Volume Forty 1998
Essays in History
Published by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia.

"*A Monster So Brutal:*" *Simon Girty and the Degenerative Myth of the American Frontier, 1783-1900*

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"Lord God Almighty," whispered the mortified prisoner. "Have mercy on my soul. Dear God, help me to conquer my fear and bear with strength what is going to be done to me here and now." With this impassioned prayer and a grim countenance, Colonel William Crawford stared into the eyes of his tormentors. Stark naked and shackled, his hands secured to a nearby tree by a short length of rope, Crawford could offer little resistance as he was mercilessly pummeled by closed fists and beaten with heavy sticks. Throughout this battering his fortitude remained unbroken and, amazingly, he did not cry out, even when his ears were roughly severed from his bruised head and held high aloft as the assembled spectators cheered wildly. Nor did Crawford let loose an agonized scream when he was repeatedly shot at point blank range by muskets whose barrels were filled with gunpowder. This gruesome process was reenacted more than fifty times, searing his body from head to toe and blackening his face into a gruesome mask of blood and soot. At last, under the strain of unrelenting misery, his resolve crumbled. Finally, he began to scream as the red-hot tips of flaming twigs, which had been roasting in the roaring bonfire behind him, were pressed into his already charred flesh, leaving smoldering contusions on his chest, face, genitals, and buttocks. Overcome by agony, Crawford cried out, "Girty! Girty! For God's sake, Girty, shoot me through the heart!" The raucous din grew ominously silent as all eyes came to rest on the man called Girty. After a moment of introspection, he rose from his seated position by the fire and strode to where Crawford lay sobbing. "I cannot," Girty replied softly. "As you can see, I have no gun." Turning away from Crawford's mangled figure, Girty grinned at the onlookers and belched forth a sinister giggle. Encouraged by this show of remorseless sarcasm, Crawford's tormentors renewed their assault, and the cheers of the onlookers reached a fever pitch as the colonel finally lost consciousness under the continuous reign of blows. As a final insult, Crawford's sandy-brown hair was savagely hacked from his skull and paraded through the frenzied throng, even as his mutilated carcass was unceremoniously hurled into the raging fire.[1]

This graphic account of the torture and death of American militia Colonel William Crawford at the hands of Delaware Indians on July 11, 1782, near the Sandusky River in northeastern Ohio, is reminiscent of the remarkable brutality that characterized the partisan war fought in the Pennsylvania backcountry and along the Ohio frontier during the era of the American Revolution (1774-1794). The account is based largely on the testimony of eyewitnesses Dr. John Knight and John Slover, both of whom managed to escape from the Delaware and avoid Crawford's fate. The story of Crawford's torture is also the cornerstone of one of the most pervasive myths of the nineteenth century -- the degenerative saga of Simon Girty, the infamous frontier renegade and so-called "white savage." The mythical vilification of Simon Girty grew out of the American frontier experience, and, beginning

with the dissemination of the Crawford torture story in the 1780s and 1790s, Girty's name became synonymous with savagery and monstrosity by the turn of the century. Like his contemporary, Daniel Boone, Girty literally became a legend in his own lifetime. Unlike Boone, however, Simon Girty did not have a hand in the shaping of his own legend. Instead, numerous intellectual and popular writers and historians conducted Girty's vilification throughout the course of the nineteenth century, elevating Girty to a mythical status rivaled only by Boone among the legends of the trans-Appalachian frontier. In the process, Simon Girty and, more specifically, the literature that constructed his myth, evolved into an embodiment of American paranoia, fear, and guilt regarding the frontier over more than a hundred years of western expansion.

Unlike other legendary figures of American frontier mythology, such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, or Kit Carson, Simon Girty is not well-known, although his life was far from obscure. Born Simon Girty Jr. in 1741 near present-day Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Girty, like those other mythical figures, lived the sort of life that lent itself readily to legend.[2] The son of a packhorse driver employed in the fur trade, his life became something of a romantic tragedy. His natural father was murdered by Indians in 1750 over a land dispute, and, following the capture of the entire Girty family by Indians during the Seven Years War in America, his step-father, John Turner, was burned at the stake before Simon's eyes in 1756. The next decade of his life was spent living among the Senecas of northwestern Pennsylvania, by whom he had been adopted. The Senecas introduced Girty to the language and culture of the natives. He eventually resurfaced among white society sometime in 1771 near Fort Pitt, where he began to make a name for himself as a capable scout and interpreter. Even back among the frontier settlements, however, Girty continued to practice the Indian mode of dress and lifestyle, moving about frequently along the Ohio River valley and making no permanent ties. His military career began as a frontier scout during Lord Dunmore's War, the brief border conflict in 1774 between Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the Shawnee tribes over possession of what is now southwestern Pennsylvania. Girty continued in this capacity during the early years of the American Revolution, operating out of Fort Pitt as an Indian agent and spy for the Americans.

To this point, Girty's military service had been competent yet hardly distinguished. His career took an abrupt turn in March 1778 after serving as an interpreter for General Edward Hand's ignominious "Squaw Campaign." In an attempt to seize British munitions believed to be hidden at an Indian settlement on the Cuyahoga River, General Edward Hand led a force of 500 American militia, which included Girty, deep into the Ohio country in February 1778. However, poor organization and adverse weather conditions prevented Hand's detachment from reaching its objective. On the long return march to Fort Pitt, Hand lost control of his unruly troops, which resulted in an attack on a nearby Indian village. Hand would later lament that the Americans cravenly attacked an enemy that "turned out to be four women and a boy . . . of whom [only] one women was saved."[3] Girty was disgusted by the perfidy of the Americans and, soon after returning to Fort Pitt, he defected to the British along with fellow scouts Alexander McKee and George Elliot. For the next sixteen years, Girty was employed in the British Indian Department at Fort Detroit, leading countless Indian excursions against the Americans along the Ohio and Kentucky frontier. It was in this capacity that Girty first earned notoriety as a "white savage," for his highly successful raids were always conducted in the Indian manner of war.[4]

