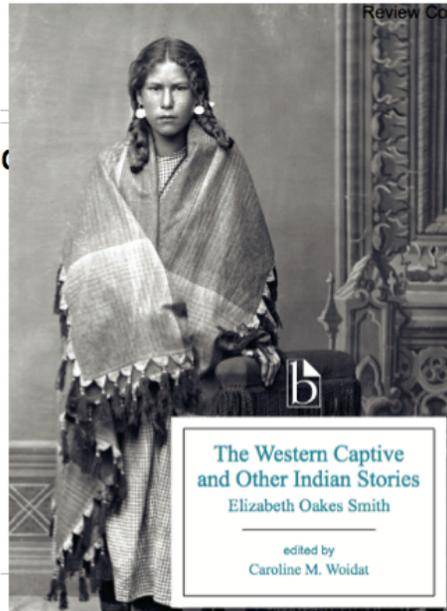


Uh, Captain?—What Captain?” Recovering the Publishing Context of
Oakes Smith’s *The Western Captive*¹

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Late last summer, a new edition of Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s 1842 novel *The Western Captive* was published by Broadview Press, edited by Caroline Woidat.² In it, readers unfamiliar with Oakes Smith or her work can discover a more Indian-centered narrative than Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* or Child’s *Hobomok*, and despite the cross-cultural reach, one more woman-centered than Seaver’s *Narrative of Mrs. Jemison* of 1824. Opening the book with a paen to Chief Tecumseh and setting nearly half the incidents of her book at the Indian settlement of Prophetstown in the Northwest



Territory in first decade of the 19th century, Oakes Smith’s presentation of white frontier life focuses principally on relations among women, depersonalizing and decentering the voices of male power. When the patriarch of the novel’s frontier settlement speaks, he is usually quoting the Bible; when General Harrison speaks, he’s usually quoting himself, as recorded in histories and campaign biographies in the run up to the Presidential election of 1840. Neither are given interior characterization, or thought. The novel’s protagonist,

¹ This paper was originally delivered for a panel entitled “New Scenes in the Emergence of Elizabeth Oakes Smith” at the American Literature Association conference in San Francisco CA, May 2016. This paper was written to augment the excellent work of Caroline Woidat in making *The Western Captive* available to a host of new readers.

² Elizabeth Oakes Smith, *The Western Captive and Other Indian Stories*, ed. Caroline M. Woidat (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2015).

Margaret Durand, might be compared to Sedgwick's Faith Leslie, taken captive as a child when her family is massacred, and lost forever to a Native tribe. But while Sedgwick's Hope Leslie or Child's Mary Conant must finally resist this kind of cultural adoption, Oakes Smith's Margaret (now called Swaying Reed) never considers herself captive at all, finding in Shawnee society the fully developed identity and dignity denied women in the white settlements. When asked to return with her sister Alice to her former life, she pauses for a moment (contemporary readers might imagine a face-palm), then delivers what stands to be the novel's most quoted line "to sit all day in the house, and do useless work, and read words, that mean nothing," said Margaret, with flushed cheek; "never—never!" (138). Indeed, as Mary Clemmensen has pointed out in a recent paper, Margaret seems to anticipate by at least a generation the frontier children of Laura Ingalls Wilder or Carol Ryrie Brink who are not repulsed but fascinated and inspired by Native American life.³ As Alice recalls, "I could never see a savage without a shudder, as if I felt the edge of the tomahawk, but Margaret had learned their dances, and would adorn herself with their ornaments, and listen to their wild tales"(106). The only developed male character in the novel, Henry Mansfield, is a "Leatherstocking who learns." The boyhood companion of Tecumseh and translator for Harrison, he finally adjusts himself to Margaret's independence and, more realistically than Cooper's hero, settles down with her sister Alice, but not before delivering a speech of unmitigated self-reproach: "What is the value of a territory to us," he asks himself, "compared to the infringement of rights we are bound to respect, and local attachments that ought to excite our reverence? A country based upon injustice can never prosper"(69). If most antebellum readers were

³ Mary Clemmensen, "Women's Affinity for Native American Culture in *Hope Leslie*, *The Western Captive* and the Juvenile Fiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Carol Ryrie Brink," seminar paper, NEIU 2015.

drawn ideologically to a male gendered voice to reflect “common sense,” that voice here is Mansfield’s, and that is what the voice so inconveniently tells readers to think.

