Week10 History and Fiction

John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994)

"I wanted to write a *story*," says John Demos in his first sentence. What does he mean by "story"? First of all, this book is not structured by *arguments* and supporting *evidences*. It may not necessarily mean that he is not arguing anything. Nevertheless, the book does not seem to have been written to *prove* one (or several) central argument(s). Second, I think the term "story" in John Demos's usage refers to a book, not an article. In these days, a scholarly article is for making an argument, not for telling a story.

What made this well-established historian declare that he really wanted to tell a *story*? In other words, why and when did mainstream historians cease to be storytellers? Some clues come from Demos's preface. He was trained after WWII under the influence of "new social history," which I presume emphasized analysis and interpretation, suppressing (?) the narration of simple stories. I imagine that he entered the field of history because he had some stories he wanted to tell people. However, probably he was taught and graded on how convincingly he argued rather than how nicely he told stories.

I would go farther back in time, to understand better Demos's strong motives to tell a story. When did historians begin to talk less to the general readers and discuss more among themselves? In other words, when did historians begin to write articles for journals and peer-reviewers? (*American Historical Review* started in 1895. Is there an earlier one?) I suspect this change in publication medium had something to do with the claim of "scientific history," which was criticized by Huizinga (*The Waning of the Middle Ages*, in 1919). Historians should resemble scientists, valuing official documents and objective sources…..

It is interesting to find out that William Cronon, who Demos confesses helped him "to grasp why history matters (p.ix)," published an article titled "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative" in 1992. When Cronon wrote this article and Demos was probably working on this book, both of them were at Yale. It seems to me like conscious intellectual efforts to revive storytelling in history. I am very curious about the response from the history community.

I am reminded by Cronon that telling a story is not so simple as one tends to believe. Storytelling itself implies a set of assumptions, concerns, interests, and even argument. Where and when should the story begin? Where and when should it end? Also, who are in the story and who are not? These simple decisions tell us a lot about what the author does and doesn't want to tell. The story in *The Unredeemed Captive* has multiple beginnings. John Demos really wanted it to be a story not only of English settlers but also of French and Indians. But when it ends, it turns out to be a story mostly of English settlers. Even when he tells stories about Indian community, the story can only be told through the eyes of English visitors. Here the storyteller confronts the problem of *sources* or *evidences*. Storytellers are not always able to tell a story that they wish to tell. If the storyteller ignores the problem, the story ceases to be history and becomes fiction. This book is a very interesting story. But I wonder: if this book had been written by a junior historian as his/her first book, could it have been well-received and praised as well?

Another small interesting point: John Williams's changing accounts of his captivity life are good illustrations of how complex it is to tell a story. Place and time of telling do change the stories being told. In this respect, this book is *a story about storytelling* as much as it is *a story itself*.