Simon Girty's career as a British Indian agent served as the foundation for the Numerous frontier historians and western writers have grappled with the meaning of myth in American society, but Richard Slotkin, in his groundbreaking work, *Degeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier,* has espoused a definition of myth which best coincides with the evolution of Girty's legend because of its stress upon the changing perceptions of the frontier over time and their manifestation in a reoccurring myth-pattern of a single historical figure.[5] Slotkin defines the

parameters of myth as "a narrative which concentrates in a single, dramatized experience the whole history of a people in their land." Slotkin, in the spirit of Frederick Jackson Turner, argues that the impetus for American mythology was found along the frontier, where experience and hardship combined to forge a distinctly American identity. This identity found expression during the nineteenth century in the form of popular border narratives that idolized the frontier hero, a larger-than-life figure whose exploits and experiences embodied the positive cultural experiences of the nation. According to Slotkin, these narratives "draw together all the significant strands of thought and belief about the frontier which have developed in the historical experience of the colonies, concentrate those experiences in the tale of single hero, and present that hero's career in such a way that his audience could believe in and identify with him."[6]

The principal model for this theory is Daniel Boone, the noted Kentucky frontiersman and Indian fighter. Boone's myth first came into the public realm in 1784 with the publication of John Filson's *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke*, which included a lengthy section entitled "The Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boone." Filson's Boone is denotive of Slotkin's requirements for myth, as the Kentucky pioneer was the prototypical frontiersman of his generation. Based on the foundation laid by Filson, the Boone legend came to encapsulate the "embodiment of the historical purpose of the American frontiersmen." As the progenitor of the frontier-hero genre, Filson crafted his Boone narrative in an attempt to symbolize the triumphant effort of American frontier settlers to impose civilization upon the untamed wilderness, a transformation that, in the estimation of Slotkin, regenerated and invigorated all of American society and culture. Violence was the key to the process. Regeneration could only be accomplished through violence against the physical embodiments of nature, a necessary regression for the vanguard of civilization, the frontiersmen, to remove the obstacles perceived by Americans to be blocking the path of society's enlightenment -- the Indians. Boone, like all frontiersmen, had to adopt violent methods in order to subdue this "savage" environment, but was sure that his efforts would produce a more civilized and advanced society than that which was previously dominant.[7]

Slotkin's myth-scenarios represent a viable component of the America experience, offering an alluring glimpse into the psyche of frontier America "as the nation moved from a rural and agrarian past to an urban and industrial future." However, within this euphoric story of success and renewal lurks a dark alternative, what Slotkin terms the "power of nature to destroy a people's capacity for civilized sentiment and social forms . . . [in essence] the power of the wilderness to kill man's better nature." Thus, Slotkin concedes that the frontier contains perils that can entrap the would be hero and lay waste to the regenerative qualities of frontier advancement. This negative connotation finds embodiment in the figure of Simon Girty, a man who represents the antithesis of Daniel Boone. Girty, like Boone, is thrust into the violent wilderness, but, unlike Boone, willfully forgoes the path of civilization and resorts to savagery by adopting the lifestyle and customs of the Indians. In so doing, he violates the cultural maxims of his race, and disregards the racial segregation of white and Indian as advocated by D.H. Lawrence: "The Indian way of consciousness is different from and fatal to our way of consciousness [while] our way of consciousness is different from and fatal to the Indian. The two ways, the two streams, are never to be united." Consistent with Lawrence's paradigm, Simon Girty, by virtue of his decision to abandon the road to civilization, is thus degenerated, in the estimation of his commentators, into sadistic savagery. It is the perception of his actions, rather than the actions themselves, that degrade Girty until he emerges as little more than a satanic emissary hell-bent upon destroying civilization and rioting in the ruins of white culture and society.[8]

Richard Slotkin, in *Regeneration Through Violence*, acknowledged the existence of those "antitypes . . . men who experienced the same initiation to the wilderness that Boone underwent but were degraded by the experience." However, he gives the Girty antithesis only fleeting notice,

acknowledging its base existence but eschewing any further analysis. Other twentieth century writers have similarly avoided the subject. Such authors, who include both historians and novelists, have delved into the historical fabric of Girty's life, but abstain from an investigation of the cultural moorings of his myth.[9] An exception is Parker B. Brown, whose article, "The Historical Accuracy of the Captivity Narrative of Doctor John Knight," investigates the origins of the Simon Girty myth, albeit indirectly. Brown successfully uncovers ulterior motives behind the inception of the myth, but his focus on the inaccuracy of the Knight account prohibits him from fully developing the narrative's implications for the myth of Girty. On a similar note, the controversial historian/fictionalist Alan W. Eckert has briefly addressed the subject in *That Dark and Bloody Ground: Chronicles of the Ohio River Valley*. However, Eckert focuses too narrowly upon the origins of the myth in an effort to reform Girty's dubious reputation, which he asserts has been the result of deliberate character assassination. As a result, Slotkin, Brown, and Eckert unfortunately offer little more insight into the Girty myth as an indication of the powerful effect of the frontier upon American consciousness than do trite early twentieth century accounts which arbitrarily reduce Girty to "a wretched miscreant" and attest that "no country or age ever produced a monster so brutal, deprived, and wicked."[10]

