

The most controversial figure in Oneida history, Eleazer Williams, is also the most difficult for a biographer. During his career Eleazer embraced three religions and as many sets of ancestors, assumed several fictitious titles, authored a number of historical fabrications, and left behind both a trail of debts and a reputation for what the charitable might call financial difficulty. Late in life, of course, Williams created that persona -- the "Lost Dauphin" -- which has dominated history's assessment of his career, and it is almost impossible to find a secondary reference to him which does not mention his claim to be the rightful Louis XVII of France. This has had a doubly damaging effect upon his place in the historical record: On the one hand, his claim to Bourbon parentage has focused the attention of his few admirers on the least plausible aspect of his career, and on the other hand it has given his critics a stick to beat him with. Eleazer was a loser in the struggle over the course of Oneida history, and -- since history is generally written by the winners -- he has come off very badly in the books and articles written by his detractors, who have taken advantage of his Dauphin pose to dismiss him altogether as a crackpot. For them it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Even descriptions of Williams by men who knew and worked with (or against) him were written almost exclusively after he had become the object of national attention -- that is, after he had been revealed as the

Dauphin -- and are colored by the 20-20 hindsight of individuals who "knew all along that he was a fraud." Moreover, Williams left distortions among his own papers -- he rewrote his journals, for example, with a keen eye toward posterity -- and so very few documents relating to his version of his life can be entirely trusted. There exists, in sum, no wholly satisfactory biography of Eleazer Williams, and few reliable materials. May I begin, then, by admonishing all of you -- *Caveat Emptor!*

The label beside the portrait of Eleazer Williams in the Neville Museum gives a fairly standard summary of this famous missionary's modern reputation: "In the early 1800s, Eleazer Williams, an Episcopal lay minister and missionary in New York, dreamed of relocating the state's six Iroquois nations west of Lake Michigan. There he would create and lead an Indian empire." The distinguished Wisconsin historian Reuben Gold Thwaites went further, claiming that Williams, "an erratic quarter-breed" and "a born intriguer," aimed to "be dictator" of an Indian government here in the Green Bay area. A later writer brought this line of thought to its logical conclusion, likening Eleazer to Adolf Hitler.

Such characterizations are neither very enlightening to those interested in Williams, nor very useful to those pursuing Oneida history. Indeed, they obscure both the social forces at work in the early nineteenth

century which forced Indians to be a caste apart from Anglo-American society, and the true circumstances of the Oneida move to Wisconsin. I wish today, for my part of our experiment in tag-team biography, to explore briefly the origins of Eleazer Williams' character, and thereby to offer an illustration of what it was like to be an Indian attempting to make it in white society, and to offer some suggestions for further work -- which is long overdue, in my opinion -- in Oneida tribal history.

To understand the development of Eleazer's character, it is necessary to begin in 1704, when a force of French-Canadians and mission Indians raided Deerfield, Massachusetts. The Deerfield Massacre, as it appears in the history books, was part of a campaign to keep the English, who vastly outnumbered the combined populations of the French and their Indian allies, too busy protecting their own frontiers to launch a viable attack on Québec. One of the Deerfield inhabitants who was taken prisoner by the raiders was Eunice Williams, the daughter of the town's minister. Eunice, who became famous as the "Unredeemed Captive" for her refusal to return to Deerfield, married an Indian and settled at Kahnawaké. Throughout her life the Williams family in New England sought to persuade Eunice to return home, but never succeeded. She was fond of her family, kept in fairly close touch with her brother, and visited Deerfield several times, but could never be brought to

see The Light (quite possibly because most of her male relatives became Congregational ministers and insisted on preaching redemption sermons at her every time she visited). Perhaps because of her steadfast refusal to return, she remained a powerful symbol for the Williams clan. Our man Eleazer was Eunice's great-grandson.

Eleazer was probably born in May of 1788, at his family's seasonal hunting camp in upstate New York. There is no evidence to suggest that his early youth was substantially different from that of any other Caughnawaga boy, and indeed depositions which were collected from tribal elders in the 1850s to refute his Bourbon posture affirm that Eleazer enjoyed a normal Indian childhood. The decisive event in his life occurred on January 23, 1800, when his father, Thomas Williams, brought two of his thirteen children, Eleazer and John, to Longmeadow, Massachusetts, where the boys were left in the care of a Williams relative, Deacon Nathaniel Ely. We can only speculate on the precise nature of the arrangement, but it was apparently not

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a spur of the moment decision, for the boys' support was paid jointly by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the state of Massachusetts.

