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Figure 1. This portrait of Mother Esther is exceptional among eighteenth-century American portraits for two reasons: it was not only commissioned by a woman (the sitter herself), it was also most likely painted by a woman, almost certainly an Ursuline nun inside the convent at Quebec. ESTHER WHEELWRIGHT, Oil on canvas, ca. 1763. *Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.*

# THE LIFE OF MOTHER MARIE- JOSEPH DE L'ENFANT JESUS, OR, HOW A LITTLE ENGLISH GIRL FROM WELLS BECAME A BIG FRENCH POLITICIAN

BY ANN M. LITTLE

*In 1703 seven-year-old Esther Wheelwright was kidnapped from her home by the Wabanaki during an attack on the town of Wells, Maine. Ultimately sold to a French missionary and taken to Quebec, she converted to Catholicism, entered the Ursuline convent, and rose to become their first and last English-born Mother Superior. Her biographers have seen Esther Wheelwright/Mother Esther de l'Enfant Jesus as a passive instrument of religion and politics and have rendered her nothing more than an antiquarian curiosity. This study instead explores how her ability to cross many borders—national, religious, and linguistic—enabled Mother Esther to become both an influential religious leader and a skilled diplomat. By exploring the political dimensions of her life, this essay also reconciles the often competing demands of biography, which can work to diminish women's lives, and women's history, which seeks to put women's experiences at the center of historical analysis. Ann M. Little is an Assistant Professor of History at Colorado State University. She has recently completed a book manuscript, "Abraham in Arms: Gender and Power on the New England Frontier, 1620-1760." This essay is a preliminary exploration of a second book, a biographical study of Mother Esther de l'Enfant Jesus.*

## *Introduction*

**I**DON'T EVEN know what to call her, this woman who's the subject of my article. Women are not supposed to be attached to their names. Most of us are given some man's name when we're born, and then give it up to take another man's name when we marry. This is a problem for historians, especially those of us engaged in biographical in-

quiry. Biography is the form of historical writing that most worships the individual, usually the political or literary man of action whose life changes history. In order to have a biographical subject, then, we must have a name. Men's biographers usually refer to their subjects by their surname, also their father's name, but usually it's a name that sticks with them, unless they voluntarily take on a *nom de plume*, or pseudonym of their own devise, like Molière or Publius. Writing women's biographies requires a more plastic understanding of subjectivity and identity, since they change their names as they grow from girlhood to womanhood, and from widowhood to remarriage. Maybe this name-changing, this verbal shape-shifting is not a disadvantage, as confusing as it seems. Maybe men and their biographers are working at a disadvantage, without a change in name to warn of a significant change in outlook or in the direction of a life.

Here is the brief history of her name: Esther was born into an Anglo-American family in Wells, Maine, in 1696, and given her father's name, Wheelwright, according to the English custom. She was taken into captivity by French-allied Wabanaki in 1703 when she was seven, and since she spent the next five years with them, was presumably given a Wabanaki name—but we know nothing directly of her life among the Indians. In 1708, she was purchased from the Wabanaki by Père Vincent Bigot, a French missionary who had taught her the rudiments of his faith, and who brought her to Québec later that year. She didn't marry, but rather was re-named by the Church she devoted her life to, first in baptism as Marie-Joseph, then by joining the Ursulines and becoming Mother Esther Marie-Joseph de L'Enfant Jesus in 1713. It seems that she never really used this new name in its entirety; instead, she retained (or recovered) her original first name, Esther.

As this short biography will demonstrate, this dilemma of a name is complicated not just because of her sex, but because her life crossed and re-crossed national, linguistic, and religious boundaries. Calling her "Esther Wheelwright" seems patronizing, emphasizing as it does an English childhood identity from she was taken at the age of seven. "La Mère de l'Enfant Jésus" recognizes her adult achievements as an important religious leader in New France, but omits the English name she used more commonly. Too often, borderlands people like my subject have been relegated to what Alan Taylor has called in the pages of this journal the "imagined peripheries" of history, when they are remembered at all. He argues that we should see Maine as an "international crossroads," rather than as "the northeastern end-of-the-line, a quaint but unrepresentative