Not unlike the Daniel Boone legend, the curse of the frontier represented by Girty evolved over time and took on a life of its own, largely independent of the experiences of Girty's story. This evolution coincides with Slotkin's requirement that a myth must be "constructed in such a way that it could grow along with the culture whose values it espoused, changing and adjusting to match changes in the evolution of that culture." Filson's *Daniel Boone* was adopted and modified by countless writers during the nineteenth century (including Boone himself), who, depending on their geographic and political orientation, shaped the Boone myth into a version that best represented their regional and ideological maxims. The same concept can be applied to the Girty narratives. Beginning with the inception of the Girty myth in 1783 and continuing throughout the nineteenth century to the zenith of the Girty legend in the 1880s, numerous writers labored to construct a mythical version of Simon Girty that would reflect their inherent beliefs about the frontier and its potentially corrupting influence on American civilization. In the process, they created an increasingly mythical monster that was often independent of historical veracity, but instead served to assuage the fears and meet the psycho-cultural needs of their society with regard to the frontier.[11]

The man most responsible for the inception of the Girty myth was Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a frontier lawyer, author, and social critic who held little regard for the trappings of frontier society. Brackenridge spent most of his professional life chastising the supposedly decadent morality of frontier communities and beseeching both the federal and state governments to restrain the excessive democracy prevalent on the frontier. A resident of the fledgling frontier community of Pittsburgh in the 1780s, Brackenridge encountered the name of Simon Girty in 1782 when Dr. Knight and John Slover returned to Fort Pitt following their escape from captivity. Brackenridge gained access to these "sole survivors" of Crawford's disastrous expedition against the Delaware towns on the Sandusky River, and interviewed each man concerning their experiences during the campaign. The result was a short tract titled *Narratives of a Late Expedition against the Indians, with an Account of the Barbarous Execution of Col. Crawford and the Wonderful Escape of Dr. Knight and John Slover from Captivity*. The account appeared in the Philadelphia-based *Freeman's Journal and Northern Intelligencer* in the spring of 1783 and was re-released as a separate pamphlet in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh during 1786.

Brackenridge, who claimed the narratives maintained a "strict veracity," hoped widespread distribution of the Crawford story might "answer a good end" by impressing upon the eastern hierarchy the pernicious state of affairs along the frontier. More specifically, he hoped to show the rest

of America "what have been the sufferings of some of her citizens by the hands of the Indian." Brackenridge's publisher, Francis Bailey, in a disclaimer to the public, candidly hoped that

> "As they [the Indians] still continue their murders on our frontiers, these narratives may be servicable to induce our government to take some effectual steps to chastise and suppress them [the Indians]; as from hence, they will see that the nature of an Indian is fierce and cruel, and that an extirpation of them would be useful to the world, and honorable to those who can effect it."[12]

In order to achieve this "good end," Brackenridge, under the guise of editorial jurisdiction, made subtle alterations to the accounts of Knight and Slover in order to portray the Indians, and Simon Girty in particular, in a profoundly negative manner.[13] Hoping to shock eastern politicians into maintaining a more formidable military presence along the frontier, Brackenridge purposefully accented every gruesome detail of Col. Crawford's torture.[14] Thus, his account of Crawford's demise unfolds around a horde of bloodthirsty savages and a supremely malicious Simon Girty, who reproaches the friendly overtures of the virtuous Dr. Knight as those of "a damned rascal." Brackenridge's Girty, "by all his gestures, seemed delighted at the horrid scene" of Crawford's torture, and promised Dr. Knight that he "need not expect to escape death, but should suffer it in all its extremities."[15]

Brackenridge's denigration of Girty reflected the fear with which he regarded the corrupting influence of the frontier. Like his myth-making counterpart, John Filson, Brackenridge held an idyllic vision of American society. Based on his personal assessment of the unruly character of frontier inhabitants, he feared that the emerging frontier communities contained the element by which the America nation might be destroyed -- the adoption of Indian culture. Brackenridge claimed that although Indians "have the shapes of men and may be of the human species . . . in their present state they approach nearer the character of devils." He considered them "animals vulgarly styled," yet surprisingly also attributed to the Indians an inherent supernatural ability to corrupt the innocence of white society and subvert it to savagery. This belief was based upon his estimation of "civilized Indians," those natives who were educated in white society, given Anglican names, and baptized into European religions. Brackenridge considered such efforts futile, as he proposed to "not know one of these who even by these means has been rendered a useful member of society." He derided one such educated Indian, John Montour, who was classically educated in the East and had earned a captain's rank in the Continental Army, claiming that "no greater savage ever existed." Indians were, in Brackenridge's estimation, "incapable of civilization . . . [and] dangerous to the good order of the world that they should exist in it." Despite all attempts to civilize them, Brackenridge argued that Indians could not be broken of "the temper of their race," which led them to commit hideous acts of violence and degradation. They were, according to Brackenridge, truculent murderers and lawless alcoholics, worthy only of extermination.[16]

What truly troubled Brackenridge, though, was the prevalence of violence and alcoholism among frontier communities. Brackenridge's vision of Girty, a clear illustration of what the corrupting influence of an unchecked frontier could harvest in the white race, grew directly from his fear of the Indians' influence on white society. The specific engine through which the Indians corrupted Girty was the torture of Crawford. By refusing Crawford's pleas for mercy, Girty became far worse in the eyes of Brackenridge than a mere loyalist turncoat -- he had degenerated into a vile rebel against humanity and a traitor to his race. In essence, he became an Indian. Concern over the possible widespread implications of Girty's degeneration led Brackenridge to question the morality of frontier society. An insurmountable fear that the corrupting power of the frontier, manifested in the form of Indian savagery, might produce an entire race of white-Indians in the backcountry settlements

prompted Brackenridge to devote the bulk of his literary efforts to enlightening eastern society to the regression of civilization he saw on the frontier.[17]