While in Ely's care, the boys were naturally the objects of great attention. Their presence in New England, enjoying the advantages of a proper

Christian upbringing far from the savagery of Caughnawaga and the perfidious influence of the French papists, was in an important sense the fulfillment of a mission -- having failed to redeem Eunice Williams, the righteous succeeded at least in redeeming her posterity. Eleazer never got over the feeling of being An Important Person, and the center of attention.

During his years in Longmeadow, Eleazer attended school, labored on the Ely farm, and received a strict grounding in the prayers, psalms, hymns, and sermons of his Congregational sponsors. By 1804, Ely could declare his charges "apt scholars" -- though this may have been a term relative to his low expectations of Indian boys -- and allowed Eleazer an increasing amount of latitude in his studies. During the latter part of his stay, Eleazer travelled among Williams family connections throughout southern New England. At least ten ministers took an interest in our subject, and he must have received a pretty thorough exposure both to the business of preaching and to ~~the social status of preachers. He could not have been unaware of either the~~

tremendous temporal influence of his hosts, or of their prominence in their communities. Although the days of Mather dominance were past, clergymen in the early nineteenth century remained the first citizens of their towns. Small wonder that Eleazer, having made the leap from poverty at Caughnawaga to rubbing shoulders with the elite in New England, acquired a

desire to become a clergyman.

What eluded Eleazer, however, was his own status. He may well have conceived of himself as an apprentice minister of the gospel, but his patrons saw him in a far different light. To them he was the object of a Mission, which, once fulfilled, absolved them from further obligation to him. At a time when the Congregational clergy were essentially a fixed caste, no one could have seriously considered the possibility that an Indian might ascend to a New England pulpit as a colleague. Times and attitudes had not changed very much where Indians were concerned since the brilliant Samson Occum was refused admission to white society half a century before.

The blow to Williams' designs came in 1807, when, in obscure circumstances, he was despatched to Moor's Charity School, which had moved to Hanover, New Hampshire. He arrived there in early November, and remained but for one week. We know little about his stay there; only that he roomed at Samuel Dewey's. Late in life he made a game attempt to gloss over this episode by asserting that he had made this northern sojourn "for his health." He even gilded the lilly by describing his conversations with the President of Dartmouth and members of the teaching staff, and paused to render this judgement: "The young gentlemen appear to be scholars, but I perceive that there is something wanting in them to make them complete gentlemen." For a

man who went to Hanover in November for his health, he was fairly astute.

The Moor's interlude, brief though it was, must be considered in any analysis of his career. His prompt departure is evidence of the mortification he must have felt at finding himself enrolled at an Indian school -- which was, of course, a significant cut below his previous social station. More to the point, his relegation to such an institution must finally have shown him how he really stood with his sponsors, and that realization came as a blow both to his pride and to his naïve ambitions. Perhaps it was intended to be so by his former patrons. Rather than accept what he perceived to be a demotion, even a repudiation, he drew out money for a greatcoat to see him back to Springfield, where, he declared as he left, he was going to fit himself for the ministry.

Deacon Ely, who was unlikely to have been pleased by Eleazer's precipitous return, died soon thereafter, and from 1809 until August 1812 Williams was nominally the pupil of the Rev. Enoch Hale of Westhampton.

Sources for this period in his life are sketchy at best, but in his journals Eleazer claimed to spend much of 1810 & 1811 travelling. In April of 1810, he went "southward" -- presumably to New York City -- where he met the future Bishop, John Henry Hobart.

Williams also asserted that in January of 1811 he was despatched to

St. Regis to "see about converting the Indians." If true, this latter journey suggests that the clergy of New England had finally found some means of bringing Eleazer's career among them to a close, the Moor's Charity School scheme having proven a bust. Two constructions fit the facts as we know them, though both are admittedly speculation: Eleazer may simply have been told to go home, and subsequently altered the record so as to make his departure appear as an important trust or assignment -- which would certainly have been in character -- or his Congregational sponsors may have seized on missionary work as a doubly satisfactory scheme, realizing their investment by producing a missionary and gracefully terminating their responsibility to him. Whatever the true nature of this St. Regis assignment, the fact that Eleazer shortly thereafter converted to Episcopalianism is most suggestive of a breach with the Puritan establishment of New England.

Williams was not long in St. Regis before hostilities broke out in the War of 1812, putting his spiritual activities on 'hold.' He certainly supported the American side, following his father's lead. By his own testimony (in the pages of the biography he wrote of his father) -- unsubstantiated by government or any other records -- Eleazer was made a Lieutenant-Colonel in General Dearborn's army, and rapidly promoted within a few pages to full Colonel, negotiator with the British, secret intelligence agent, and



Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs for the northern frontier. He also, by his own account, won the Battle of Plattsburg. What he actually did during the war is something of a mystery; among his papers were a pair of probably genuine ledger entries, from which we can infer him that by January of 1814 he was in the Albany area, where he moved into Moss Philip's house on April 21 without paying the rent. His diet apparently included bread, cheese, beef, and gin as staples, but beyond such bits there is not much to go on.

With the cessation of hostilities, Williams wasted little time re-establishing his connexion with Bishop Hobart. The Bishop, who had a special interest in resuming those missionary activities which the Anglican Church had carried on among the Indians prior to the American Revolution, and he must have found in Eleazer a Godsend. In short order Williams was despatched to Oneida Castle to serve as lay reader, catechist, and religious instructor to the Oneida, and arrived there in March of 1816.

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When he arrived at Oneida, he found the reservation divided -- as it had been since 1805 -- between the Christian Party dominated by adherents to the preaching of Samuel Kirkland and their Pagan Party rivals. Moreover, the tribe was deeply divided on the pressing issues of the day, and there is evidence that some elements among the Oneida were actively considering emigration to the west, while others may have been making a quick buck by

selling off bits of Oneida land to the land companies -- particularly the Ogden firm -- who held the rights to extinguish Indian title to that real estate. There is good reason for the Oneida to have been so politically divided. They were under considerable, and mounting, pressure from their white neighbors to cede their territories -- pressure which came not only from local speculators but also from the federal, state and local governments. Even those elements of white society who considered themselves friends of the Indian -- including many of the churches -- then saw removal as a constructive policy which would ultimately work to the benefit of the Indians. Assailed on all fronts, it is small wonder that the Oneida weighed the alternatives of moving and staying put, each perspective with its supporters.

Into this unsettled situation came Eleazer Williams, who instantly filled the void in charismatic leadership which existed at Oneida. It is difficult to imagine a more thorough contrast to Samuel Kirkland -- where Kirkland was an unpleasant, dour, anglophone Puritan, Williams was a an outgoing, gregarious, Mohawk-speaking Episcopalian. Williams was energetic, sympathetic, and a terrific salesman, and shortly thereafter proved his worth to the Episcopal Church by converting several hundred of the Pagan Party to Chrsitianity. (This leads one to wonder whether the considerable

size of the Pagan Party had been due all along to an antipathy to Christianity, or simply an antipathy to Samuel Kirkland.) Williams preached in an intelligible language, prepared religious texts in the vernacular as well, and -- perhaps most important of all -- showed by example that Christian and Indian were not mutually exclusive terms. As Professor Ronda suggested yesterday, the importance of spiritual leadership in this context cannot be dismissed from the complacent perspective of our own, largely secular day, and I hope that another historian will soon take up the challenge of addressing the impact of Christianity upon the lives of the Oneida people.

Williams was much more than a preacher, however. He quickly carved out for himself the role of broker between the Oneida and their neighbors, and in that capacity revelled in his position as the man the Oneida turned to for dealings with governments and others, and as the man those outside agencies turned to when they wished to address the Oneida. It is clear from ~~his career that Williams wanted, above all else, to be an important man.~~ At

Oneida he was, and so was tempted into the great blunder which ruined him. He became embroiled in the political questions of the day, and, by becoming a partisan, neutralized his advantages as a missionary to the whole Oneida people, and forfeited his unique position.

The most common criticism of Williams claims, as we have seen, that

he invented the westward migration to Wisconsin, and foisted it upon the Oneida. Rubbish. In the first place, and please pardon my gross oversimplification, would the Oneida leave Wisconsin now simply because a Mohawk-speaking Episcopalian, however charismatic, came here for three or four years and then announced that the Oneida would do far better in Idaho? The Oneida were not dummies in the 1820s, and any portrait of the move here which claims that Eleazer conned this nation into leaving traditional lands in New York for Green Bay is grossly unfair to both parties. Moreover, Williams did not exert the kind of imaginative, consistent leadership necessary to pull it off. It is far more likely that he was a tool of the emigration-favoring faction of the Oneida -- which included such figures as Daniel Bread, whose biography sorely needs to be written -- than he was the architect of the scheme. Finally, Williams, who by 1821 required the support of a reliable party within the Oneida, and of the government authorities with whom the Oneida dealt, to maintain his broker role (and to keep taking those nifty trips to Wisconsin and Washington), was under enormous pressure -- implicitly, if not explicitly -- from those outside authorities to promote the move. To have opposed it would have been political suicide.

Unfortunately, Williams being Williams, he later claimed that it was all his idea, just as he had saved Plattsburg. This has allowed historians to

date to pass over the complicated internal divisions of the Oneida, and the external conditions which strengthened the hand of the party favoring emigration. In short, Eleazer became the scapegoat, and posterity has done without a useful history of the Oneida move for more than 160 years. Long enough; too long.