backwater bypassed by the major events and forces of American history.” The teleological imposition of the nineteenth-century nation-state on the boundaries of historical inquiry is no more objective, and arguably far less relevant, than conceiving of northern New England as an “active site for cultural and economic work,” at the crossroads of many different Indian and European languages, religions, and folkways. Geography isn’t the only thing that privileges some people’s stories and marginalizes others. If we take Taylor’s theory to its logical end, it will also allow us to move other so-called “peripheral” stories in the nation-state narrative, most particularly those of women, Catholics, and of non-English speaking peoples to the center.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will call her Mother Esther, because she apparently chose it, and because it nicely signals her layered identity as a borderlands person: both French and English, Catholic and Protestant, and a “mother” and daughter and sister alike.

### *Wells and the Maine Frontier*

Like many other Northern New England towns, Wells was founded by English protestants who had little use for John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill,” and had different visions of their own New World utopia. The founding patriarch of the Wheelwrights in Wells, the Rev. John Wheelwright, was in fact directly at odds with Winthrop in a major civil and religious schism almost as soon as he arrived in Boston. Wheelwright immigrated with his family from Lincolnshire to Massachusetts in the spring of 1636, and fell in quickly with his wife’s brother and sister-in-law, William and Anne Hutchinson, who would soon find themselves at the center of the Antinomian Controversy. So-called “antinomians” (the name was intended as an insult) were accused by Massachusetts’s established civil and religious authorities of believing in the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. In turn, Anne Hutchinson and others accused Massachusetts ministers and magistrates of putting too much stock in good works—a charge that recalled the initial Protestant complaints against the church of Rome. Hutchinson and Wheelwright began preaching to growing numbers of people who shared their concerns about the leadership of the Bay Colony, and this open defiance of church leaders and civil authorities led to their trial and banishment in the winter of 1636-37. After a stay in Exeter, New Hampshire, Wheelwright acquired land in Wells in 1643 and seven years later was given permission to erect a sawmill on the shores of the Ogunquit River. Some of his partisans in

the Antinomian Controversy followed him to Exeter and then to Wells, where by the 1670s they and their descendents traded religious conflict for almost forty years of continuous Indian warfare. Maine, from York to what is now Falmouth, was a major front in King Philip's War, and English settlements there were attacked repeatedly in the summers of 1676-1677 by the Wabanaki. Accordingly, English settlements on the northern New England frontier became heavily militarized, and early Maine records speak of towns divided not by neighborhoods or salt marshes, but by garrisons. In 1690, the town reported that it had six garrisons, or strong houses, and only four of the province's soldiers to help the householders in their defense.<sup>2</sup>

At the turn of the century, two families dominated Wells's martial, economic, and political life: the Wheelwrights and the Littlefields. In a census of the town's military readiness taken in 1711, twenty-six of the town's forty families lived in garrisons owned by men with those surnames, who together housed more than sixty percent of the entire town. The Wheelwrights alone counted 92 people within their garrisons—over a third of Wells's 267 inhabitants and soldiers. Both of these families, as well as other Wells families, were hit hard by Indian warfare and captivity, especially during King William's War (1688-97), Queen Anne's War (1702-13), and Dummer's War (1722-25). Indeed, the pages of the Massachusetts provincial records of these decades are filled with letters by various Wheelwrights and Littlefields and their neighbors, always begging for more soldiers and reinforcements. To live among the English at Wells at the turn of the eighteenth century meant to live in constant fear of Indians who "have been Lately & are now Lurking about ye out habitations," and to believe that "if wee have not Imediate help Wee are a lost people." In 1712, an Indian attack even interrupted the wedding of Elisha Plaisted and Hannah Wheelwright. The groom was among the townsmen who responded to the crisis, and was taken into captivity on his wedding day. (He was redeemed just a few days later near present-day Portland.) Wells residents were right to be fearful, as they had lost a shocking number of their inhabitants to war—mostly as captives rather than casualties. By 1710, the tiny settlement had had at least twenty-two people taken into captivity, and of that number twelve still remained with their captors. Most of those captives were taken in a devastating Wabanaki raid in August of 1703, when the town lost thirty-nine people to death or captivity. Among the captives was seven-year-old Esther Wheelwright, and her three teenage cousins Mary, Priscilla, and Rachel Storer.<sup>3</sup>