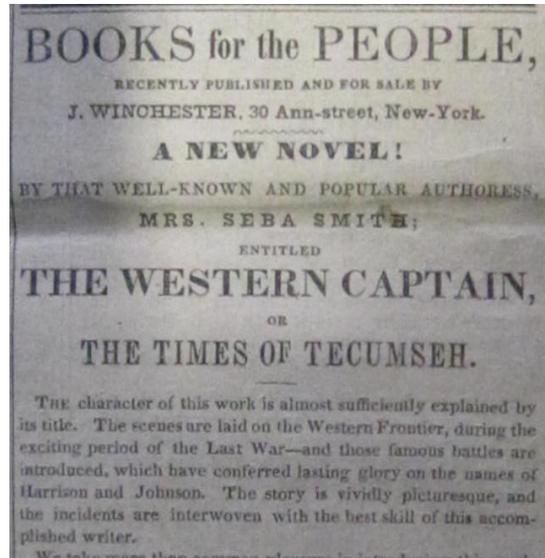
In a few minutes I hope I’ve suggested details that demonstrate why this was a book worth republishing—and worth adopting for our classes in women’s writing and American literature. But it is precisely with these characteristics of setting, plot and character in mind that many of us who have been teaching it have asked ourselves why the book and its author have taken so long to resurface. At an SSAWW panel celebrating Oakes Smith’s bicentennial a decade ago I suggested that the physical form of the book—one of the earliest paperbacks, or actually an “extra” edition of Park Benjamin’s



newspaper—may have had something to do with it: if “2500 copies were sold in the first four days,” as Oakes Smith reports in her autobiography, perhaps it was devoured so readily, passed hand to hand, and finally, as Cathy Davidson has described the fate of

some early almanacs, was “read to pieces,” leaving only a dozen or more copies to be delicately preserved in manuscript archives. More puzzling, however, is that no critical mention, much less a literary review of the novel, has surfaced. From Irene DiMaio’s recent work we know German translator Friedrich Gerstaecker brought out an edition of *The Western Captive* in 1846, but it is notable, as DiMaio argued in a paper last fall, that

Gerstacker glozed over the novel's political character in his translation.⁴ Strangest of all, if one investigates copies of Benjamin's *New World* about a month before the publication of *The Western Captive*, one finds its earliest advertisement, which reads as follows:



Especially jaw-dropping is the initial claim that the “character of the work” is somehow “sufficiently explained by the title,” beyond which the writer of the advertisement seems not to have read—a misrepresentation made even more egregious by the fact that they don’t even have the title right. And how ironic, if Oakes Smith’s headnote encourages and even dramatizes women’s “desire for utterance” and their escape from “womanly seclusion,” that the “fame” of the “authoress” is subsumed in the advertisement by her husband’s name. “Vividly picturesque” scenes *are* invoked in the novel, but here, not a woman is in sight, much less a daring, white, culture-crossing female heroine. Once one has read this book, a point of view can hardly be imagined from which it could be seen to “feature” those “famous battles” that have “conferred glory on the names of Harrison and Johnson,” (indeed there are no “battles” directly depicted, and no “Johnson” in it at all).

⁴ “Friedrich Gerstäcker’s *Western Captive*: Mediation of America through Translation,” delivered for the panel “Rejoining the Conversation: Oakes Smith’s *The Western Captive*” Society for the Study of American Women Writers conference, November 2015.

The most blatant incongruity is finally the motto printed beneath the *New World's* banner, which reads “No pent-up Utica contracts our powers, for the whole wide continent is ours,” a phrase which stands in complete opposition to what seems plain to

us as the novel’s

celebration—on page one,

paragraph one—of

Tecumseh’s brave

resistance to the sentiment

that motto expresses for the nation in the 1840s decade, and by extension the military and economic policies it underwrites.



I had been teaching *The Western Captive* in my classes for ten or twelve years when I happened upon this advertisement in 2008 or 09, and until recently I’d chalked it up to a combination of Oakes Smith’s at times undecipherable handwriting and some miscommunication between her agent, Rufus Griswold, to whom Oakes Smith originally sent her manuscript in May 1842, and his friend Park Benjamin, whose cavalier and mercenary editorial policies were legendary. Along with printer Jonas Winchester, Benjamin’s idea for the “extra” series was to undercut the competition with the fastest, cheapest book production methods ever attempted in the American market, and this sort of botch, I thought, was an understandable result. Still, the *New World's* pirated “extra” edition of Dickens’s *American Notes*, even riddled with printing errors, was advertised accurately, as was Walt Whitman’s temperance novel *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate*, which appeared in the same series the following month.⁵ Certainly between September

⁵ Dozens of issues of *The New World* from 1842 and 1843 are available for review at the Newberry Library, Chicago IL.

20th and October 20th, when the novel appeared, Oakes Smith had ample time to ask for a correction.

The question is whether or not a correction—or the true nature of Oakes Smith’s intervention in the debate over US economic and military policy—was saleable—or anything to be advertised, in its time. This possibility was suggested to me when last year I assigned Pat Kalayjian’s essay on Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* entitled “Reenvisioning America’s Literary Past” to my class on US women writers.⁶ In the essay, Kalayjian makes an excellent case for Sedgwick’s strategic opposition to her culture’s “dehumanization of Native Americans” along with its “construction of women as models of submissiveness,” but finally notes how little it should surprise us that these dimensions of the novel—or Sedgwick’s political consciousness—were contemporaneously forgotten in favor of her more didactic writings. “The mood of the country was changing,” Kalayjian writes, “the leadership was of a new breed, and the conciliatory nature of Sedgwick’s historical romance would position it philosophically at the edges of liberal humanitarianism in a new era of ethnocentric, capital-driven expansionism”(71).

Kalayjian’s acknowledgment of “the countering fact” of history in Sedgwick’s case might well explain Oakes Smith’s marginalization and disappearance—or at least that of *The Western Captive*—far better than an appeal to its fragile physical form. How much more would a *triumphantly* ethnocentric, expansionist, US culture now “free” of indigenous people east of the Mississippi in the early 1840s, want to forget Oakes Smith’s even more radical, far less nuanced critique of the nation’s treatment of Indians and women in her novel *The Western Captive* of 1842? Those of us who have

⁶ Pat Kalayjian, “Reenvisioning America’s Literary Past: Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*,” *NWSA Journal* 8/3 (August 1996): 63-78.

rediscovered this book and made it available to our students in xerox copies for some years all celebrated the publication of Caroline Woidat's new critical edition of the novel last summer, but if we can apply Kalayjian's argument to Oakes Smith's work, we should be cautious, as we teach it, not to allow our undergraduates' commonly "reflectionist" theory of literature to mislead them into missing the countering facts of history--that this novel and its author have been *missing for a reason*: that is, more than evidence of editorial sloppiness, I am increasingly convinced that the reason for its misleading advertisement, the critical silence following its publication, and its almost immediate disappearance in its time is that Oakes Smith's positions were too radical, too blatantly critical of what readers accepted as fact. Far from transparently "expressing" a widely shared progressive view or real debate over the place of Native Americans in the antebellum period that has been unfairly hidden in 20th century patriarchal constructions of the US canon, *The Western Captive* was so outside the mainstream in its time that its own publishers—quite willing to advertise the name of a newly popular New York poet in 1842—had good reason to hide the contents of her new novel from potential buyers.

As strange as this explanation may seem, it actually helps us read Oakes Smith's own cagey marketing of the manuscript to Rufus Griswold back in May of 1842, about the time he began to solicit her work for *Graham's Magazine*. Her response to his invitation to contribute, that she is a "poor subject for his magnanimity," that her talents "are not of a popular order," and her writings "not things to take with the mass," was belied by the small sensation made by her poem "The Sinless Child," published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* the January before, and likely the reason for Griswold's

solicitation.⁷ Til now I had always read Oakes Smith's modest protestations in the letter as evidence of her playing a role that might ingratiate her with a well-connected publication and its editor. But in light of Oakes Smith's attempt to place not a poem or two, but a whole novel—and especially in the context of where the letter is headed—her casual suggestion that he “try a few chapters of her new prose Romance upon an American subject,” I think we have to take Oakes Smith seriously when she confesses to Griswold that her “success has depended mainly on the partiality of my personal friends.” Indeed, the opinions expressed in the novel she was selling *would not* “take” with the mass, and were hardly “of a popular order” in an atmosphere leading to Louis O’Sullivan’s declaration of the nation’s *manifest destiny* to have its military and economic way with the hemisphere, or one in which even as radical an abolitionist as Theodore Parker, in his jeremiadic *Sermon on the Mexican War*, could suggest our military budget might be better spent on something more productive than war, like a trans-national railroad, without the least acknowledgment that it might run over the lands of people whose culture it would invade and destroy.⁸ In this context, the defiant the voice of an independent woman in support of Native Americans might have been imaginable to some, acceptable to few, and saleable to even fewer. What did Park Benjamin, editor of *The New World* owe his old friend Rufus Griswold, now editor of *Grahams*? It seems enough of a favor that Oakes Smith did place her novel in Jonas Winchester’s Books for the People series, and received \$100 for it. In return, Oakes

⁷ Elizabeth Oakes Smith to Rufus Griswold, undated MSS letter, held in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

⁸ Louis O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* August, 1845: 5-10. Parker’s sermon was published under the title *A Sermon of the Mexican War: Preached at the Melodeon on Sunday June 25th 1848, by Theodore Parker, Minister of the XXVIII, Congregational Church in Boston* (Boston: Coolidge and Wiley, 1848).

Smith gave Griswold the opportunity to publish her *Complete Poetical Writings* in 1845, in the preface of which he made no mention of her novel *The Western Captive* or her advocacy of the Native American cause or any other. Thus did the publishing world go round.

Drawing attention to the lack of evidence for the novel's impact in its time, I don't mean to gainsay Caroline Woidat's argument in her introduction to the Broadview edition, where she reveals Oakes Smith's complex position as a translator of Native American texts, both as one whose gender position has left her in a position of subjugation shared with indigenous populations, and one whose attraction to the wilderness brings her into positive contact with Indians whose confidence (and stories) she then carries or "translates" into the pages of American periodicals. Rather, I would argue that we must be careful to differentiate the rhetorical figure authorized by Oakes Smith's audience of the early 1840s—author of "The Sinless Child"—from the feminist advocate only later recognized for her advocacy on behalf of Native Americans. Woidat's case for Oakes Smith's intention to intervene in the political debate among Harrison's supporters and detractors might be clear to us; indeed, we could add that Oakes Smith seems to go beyond Harrison's political detractors (who only emphasized his indecisiveness at the battle) to present the massacre of women and children at Tippicanoe as the result of a hypocritical policy that supported land rights for "all"—including Indians--only to garner popular support for office and later political resistance to Andrew Jackson and the Democrats' position against debt and credit. Notably, however, Woidat's example for Oakes Smith's place in this debate does not arrive until 1998, in Kenneth R. Stevens's *William Henry Harrison, a Bibliography*.⁹

⁹ Woidat, introduction 21.

The point of all this may be that as difficult as it is to work through—especially in the compressed format of an undergraduate course—any full understanding of the texts we recover requires us to recover not only texts, but those conditions that created the need for their recovery. In the case of Oakes Smith’s first Indian novel, that may mean recovering, in the sordid details of the antebellum publishing market, a series of traces that might provide some shape to the cultural and political conditions in which the radicalism of Oakes Smith’s creation might be appreciated *as so* challenging it could not be frankly advertised. As tempting as it is to view the advertisement as a “mere” sales gimmick—in contrast to a serious critical engagement of the issues involved in the historical treatment of US Indian policy—we should acknowledge how the profit motive itself might reproduce in an advertisement just those dominant beliefs and prejudices that would appeal to a broad spectrum of citizens in a new economy in which books are marketed and priced not just for the rich but—for “the People,” just like land in Indiana.

As a coda to this paper I want to suggest some further implications of this investigation for the study of literature and material culture, a class I’ve been teaching at Northeastern at the MA level for the past few years. For literary critics, this approach has led my students to contemplate the role of more material dimensions of literature—the technologies of publishing, distribution, book production and transportation—in the production of meaning. But since the setting of Oakes Smith’s novel in northwest Indiana isn’t very far, I’ve experimented with the kind of material culture study originally practiced in the fields of anthropology and archaeology with visits to Tippicanoe Battlefield Museum, if nothing else to put myself in the place described and to determine how its preservation might bear upon our understanding of what took place there. A full description and analysis of the park and museum would require another paper, but suffice

to say in light of the past forty years of academic scholarship dedicated to the re-introduction of Native American perspectives to the narrative of American literary and



cultural history, Tippicanoe Battlefield remains largely unreconstructed. While one can purchase a handful of books on Midwest Indian culture in the museum shop, the battlefield itself, encircled by a metal fence in 1873, features only monuments to fallen US soldiers. As one walks from the battlefield plot to the museum, visitors should be careful not to trip over the single rock marked to remind them of the uncounted Indian dead. After my last visit I called the Curator of Collections, Kelly Lippie, to see if there were any

plans in the works to (I forget the word I used) “update” the story being told at the

battlefield—perhaps, to include other perspectives. She assured me that the Native American story was told over at Prophetstown State Park, which is, on its face, a prairie preserve, featuring trails for biking and a campground. And a water park, with a concession, and those huge plastic slides. If visitors make it three quarters of a mile into the trails, past the neatly arranged working farm and a series of early 20th century barns and outbuildings, they can find some reproductions of Woodland Indian-style buildings whose “abandoned” and neglected aspect further marginalizes the traces of the original inhabitants already relegated to an



afterthought. The kicker, though, is the sign posted just after the entrance to the park, whose irony seems lost on the Park Rangers there. It reads: “Celebrate *the Gift* of this Land.” New evidence may emerge that supports readerly engagement with Oakes Smith’s critique in its own time, but if it did go unheeded, missed, or dismissed in the 1840s, the story told materially in the land Oakes Smith depicted shows her novel still has plenty of work to do in our own.