In the process, Brackenridge spurred a rising awareness within the federal government of the frontier's corrupting influence upon American society. The savage tendencies of the Indians, many of which had been adopted by white settlers during the border fighting of the American revolution, dismissed all thoughts of assimilation and justified extermination. Based on clearly racist beliefs in the inherent superiority of white civilization, the fledgling United States government adopted a grand military initiative in the 1790s to secure the Ohio frontier. The government thus turned to the army as the tool by which the western population could be brought back into the fold of American civilization. Concurrently, officials attempted to eliminate the degenerative influence of Indian society by dispossessing the Indians of their lands and escorting them across the Mississippi divide.[18]

Despite Brackenridge's literary appeals for frontier stability and the efforts of the federal government to regulate the frontier, the dichotomy between the supposedly civilized east and the barbaric frontier continued to dominate the early nineteenth century. Frontier insurrections, the demand for political autonomy by frontier leaders, and the perceived perversion of democracy by the frontier lower-classes led many writers to echo Brackenridge's conviction. The only effective means of eliminating frontier degradation, writers asserted, was to forcefully extend the established eastern society into the west. This belief was inherent in the concept of manifest destiny, which developed powerful ramifications within the American psyche long before John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase in May of 1845. Having evolved from a long tradition of American exceptionalism, which included such expressions as the "city on a hill" Puritan ideology and Thomas Jefferson's cherished "empire of liberty," manifest destiny was a supremely racist maxim that triumphantly claimed all of North America for the racially superior white civilization. American expansion was considered a God-given right, and was, at its core, anti-Indian, anti-black, and anti-Mexican. Yet adherents of manifest destiny faced a racial crisis in the first half of the nineteenth century. An ominous flaw emerged from the cultural construction of their ideology -- manifest destiny could not solve the problem presented by the Indians, who possessed the incomprehensible power to subvert the God-given rights of American expansion on the battlefield. Violence was the tool by which the Indians strove to destroy white culture, and each time the Americans suffered a military setback at the hands of native warriors, expansionists questioned America's divine right to possess the West.[19]

Advocates of manifest destiny sought a solution to this paradox that would leave in tact the supremacy of white society while diminishing the power of the racially inferior Indians. The heart of the issue remained racial in nature -- Americans needed to develop an excuse for why an inferior race of savages could periodically vanquish such a superior civilization. The answer was necessarily found in white society, or more specifically, in the way white renegades like Girty exacerbated the Indians' destructive capabilities. By abandoning the white race and embracing Indian culture, Girty became part of the barrier against white expansion. Moreover, many nineteenth century writers went so far as to credit Girty with creating this barrier. Ignoring historical precedent, these authors asserted that the presence of Girty and other renegade whites among the essentially docile Indians empowered them with the ability to overcome their racially superior antagonists.[20]

John Filson, in *Kentucke*, hinted at the acceptance of this theory as early as 1784 when he claimed that the Ohio Indians' "savage minds were inflamed to mischief" by Girty, who "led them to execute every diabolical scheme" against the whites he could envision. John McClung adopted Filson's argument in his vastly popular *Sketches of Western Adventure* (1832). McClung was convinced that the Indians were disposed towards violence against the whites because of the influence of "a few renegade white men, who mingled with them, and inflamed their passions . . . among these the most

remarkable was Simon Girty." Timothy Flint concurred with Filson and McClung in his *Indian Wars of the West* (1833), in which he credited Girty with the ability to "arouse the most malignant feelings of vengeance in the savages." Girty was thus the progenitor of Indian resistance against white expansion and the originator of their determination to retaliate against white encroachment with violent force. Moreover, Girty, through his affiliation with the British, actually afforded the Indians with the instruments of resistance, a pattern that repeated itself across the frontier as British traders continued to supply Indians with weapons for their fight against the Americans.[21]

By championing the cause of the Indians, Girty suffered further vilification at the hands of mid-nineteenth century writers, who labored to expunge all traces of humanity from his myth. Their method was, not surprisingly, racist. These authors built upon the concept that Girty, who had willfully chosen to degenerate himself to the level of the Indian, still retained the innately superior qualities of the white race. Girty's ability to add "the acquirements of the whites to the instinct and skill of the savages" inverted one of the most racist tenants of the frontier-hero myth. The mythic narratives of the frontier-hero chronicle the ability of the superior white frontiersmen to beat the Indians at their own game by becoming better Indians than the originals. Flint argued this point in reference to Daniel Boone, who, despite being "a Nimrod by instinct and physical character," was "more expert at their own arts than the Indians themselves." Mixing savagery with white superiority allowed Girty, in Flint's and other writers' estimation, to become a superior breed of Indian, a type of unholy super-savage bent on destroying civilization. The mythical Daniel Boone used his advanced woodland prowess to defeat the Indians and advance the cause of civilization, while the demonic Simon Girty uses his racially enhanced savagery to foster resistance among the Indians, harness their brutality, and perpetuate their savage society at the expense of white civilization.[22]

Thus, Girty devolved in these narratives into something much worse than Brackenridge's corrupted frontiersmen -- he became a total monstrosity. In Girty the corrupting influence of the frontier overcame the civility of his white race, but he is strengthened by the process, creating a new race of man that is, by virtue of its very existence, diametrically opposed to white civilization. The authors of the Girty myth exemplified this belief. Uriah Jones, in his 1846 work, *Simon Girty the Outlaw*, depicted Girty as a fanatical tomahawk-waving warmonger. According to Jones, Girty chastised the pacific nature of his Indian brethren by asking, "Whose tomahawk has drank more of the white man's blood than mine?" Likewise, the majority of the Girty literature produced from 1800-1850 portrays a man who is at best a remorseless killer and at worst an emissary of Satan sent to destroy God's chosen people -- the Americans. Timothy Flint described Girty's hands as "stained with the innocent blood of women and children," while Alexander Withers, in *Chronicles of Border Warfare* (1831) derided Girty as a "worse than savage monster . . .[and a] disgrace to human nature." Jones added furthers credence to his view when he represented Girty as a man so consumed with hatred for the white race that he senselessly murdered his own wife, who is white, and then seemed somehow satisfied as he watched "the warm blood spurt from her wound until her white dress was crimsoned with gore." Yet perhaps the most revealing depiction of Girty as a brutal monster was formulated by Kentucky Governor James T. Morehead in his 1840 speech, *An Address in Commemoration of the First Settlement of Kentucky*. Encompassing his generation's total perception of the Girty myth in all its negative connotations, Morehead summarized the evolution of the Girty myth:

> "Girty became an Indian by adoption -- acquired their habits -- participated in their deliberations -- inflamed their passions -- and goaded them on to deeds of human atrocity. I called him an incendiary. He was worse -- he was a monster. No famished tiger ever sought the blood of a victim with more unrelenting rapacity, than Girty sought the blood of the white man."[23]

Girty's slide into the depths of inhumanity reveal that the dynamic motivating factor in the myths espoused from 1794-1850 remained the frontier and its ability to corrupt man and thwart civilization

through the Indians. By the end of the century, however, the frontier had all but vanished, leaving Americans to ponder the implications of its passing even as Frederick Jackson Turner codified his vision of its meaning in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). In trying to come to terms with the aftermath of westward expansion, which twentieth century revisionist historians have tagged "the legacy of conquest," American writers in the 1880s and 1890s again turned to myth to assuage feelings of guilt and remorse. National guilt over the eradication of Indian societies reached a fever pitch in humanitarian circles after the Seventh Cavalry's massacre of over two hundred peaceful Miniconjou Sioux near Wounded Knee Creek in 1890. Helen Hunt Jackson accentuated the feelings of countless Americans in her protest works, *A Century of Dishonor*, which found its way onto the desk of every member of Congress in 1881, and *Ramona*, which was so influential among the American populace that it has been lauded by modern historians as "the Uncle Tom's Cabin of Southwestern Indians."[24] Fueled by this popular literature of protest, many guilt-stricken Americans began to question their past attitudes toward the Indians and seek justification for their actions. They attempted to sanitize a decade marked by institutionalized genocide. Their tool, once again, was frontier renegades like Simon Girty.[25]

By the 1880s, the cult of the "noble savage" was in full flower. Popular novelists championed Indians in the pristine wilderness as the judicious children of nature, while public interest in the rapidly disappearing Indian culture manifested itself in the success of Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West Show" and other regional displays of "Indian curiosities." No longer a military threat to the expansion of white civilization, Indians took on a more childlike, innocent nature in the literature of the period. Such quiescent peoples, it seemed, were hardly capable of committing murder and degradation along the frontier or subverting civilization, so American apologists created a popular allegory that explained their past violent savagery and justified their extermination.[26]

Renegade white men like Simon Girty were credited with the degeneration of the noble Indians into savagery. Even as a few dissident writers attempted to reform Girty's image, a host of others argued that Girty, by virtue of his own descent into savagery, carried his Indian cohorts with him.[27] In this view, Girty became not just a superiorly skilled white-Indian, but an Indian leader -- a vile chieftain whose evil permeated the entire Indian community and corrupted their inherent nobility. The Indians thus become pawns for Girty's war against civilization. Preceding the main architects of this vision by a full generation, Uriah Jones reasoned that "the genius of Simon Girty, whom they [the Indians] obeyed with alacrity, taught them how to manoeuver and guard against the more powerful means employed by their opponents, as the successful issue of more than fifty battles plainly proved." Writing at the height of this construction in 1883, E. G. Cattermole echoed Jones's sentiments in his *Famous Frontiersmen, Pioneers, and Scouts*:

> "it would be difficult to determine how many horrible massacres, scalping crusades, and savage battles this white man of the woods engaged in . . . but certain it is that no champion of savage cruelty ever held such indomitable sway over his barbarous associates, nor even wreaked such terrible vengeance as he . . . the whites along the border feared him as they feared no chief who wielded the tomahawk."

By tainting Indian nobility with his unnatural bloodlust, these writers argued that Girty made the Indians a viable threat against white society and thus ensured the necessity of their destruction.[28]

The clearest indication of this belief is illustrated by the Indian attack on Bryan's Station, Kentucky, and the subsequent Battle of Blue Licks in August 1782. The mythical Simon Girty figures prominently in the narratives of the campaign. Following the defeat of Colonel William Crawford's expedition to the Sandusky River basin in May, many Ohio tribes were interested in suing for peace with the Americans in 1782. Crawford's invasion had been a near total disaster for the Americans,

which Indian leaders hoped to use as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations. However, peace did not come to pass, and it was Girty who was once again portrayed as the progenitor of violence among the otherwise serene Indians. At an intertribal council held at Chillicothe in July 1782, Girty not only dissuaded the Indians from their peaceful course but, in the estimation of George Ranck "aroused the warriors to the highest pitch of excitement . . . [and] with a flourish of his tomahawk he closed his impassioned words by a fiery call for the extermination of their enemies [the white settlers in Kentucky], which was answered by a wild and unanimous yell of approval." Girty, "the most trusted and devoted of the Indian leaders," singlehandedly subverted all hope of peace by convincing the Ohio Indians to strike the Kentucky settlements. Even Girty's chief apologist, Consul Willshire Butterfield, concedes in is *History of the Girtys* that "the young warriors expressed their approbation for the speaker [Girty] . . . by extending outstretched arms towards Kentucky, and by grasping their tomahawks and striking them into the ground with a hideous yell."[29]

Girty's true evil genius was realized during the actual attack. According to Charles McKnight's *Our Western Border in Early Pioneer Days* (1875), Girty not only assumed command of the Indians but also "concerted the plan of attack," which involved an elaborate ruse to lure the defenders of Bryan's Station, who included Daniel Boone, out of the settlement's fort. Appearing before the fort with only a small portion of his Indian army, Girty called for the inhabitants to surrender, and, according to Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (1889), promised the defenders "that if forced to batter down the walls no quarter would be given to anyone" -- women and children included. The defenders naturally refused, seeing only a small group of savages before their gate. In response, Girty's Indians directed a halfhearted assault against the fort and then withdrew. Thinking that Girty had decided to search out an easier target, the defenders of the fort began a hasty pursuit, convinced that Girty was at the head of only a small force and that the notorious renegade could be easily captured. The Americans overtook Girty's squadron near the Blue Licks, a local salt spring, where Girty sprung his trap. The full compliment of his Indian troops fell upon the unsuspecting Americans while Girty, according to Boone biographer Edward Ellis, "smiled grimly as he saw his victims doing everything in their power to hasten their own destruction." The result was a massacre, with only the great Daniel Boone and twelve others escaping capture or death. Over seventy Americans were killed, including Boone's son Israel and brother William, while the merciless Girty consented to take only seven prisoners.[30]

Perhaps the most curious aspect of this angle of the Girty legend is that the surviving primary sources of the attack -- of which there are four, two American and two British -- do not credit Girty with leadership of the Indians at all. Instead, the campaign is under the command of a British officer named Caldwell, the captain of a ranger division based at Fort Detroit.[31] This example only serves to illustrate that the Girty myth had taken on a life independent of historical veracity. Accuracy was not the focus of these authors, rather it was to pin responsibility for the bloodiest American frontier defeat of the Revolution on Girty. Nor was the account of Bryan's Station a singular episode of this phenomenon. Both James Perkins's *Annals of the West* (1856) and James McMechen's *Legends of the Ohio Valley* (1881) credit Girty with organizing and leading the siege of Fort Henry, [West] Virginia in September of 1772. Although it has been proven that Girty was not present at the siege of Fort Henry, those authors' claims that he was shed further light on the pervasive power of his myth. Factual evidence was either suppressed or ignored as writers instead attributed roles to Girty that better represented his "intense hatred of his own countryman." This hatred, intermixed with superior savagery, resulted in his corrupting influence upon the Indians.[32]

The most diabolical action associated with the Girty myth revolves around his purported involvement in the massacre of nearly one hundred "Christian Indians" at the Moravian settlement of Gnadenhutten (translated as "Cabins of Grace") in March 1782. This ruthless attack on these

"peaceful" Indians, led by American Colonel David Williamson, remains one the darkest episodes of the border conflict in the Ohio Valley during the Revolutionary era. The account of the Gnadenhutten massacre also represents perhaps the grandest effort of American apologists to sanitize the atrocities committed by the American nation against the Indians. The tribes in residence at the Gnadenhutten settlement were converts to Christianity and, although they had allegedly gone on the warpath earlier in the war, Moravian missionaries swore that these Indians had taken no offensive actions against the Americans while they were under the watchful eye of the church. Thus, the builders of the Girty myth employed the renegade once again as the agent responsible for the destruction of these noble Indians.

Simon Girty, as a vengeful opponent of white civilization, would logically have little love for Christian Indians, according to the myth-makers. Girty's intense dislike of Christian missionaries among the Indian tribes of Ohio did have a historical precedent. Girty had considered the Moravian missionary John Heckewelder a secret ally of the Americans. Nonetheless, writers in the 1870s and 1880s twisted Girty's disdain for the Moravians into a bloodthirsty hatred of peace, a distortion that was more consistent with their need to placate guilt over the massacre. The resulting story thus chronicles the actions of a duplicitous Girty, who incites the Americans to attack the Moravian settlement while simultaneously urging the Ohio tribes to strike the warmongering Americans. C. H. Michener, in *Ohio Annals* (1876) claimed that it was a "kind of double life Girty gloried in, first on the border, exciting the whites to kill the Christian Indians and burn their towns . . . next at the warriors towns, inciting them to avenge the deaths of those Christians." James Perkins asserts in *Annals of the West* that Girty was "continually seeking to excite the heathen Indians to murder [David] Zeisberger (The leader of the Moravian missionaries), and destroy the mission." Even after the massacre, according to the myth-makers, Girty continued to persecute the Moravians, eventually hunting them down and bringing them to Detroit for trial as traitors. Although they were acquitted by the British, Girty is portrayed as driving the Christian Indians to the fort "the same as if they were cattle, and not [allowing them to] make a halt even for the purpose of the women giving suckle to their children."[33]

Thus, these authors accuse Simon Girty of inciting the Americans to massacre the peaceful Christian Indians in an effort to increase the bloodlust of the Ohio tribes. Again, the pacific nature of the Indians is repressed by the supreme savagery of Girty. Not surprisingly, this conception of the Girty myth is not far removed from the myth initially espoused by Hugh Henry Brackenridge in 1783. Although Girty serves as the corrupting influence in the latter narratives, the frontier as a degenerative factor is still a pervasive force. In Brackenridge's estimation, the frontier corrupted Girty through the presence of the Indians, which made the frontier a dangerous environment for white society. In the narratives of 1870s and 1880s, on the other hand, it is Girty who corrupts the noble Indians and in turn makes the frontier unsafe for white civilization. In the interim, Girty became the most dangerous example of the degenerative power of the frontier during the height of Manifest Destiny, devolving into a subhuman beast with an almost superhuman capacity for violence and savagery.

Race as a cultural construct was the force that bound the differing versions of the Girty myth together as a cohesive whole. The fundamental issue that the builders of the Girty myth grappled with at each stage of its evolution was always the supposed superiority of the white race. The frontier, best conceptualized as a zone of interaction and exchange between two divergent cultures, severely challenged American racial attitudes. The adoption of Indian customs, military reverses against native forces, and the nature of Indian removal all brought into question the morality and virtue of the supposedly superior white race. In responding to these ideological crises, Americans invented a cultural fabrication -- the Simon Girty myth -- that explained away the inconsistencies of their racist dogma, and revitalized the belief that white Americans were God's chosen people. A new generation of Americans would carry this belief in American exceptionalism into the twentieth century, but the

myth of Simon Girty, like the frontier which spawned it, would remain a creature of the nineteenth century. Thus, Simon Girty's mythical epitaph might read like these lines from Frank Cowan's poem, "Simon Girty to Col. Crawford at the Stake" (1878):

"You say I am accursed. I am accursed.
Of all the damned on earth, I am the worst.
And it is well I am, that you receive
Your just deserts which only I can give.
Compared with me, the Delaware is tame --
A suckling wolf -- a savage but in name.
The great is grown alone within the great:
A Girty can alone the White create."[34]

Notes

[1] Hugh Henry Brackenridge, ed., *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians, with an Account of the Barbarous Execution of Col. Crawford and the Wonderful Escape of Dr. Knight and John Slover from Captivity, in 1782* (Philadelphia: Printed by Francis Bailey, 1783; reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 9-12; Consul Willshire Butterfield, *History of the Girtys: Being a Concise Account of the Girty Brothers-Thomas, Simon, James and George, and of their half-brother, John Turner* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke & Co., 1890), 180-182, 367-372; Allan W. Eckert, *That Dark and Bloody River: Chronicles of the Ohio River Valley* (New York: Bantam, 1995), 390-393. All references to the *Narrative*s made in this study refer to the 1783 edition rather than the 1843 version which was reprinted under the title, *Indian Atrocities: Narratives of the perils and sufferings of Dr. Knight and John Slover, among the Indians during the revolutionary war.*

[2] Biographies of Simon Girty are scarce, although he appears in numerous border histories and Indian war narratives. The most reliable accounts of his life include Butterfield, *History of the Girtys*; and, George Washington Ranck, "Girty, the White Indian: A Study in Early Western History," *Magazine of American History* 15 (March 1886): 33-59. A sympathetic modern account, although less reliable historically, is contained within Eckert's *That Dark and Bloody River*, throughout.

[3] Consul Willshire Butterfield, ed., *Washington-Crawford Letters* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1877), 66n; Butterfield, ed., *Washington-Irvine Correspondence* (Madison, WI: D. Atwood, 1882), 15-16.

[4] The Moravian missionary John Heckewelder is credited with being the first author to immortalize Simon Girty as the "wicked white savage." Heckewelder, John G. E., *A Narrative of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Delaware and Mohegan Indians; from its Commencement, in the year 1740, to the close of the year 1808* (Philadelphia, PA: M'Carty & Davis, 1820), 192-194.

[5] The progenitor of modern western myth-studies is the often-criticized Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950). More recent myth-driven frontier scholarship includes Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); David Mogen, et al, eds., *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream* (College Station, TX:

Texas A&M University Press, 1989); Oyunn Hestetun, *A Prison House of Myth?* (Ph.D. Diss., Uppsala University, Sweden, 1993); and Kent Ladd Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

[6] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 269.

[7] John Filson, "The Adventures of Daniel Boone," in *Filson's Kentucke*, edited by Willard Rouse Jillson (Wilmington: Printed by John Adams, 1784; reprint, New York: Filson Club Publications and Burt Franklin, 1972), 49-81; Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 5, 269-274.

[8] John Mack Faragher, "A Nation Thrown Back Upon Itself: Frederick Jackson Turner and the Frontier," in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1994), 1-10; Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 274-275; D.H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico*, quoted in Louise K. Barnett, *The Ignoble Savage: American Literary Racism, 1790-1890* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1975), vii.

[9] In addition to a handful of traditional historical and literary works, Girty has appeared in a wide variety of non-conventional literary forms during the twentieth century, including such diverse mediums as Steven Vincent Benet's theatrical treatment, *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1930), and a segment entitled "The Girty Brothers" on the 1950s radio program *Once Upon a Time in Ohio* (broadcast Feb. 5, 1952). He has also been the subject of the unusual literary endeavors of the poet Richard Taylor in his *Girty* (Berkely, CA: Yurtle Island, 1977), and, most recently, Girty has appeared as the main figure in a graphic novel by Timothy Truman, *Wilderness: The True Story of Simon Girty the Renegade* (Lancaster, PA: Four Winds Publishing, 1989-1990).

[10] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 289-291; Parker B. Brown, "The Historical Accuracy of the Captivity Narrative of the Doctor John Knight," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 70 (Jan. 1987): 53-67; Eckert, *That Dark and Bloody River*, 722-723; Thomas Boyd, *Simon Girty, The White Savage* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1928), 8.

[11] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 269. The most recent interpretation of the promulgation of Daniel Boone's legend and myth is John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York: Henry Holt & Co.), 320-362. See also Slotkin's full treatment in *Regeneration Through Violence*, throughout, as well as the refinement of his interpretation in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Athenium, 1985), 65-68.

[12] Hugh Henry Brackenridge to Francis Bailey; Bailey to the Public, March 1783, in Brackenridge, ed., *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians*, 3, 38.

[13] Hugh Henry Brackenridge to Francis Bailey; Bailey to the Public, March 1783, in Brackenridge, ed., *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians*, 3, 38.

[14] For a detailed discussion of Brackenridge's subterfuge, see Brown, "The Historical Accuracy of the Captivity Narrative of the Doctor John Knight," 53-67. In tracing the development of the Girty myth, it is less important for this study to give a detailed explanation of the mechanics of what Brackenridge did as it is to comprehend the motivations behind his hostile actions.

[15] Brackenridge, ed., *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians*, 9-12.

[16] Hugh Henry Brackenridge to Francis Bailey, in Brackenridge, ed., *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians*, 37-38.

[17] "Letter from H. Brackenridge on the rights of the Indians," in Brackenridge, ed., "Indian Atrocities," 56; Brackenridge's career is admirably dealt with by Joseph Ellis, "Hugh Henry Brackenridge The Novelist as Reluctant Democrat," in his *After the Revolution: Profiles in Early American Culture* (New York: Norton, 1979).

[18] The efforts of the federal government to curb frontier independence and eliminate the pervasive influence of the Indians is dealt with admirably in Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 187-270.

[19] The scholarship on manifest destiny is voluminous. However, of special interest for the interpretation herein, see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History; A Reinterpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1963); and Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995). For background on the Puritans and Jefferson, see Charles M. Segal and David C. Stineback, *Puritans, Indians, and Manifest Destiny (*New York: Putnam, 1977); and Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Filibusters and Expansionists: Jeffersonian Manifest Destiny, 1800-1821* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

[20] The foremost authority on the impact of Indians on westward expansion during the formative period of the United States remains Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1967), while Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1975) chronicles the Jacksonian period. Also, of particular interest for the conceptualization of Indians as a barrier to expansion are Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), and Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.

[21] Filson, *Kentucke*, 75; John A. McClung, *Sketches of Western Adventure* (Maysville, KY: L. Collins, 1832; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 66; Timothy Flint, *Indian Wars of the West* (Cincinnati, OH: E.H. Flint, 1833; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1971), 90.

[22] Flint, *Indian Wars of the West*, 53, 90; The literary acceptance of the ability of white frontiersmen to "out-Indian the Indians" is discussed in Barnett, *The Ignoble Savage*, 130-131.

[23] Uriah James Jones, *Simon Girty the Outlaw: An Historical Romance* (Philadelphia, PA: G. B. Zeiber, 1846), 86, 116-117; Flint, *Indian Wars of the West*, 90; Alexander S. Withers, *Chronicles of Border Warfare* (Clarksburg, VA: Joseph Israel, 1831; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1971), 334, 347; James T. Morehead, An Address in Commemoration of the First Settlement of Kentucky (Frankfort, KY: State Printer, 1840), 90.

[24] Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with some of the Indian Tribes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881); Ibid., Ramona, *A Story* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1884). For more on the impact of Jackson's writings on American society, see Antoinette May, *Helen Hunt Jackson: A Lonely Voice of Conscience* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1987), and Valerie Sherer Mathes, *Helen Hunt Jackson and her Indian Reform Legacy* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990). Quote is from May, *Helen Hunt Jackson*, xi.

[25] The revisionist story of western expansion is best represented by Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), and Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). For the current state of the debate over the nature of western expansion and history, see Clyde A. Milner II, ed., *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[26] Barnett, *Ignoble Savage*, 86-90; Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 521-522.

[27] The two principal nineteenth century authors who view Girty in a more favorable manner are Butterfield, *History of the Girtys*, and, to a lesser extent, Charles McKnight, *Simon Girty: The White Savage, A romance of the border* (Philadelphia, PA: McCurdy & Co., 1880). A few twentieth century historians have followed their lead, the foremost of which is Alan W. Eckert, whose *The Frontiersmen* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1967) and *That Dark and Bloody River* portray Girty in a more realistic manner. Unfortunately, Eckert's insistence on using invented dialogue and filling historical gaps with conjecture tend to damage, somewhat unjustly, his credibility and diminish the result of his exhaustive historical research.

[28] Jones, *Simon Girty*, 125; E.G. Cattermole, *Famous Frontiersmen, Pioneers and Scouts: The Vanguards of American Civilization* (Chicago: Coburn & Newman Publishing Co., 1883), 94.

[29] Ranck, "Simon Girty," 267; Butterfield, *History of the Girtys*, 191.

[30] Charles McKnight, *Our Western Border in Early Pioneer Days* (Philadelphia: J.C. McCurdy, 1875), 271-272; Edward Ellis, *Life and Times of Daniel Boone* (Philadelphia: Porter & Cotes, 1884), 138-139; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, 6 Vols. (New York: Putnam, 1889), 196-206.

[31] Butterfield asserts that Girty had "no position except that of interpreter, *History of the Girtys*, 200.

[32] Butterfield, *History of the Girtys*, 199-201; Eckert, *That Dark and Bloody River*, 413-416; James H. Perkins, *Annals of the West* (Cincinnati, OH: U.P. James, 1846), 256-257; James H. McMechen, *Legends of the Ohio Valley, or Thrilling Incidents of Border Warfare* (Wheeling, WV: Lewis Baker & Co., 1881), 27-34; Cattermole, *Famous Frontiersmen*, 94.

[33] Heckewelder, *Narrative*, 192-194. C. H. Michener, *Ohio Annals, or Historic Events in the Tuscaraws and Muskingum Valleys* (Dayton, OH: Thomas W. Odell, 1876), 164-165; Perkins, *Annals of the West*, 372-373; Consul Willshire Butterfield, *An Historical Account of the Expedition against Sandusky un der Col. William Crawford in 1782* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1873), 192; Cattermole, *Famous Frontiersmen*, 98-99.

[34] Frank Cowan, *Southwestern Pennsylvania in Song and Story* (Greensburg, PA: Published by the Author, 1878), 94.