However benighted the people of Wells, they had in fact courted this

fate by founding an English town on lands inhabited by Wabanaki people. At the time French and English people began making fishing camps and missions in what became the state of Maine, the Wabanaki had been making their living for thousands of years off the rich forests, ponds, and ocean fisheries connected by the Saco, Androscoggin, Kennebec, and Penobscot River Valleys. East of the Kennebec River, hunting, fishing, and gathering seasonal produce were the mainstay of the Wabanaki economy, whereas the climate south and west of the Kennebec was suitable for the cultivation of summer crops. Politically independent but connected via kinship and friendship, Wabanaki bands of fifty to perhaps a thousand people tended to remain within the same tributary or bay, moving up country in the fall and winter, and down towards river banks and sea shores in the spring and summer. French Jesuits had great success among the Wabanaki, establishing several missions in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries scattered throughout Acadia and interior Maine. English migrants, true to their national style of colonial settlement, attempted to cultivate trade relations with the Wabanaki, but otherwise made little effort to ingratiate themselves with their new neighbors. Neither the French nor the English were surprised that the Wabanaki consistently allied with the French, to the hazard of some of New England's smallest and poorest settlements.<sup>4</sup>

### *Women, Biography, and History*

What happened to Esther Wheelwright after she was taken from her birth family in 1703? We have no direct knowledge of her life in captivity with the Wabanaki, nor can we identify the exact tribe that took her. Like many captives, Esther may have been in the hands of many different Wabanaki and was ultimately adopted by someone other than her initial captors. We might assume, however, a few things about her experience in captivity based on what we know about her adult life in Canada, as well as on what we know from the testimony of other Wabanaki captives in these years. Like other Indians, the Wabanaki took captives in war as a means of strengthening their numbers and replacing dead or captured family members. However, by the time Esther was taken, captives had become a lucrative trade item as well, a wartime commodity that could be sold to French allies when warfare disrupted beaver trapping, deer and moose hunting, and corn production. Thus the economic ties that helped bind the French and Indians politically and militarily as well as economically, remained uninterrupted by war. Because of her young

age, though, Esther would have been a prime candidate for permanent adoption by a Wabanaki family. While English people of all ages and both sexes were adopted by their Indian captors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, children were more frequently adopted as they tended to assimilate more easily, whereas adolescent and adult captives were more likely to have been redeemed in Québec or Montreal. Because she was only seven, Esther probably learned to speak and understand several different Wabanaki dialects with ease, which would have aided her acculturation to Indian ways. Many captives forgot their native English, and it is likely that Esther did too, as later in her life she required the assistance of a translator in correspondence with her mother. By all accounts, her Wabanaki family surrendered Esther only very reluctantly to Père Bigot, another indication that she had been adopted as their daughter.<sup>5</sup>

If we assume that Esther was adopted by a Wabanaki family, then we can infer some of her experiences from ages seven to twelve. Accounts are inconsistent as to where she lived during those years; some say that Père Bigot found her on the shores of the Kennebec, but because he was in Québec from 1704 to 1710, and his brother Père Jean Bigot was working at the Indian mission of St. Francis, four miles from Québec, it is likelier that Père Vincent Bigot met her there, among his brother's mission Indians. She may have moved among several different Wabanaki bands along the journey from Wells to St. Francis, and each time she might have been given the welcome that greeted all captives: stripped and re-dressed according to the custom of the tribe, and re-named, perhaps given the name of a dead relative and expected to take his or her place in the family. Transformed into an Indian child, as she grew she would have been taught the skills she would need as a Wabanaki woman—gathering seasonal fruits, medicinal plants, and shellfish, preparing food, tanning hides, and making all manner of personal and household equipment including baskets, clothing, moccasins, and birch-bark houses and canoes.<sup>6</sup>

Except for the obvious changes in her appearance and language, Esther's youth would not have been very different from her life had she been returned to Wells shortly after her capture. Her childhood might appear from the outside to be freer than that of most New England girls, but as in Wells, much of her time would have been devoted to work rather than play even at that young age. Esther's productive labor would have been equally valuable and necessary to a Wabanaki as to an English family. However, because Native women retained a kind of ownership of



their labor and the things they produced, she would have had more decision-making authority in her family and within the community as a Wabanaki wife and mother than if she had remained among the English. Because women among the southern Wabanaki were the agriculturalists, and because all Wabanaki women built their own homes and processed the animals men brought back from the hunt into meat, bones, sinew, furs, and skins, they presumably had a great deal of authority in determining their community's rotation through seasonal encampments. But since English common law stripped married women of their right to property ownership, most Anglo-American women lived much of their lives working on farms they did not own, in households over which they had no legal authority, and without custody of their own children.<sup>7</sup>

Before we move with Esther from her Wabanaki family, there is another point of comparison between Native and English culture worth considering. While Anglo-American girls like Esther were raised with the expectation that they would one day leave their father's home and name behind and take on a new role and name as wife, their embrace of adopted captives demonstrates that Wabanaki people shared a belief in the contingent nature of identity for men and women alike. This notion of human nature—that identity was more a matter of accident and affiliation—was very different from the patriarchal New England Puritan belief that identity was largely fixed by blood ties and predestination. Thus the tradition of women's authority among the Wabanaki, and their belief in the flexibility of identity, might have been very important steps in Esther's eventual re-making of herself as a French nun.<sup>8</sup>

After Père Bigot brought her to Québec, she was taken into the home of the Governor of New France at the age of twelve. In early 1709 she was briefly enrolled at the convent school of the Ursulines in Québec and then removed. The following three years were a period of intense negotiations about the return of Esther Wheelwright and several other New England captives, and she accompanied Gov. Vaudreuil on his journeys for these negotiations, staying with the Ursulines in Three Rivers and at another convent in Montreal, but she was not among the captives returned to New England at the end of the war. In a 1711 letter to the Governor of Massachusetts, Vaudreuil claimed that he was awaiting "only a safe and fit opportunity to send her back, although she does not wish to return." We don't know why she was never among the repatriated ex-captives, but considering Vaudreuil's remarks about Esther's own desires, and the fact that she returned to the Ursulines in Québec and began her novitiate on Oct. 2, 1712 at the age of sixteen, it appears

that remaining in Canada with her favorite *religieuses* was her own choice. Some biographers said that the Governor himself had paid her dot, the dowry required of novitiates, while others said that her confessor Père Bigot had paid it. She took on the white veil at an investiture ceremony that, unlike those of most novitiates, was widely attended and celebrated on January 3, 1713. A little over a year later, on April 12, 1714 she took her final vows. As had probably happened upon her arrival in a Wabanaki village, she was once again ceremonially stripped, redressed, and renamed to reflect the changes in her identity and role in a new community. Little is known about her life in the convent; she worked in the many services the Ursulines performed for their community, especially in education; she reportedly had talent in painting and embroidery, and probably worked with both Indian and French girls. As a teacher, her knowledge of at least one Algonkian language would have been a great asset to her community. In 1760, with the end of French rule in Canada, she was appointed its first and last English-born Mother Superior three months after the Capitulation was signed in Montreal. She served as Superior until 1766, and then served again as Superior from 1769 to 1772. Thereafter, she served six years as Assistant Superior and then as Zelatrix (or supervisor) until her death in 1780 at the age of 84.<sup>9</sup>

A portrait of Mother Esther, now in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, is a rare example of eighteenth-century North American portraiture, for a few reasons (fig. 1). First, it was commissioned by the sitter herself shortly after her elevation to Superior, rather than by a husband, or a father. Second, the portrait was not only commissioned by a woman, but it was most likely painted by a woman as well. The Ursulines were cloistered, which would have made it difficult to bring a male artist into the community. Furthermore, the painting is clearly not the work of a trained artist, but that of a skilled amateur familiar with mid-eighteenth-century European conventions of portraiture. The painting is a black field, her black-clad body melting into an almost undifferentiated background. The top half is dominated by a white triangle formed by the collar of her habit and her round face. The features are small and clear, but set somewhat awkwardly in relation to one another. Her lips are pursed in what might be a suggestion of a prim smile, but overall an expression of will and determination. Below her collar, her hands are folded around one another, fingers neatly tucked into the sleeves of her garment. (A sure sign of an amateur painter, who was at least shrewd enough to know that painting realistic hands is one of the most difficult tasks an artist faces.) