklore. Even Boone's most recent biographer, Michael Lofaro, revels in the heroic Boone: "Daniel Boone!" he writes; "The very name evokes and echoes the epic exploration of the American West" (ix).

Trumbull's popular repackaging of the Boone autobiography with an Indian captivity narrative repositions Boone to highlight, as do other captivity narratives, his relationships with the Indians and conforms to the long-standing animosity toward native Americans that was taking on new life in the early republic. Just as the publication of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative with her husband's final sermon enforced a religious interpretation of her text, Trumbull's publication of the Boone autobiography as a captivity narrative enforced a reading of Boone as an active man who spent most of his time fighting the Indians in individual combat. By the 1780s when the Filson and Trumbull editions went to print, the "Indian Captivity Narrative" was a well-established and popular genre. No doubt Yankee Trumbull, in contrast to Filson, was more intent on cashing in on a growing business in captivity narratives than he was in promoting the natural wonders and beauties of Kentucky. Furthermore, like other genres, the "Captivity Narrative" had changed over the years; by the post-Revolutionary War era, the genre had become both more political and more patriotic. The "Captivity Narrative" genre entered the public discourse to construct a new American for the new America. Furthermore, the narratives themselves had grown more exaggerated, even fictional, as the form inched its way toward the novel. By the time of the "Panther Narrative" in 1787, for instance, one year after Trumbull's edition, the genre had evolved to show sophisticated narrative strategies such as framing and embedding, and demanded far more imaginative engagement with the reader than previously.²

However, as captivating as Boone's legendary characterization as a result of Trumbull's repackaging may be, even more fascinating is a study of the Boone autobiography in the context that Filson provided. Examining the Boone autobiography in its connection with *Kentucke* sheds light on how Boone was perceived in his own time and on Filson's great accomplishment in biography and natural history. Boone is linked to Kentucky in popular American history not just because he happened to establish one of the first settlements in what later became designated as the com-

monwealth of Kentucky, but because Filson constructed Boone as an integral part of and participant in the natural wonders of the land. In Filson's view, Boone represents Kentucky not because he stood up for white America and cleared Kentucky of native Americans, but because he found solace and companionship in Kentucky's natural beauty. Conversely, Boone aggrandizes Kentucky not so much because he personifies the hardy, self-sufficient, rugged individualism promoted as an ideal of manhood in the Revolutionary era, but because Boone's life positions Kentucky in God's divine plan. In short, Trumbull's Boone is about a fascinating individual man; Filson's Boone is about Kentucky. Trumbull creates Boone as myth; Filson creates Boone as a natural phenomenon of a special place.

When Boone's autobiography is considered in the context of *Kentucke*, Boone is a product or expression of natural history. In *Kentucke*, Filson entitles one chapter "Curiosities." Here he describes some of the unusual geographical features of Kentucky. He describes, among other noteworthy elements, the precipices of limestone, the caves, an underground lake, natural stores of sulphur and salt, springs of bitumen, copper and alum, salt licks, Indian burial remains, buffalo, and fossils of large animals. "Curiosities," embedded in the larger work, is preceded by "Inhabitants" and followed by "Rights of Land." Consequently, when Boone's autobiography begins with the compelling line, "Curiosity is natural to the soul of man . . ." (49), Filson is making more than a comment about human psychology; he suggests that Boone is one of the unusual natural phenomena of the state, one of the natural phenomena that identifies and distinguishes Kentucky.

While readers of Trumbull's edition admire Boone's own style of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency, Filson's use of the word "curiosity" positions Boone in a nearly opposite context—it relates him to the divine. The connection is both rhetorical and spiritual. Many New England Puritan histories were organized around the concept of "remarkable providences." As such, they constituted a list of God's gifts to his chosen people—natural gifts, but gifts that nevertheless show God's active interest in the affairs of people on earth. Hawthorne's scarlet letter A that appears in the midnight sky in *The Scarlet Letter* is a famous example of the concept used in fiction in the nineteenth century. But Hawthorne knew his Puritan history enough to get the basic thought processes and beliefs right. He carefully (and accurately) defines the remarkable providence as a phenomenon occurring naturally, but rarely enough and momentous enough to cause notice when it occurs. Puritan historians often organized history around "remarkable providences," for they were intent on showing God's active intervention in the affairs of New England. For example, Increase Mather wrote *Remarkable Providences: An Essay For the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, about cases of witchcraft; Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* translates into "The American Wonders of Christ." One of the books in *Magnalia* is entitled "A Faithful Record of many Illustrious, Wonderful Providences, both of Mercies and Judgments, on Divers Persons in *New-England*" (title page). Just as the popular construct of Boone entered American mythology for even those people who never read either Filson or Trumbull, Filson may not have read Puritan histories of America, but he was influenced by one of their organizing principles used to understand the world and convey meaning to others.

Cotton Mather's monumental *Magnalia* offers further precedents for Filson's rhetorical strategy in *Kentucke*. In *Magnalia*, biographies play a large role; two books are comprised exclusively of biographies of important leaders and ministers in New-England, and biographies contribute to several other books in the tome as well. Thus,

Mather shows how the biography of a specific individual both explains and constructs history. Some of Mather's biographies verge on hagiography, as he situates these leaders as founding fathers of a colony that is following God's plan, moving toward redemption for God's chosen people.

Filson's refusal to include Daniel Boone in his section on "Inhabitants" emphasizes that Boone is a special case, a "curiosity," an unusual but natural phenomenon, and a uniquely important feature in the natural history of Kentucky. Filson's Boone is thereby made the product of a unique place, an extension or an example, if you will, of the way Kentucky is linked to God's divine plan. The Puritan thinking is confirmed by the autobiography's opening paragraph. In the second sentence Filson/Boone writes: ". . . in time the mysterious will of Heaven is unfolded, and we behold our conduct . . . operating to answer the important designs of heaven." Immediately, Filson/Boone follows with conventional Puritan rhetoric describing the New World: "Thus we behold Kentucke, lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts . . . become the habitation of civilization" (49).

The phrase "howling wilderness" appears memorably and often in Puritan historical texts and sermons. In fact, Puritans feared the wilderness because it lacked the amenities of civilization to which they were accustomed and because it posed a spiritual threat as the home of non-believers, the heathen savages. The change from "howling wilderness" to "civilization" in the sentence is dramatic and noteworthy—in a word, curious. And the figure who lived the change, who brought the change, himself a "curiosity," merely "answer[s] the important designs of heaven" (49). As Filson/Boone more humbly puts it on the next page, "Most of the memorable events [in the settling of the region] I have myself been exercised in" (50).

However, the link with the divine which Filson establishes for Kentucky and Daniel Boone by virtue of casting Boone in a special biography differs markedly from the relationship with the divine seen in most Puritan captivity narratives.

Rowlandson's 1682 narrative set the model for decades to come: when something good occurs to her, Rowlandson notes it as a "mercy" or "good providence" of God;³ something bad is the divine chastening and tempering God uses to make her faith stronger.⁴ One hundred years later, Filson/Boone no longer sees God's hand acting discretely in each episode of his life. Instead, the life of the hunter, the agency of the man, serves to nurture Kentucky's place in a history that is much bigger than a single individual.

Boone is, of course, as we know from his story, captured by the Indians and taken prisoner, so his story is literally a captivity narrative. However, his captivity is not the major interest of the narrative, and that makes Boone's narrative significantly different from the genre of captivity narratives. His first captivity occurred on December 22, 1769, when Indians "rushed out of a thick cane-brake upon us, and made us prisoners" for seven days. Rather than elaborating on what happened during those seven days, Filson/Boone reports only that they were treated "with common savage usage" (52).

The next captivity in the autobiography is that of his daughter and the two Callaway girls. No Amber Alert; no hysterical, pleading mother on television; no emotion is betrayed in the account. Boone simply follows and rescues the girls the next day. On February 7, 1778, Boone reports that he was taken again, and this captivity results in his convincing the men making salt at the Licks to surrender to the Indians. The entire group then walks to Old Chilicothe. Again in marked contrast to the captivity narrative genre, Boone supplies no details, saying only that the group "received as

good treatment as prisoners could expect from savages" (63). He and ten of his men are subsequently taken to Detroit, the men are left there "in captivity with the British at Detroit" (64), and Boone is forced back to Old Chillicothe. But he does not tell us how the Indians treated him en route, and he comments only on the difficulty of the journey itself, "a long and fatiguing march." Surprisingly, he does manage to notice that their travel takes them "through an exceeding fertile country, remarkable for fine springs and streams of water" (64). Personal details of the difficulties of his return journey are subsumed by information about the land through which they travel, in keeping with Filson's motivation for *Kentucke*: "to inform the world of the happy climate, and plentiful soil of this favored region" (5-6). Even Indian captivity is put to the service of Filson's rhetorical purpose.

Subsequently begins the longest, and perhaps oddest, stage of Boone's captivity, his adoption into an Indian family. While other captivity narratives describe this practice of adoption, none seems so comfortable in it as Boone, or so aware of psychological manipulation. Boone is careful not to outshoot the Indians, careful when he goes hunting to share his catch, but more than anything else, he dwells on the comfortable relationship he has with the Indians during this time: "I was exceedingly familiar and friendly with them," he writes. A little later, "The Shawanese king took great notice of me, and treated me with profound respect, and entire friendship, often entrusting me to hunt at my liberty" (65). After being taken to work at the salt springs on Sciotoha for ten days, he again departs from conventions of the genre by commenting not on the spiritual significance of his captivity but on the quality of the soil, writing that the land near the river "exceed[s] the soil of Kentucke, if possible, and [is] remarkably well watered" (66). Nor does he indicate anger when the Indians refuse to accept ransom money for his freedom. Indeed, he is prompted to escape only when he returns to Chillicothe and finds the Indians prepared to march on Boonsborough. His contentment during this captivity episode causes problems for Boone later from other settlers who resent his ease with the natives and accuse him of disloyalty to his own racial and ethnic roots. Regardless of his motivations during this time, his story departs markedly from other captivity narratives, written to show God's mercies and judgments on an individual (seventeenth-century narratives) or to create an American hero for the new Republic (eighteenth-century narratives). Filson/Boone uses Boone's several captivities not to portray the captive's spiritual struggles or to show personal courage, but to highlight the good land of the Kentucky region. God may not deliberately intervene to test Boone's faith or reward him, but His presence is evident in His creation.

Furthermore, in the autobiography Boone's escapes are less than dramatic. From the longest captivity he writes, "I departed in the most secret manner, and arrived at Boonsborough on the twentieth, after a journey of one hundred and sixty miles; during which, I had but one meal" (66). One sentence. Most narrators would see God's mercies through the difficulties of such a desperate journey, but Boone's report is minimalist at best.

Although Filson entitles his account the "Adventures" of Daniel Boone, the text indicates that he was far more interested in what Boone's life would reveal about Kentucky than what it reveals about Boone. The several Indian captivities reveal the dangers people living in Kentucky experienced. Boone's battles with the Indians to defend Boonsborough and the many other encounters, "skirmishes," he calls them, show how Kentucky settlers responded to the Indian threat. The group difficulties evoke in Filson the negative language used in other captivity narratives for the conflicts that individuals experienced.

The 1780-1782 period was especially hostile for Kentucky settlers. "The barbarous savage nations" united against the settlers (74); their "savage minds were inflamed" by white renegades, who led the Indians "to execute every diabolical scheme" (75). Indian actions and practices are ascribed to the devil as vehemently here as in Cotton Mather's account of the settling of New England. However, rather than heightening Boone's heroic status, the strong anti-Indian language emerges in Filson's text as a statement of what early settlers had to contend with.

Positive outcomes, however, are another story. While the most notable feature in conventional seventeenth-century captivity narratives is the habit of attributing any good outcome or relief to God, here in Boone's autobiography, consistent with the increasing secularization of the eighteenth century, survival and success come from man. For instance, without corn in the winter of 1780, the settlers survived not because God has mercy on them, but, Filson writes, because they are "a hardy race of people, and accustomed to difficulties and necessities." When conditions ease the next fall, it is because they "received abundance from the fertile soil" (73). In Filson's account, hardship does not initiate a crisis of faith for the individual, success is not a discrete act of God's mercy, but rather, survival demonstrates and confirms the good richness of the soil.

Furthermore, through the adventures of his life, Daniel Boone figures the development of Kentucky. As he writes near the end of the autobiography, "This account of my adventures will inform the reader of the most remarkable events of this country" (81). That is to say, his account of the many Indian raids and captivities, the building of forts, the political assemblies, the richness of animal and plant life demonstrates the development of the land. In other words, the political, social, and economic history of Kentucky is given through the struggles of Boone to survive and care for his family. Another famous American would one day soon use his biography in a similar manner. Benjamin Franklin points to this same use of self as a developmental guidepost when he includes in his *Autobiography* a letter from Benjamin Vaughan, who encourages Franklin to continue writing his autobiography because of its intimate connection with the growth of the new nation: your autobiography, Vaughan writes, "will [. . .] present a table of the internal circumstances of your country" (59).⁵ Several times in the *Autobiography* Franklin reflects on the change that has occurred since his last visit to a place. Filson/Boone also situates his story as historical narrative that documents change:

Here; where the hand of violence shed the blood of the innocent; where the horrid yells of savages, and the groans of the distressed, sounded in our ears, we now hear the praises and adorations of our Creator; where wretched wigwams stood, the miserable abodes of savages, we behold the foundations of cities laid, that, in all probability, will rival the glory of the greatest upon earth. And we view Kentucke situated on the fertile banks of the great Ohio, rising from obscurity to shine with splendor, equal to any other of the stars of the American hemisphere. (50)

Filson's careful sequencing of past tense ("shed," "sounded," "stood") and present ("now hear," "behold," "view") introduces the narrative to come, foreshadows the action, and prepares us to see Kentucky "rising" to greatness. At the end of the narrative, Boone confirms the development that has transpired in the course of the events of his life:

I now live in peace and safety, enjoying the sweets of liberty, and the bounties of Providence, with my once fellow-sufferers, in this delightful country, which I have seen purchased with a vast expense of blood and treasure, delighting in the prospect of its being, in a short time, one of the most opulent and powerful states on the continent of North-America; which, with the love and gratitude of my country-men, I esteem a sufficient reward for all my toil and dangers. (81-82)

And so the autobiography ends where *Kentucke* began, offering proof of the pleasures of Kentucky. Boone tells the reader that achieving this positive state hasn't been easy, that it has cost much in life and hardship for him and others. He notes that it has been *earned*. His account differs from Puritan biographies couched in history, for the Puritans' good lives did not warrant reward on earth or material comfort, but rather, any good they achieved was a sign from God that the covenant He made with his chosen people was still in force; by living spiritual lives within a religiously sound community, they would show themselves to be at least minimally worthy of redemption, if God would be merciful enough to grant them eternal salvation. While Boone mentions Providence as the ultimate source of Kentucky's bounty, he assumes agency. Furthermore, while others have assisted in bringing about the positive current condition of Kentucky, they were not a "community" with a communal goal as in Pilgrim America, but a group of men who came together sporadically in pursuit of individual interest. But regardless of motive, most importantly, that dangerous time is past. Boone and others have brought Kentucky to this present time, a time of "peace and safety," where a new settler can enjoy "the sweets of liberty."

Despite the contributions to American folklore that Trumbull initiated by repackaging the Boone narrative with an Indian captivity narrative, Filson's achievement in frontier narrative ultimately has been far more significant. Incorporating the Boone narrative as part of *Kentucke* makes Kentucky the hero in its progress to its present state; Daniel Boone and others like him brought forth the beautiful and rich land of Kentucky that is still held dear by current settlers and holds an attraction to others. Through Filson's frontier narrative of Daniel Boone, as he writes at the beginning, "we behold our conduct [. . .] operating to answer the important designs of heaven" (49). For Filson, Boone through his autobiography realizes the progress of divine plan for Kentucky. In short, Filson's work, including the Boone Autobiography, is the epic story of Kentucky.

Endnotes

1. It would be interesting to learn when Washington's truth-telling became solidified in American historical lore by such incidents as the cherry-tree tale.

2. In the "Panther Narrative," for instance, the woman presumably managed her own escape from the Indians and then lived alone in a cave, sustaining herself single-handedly for nine years and conquering a gigantic male figure, until being "discovered" by a party of white men, at sight of whom she fainted.

3. For example, managing to cross an icy brook without getting wet she acknowledges, ". . . through the good providence of God, I did not wet my foot" (22).

4. "I knew that he laid upon me less than I deserved," she writes during a period of depression in the Thirteenth Remove (30).

5. Vaughan's letter is dated 1783, but Parts Two, Three, and Four of the *Autobiography* were written later, and the work was not published until after Franklin's death in 1790.

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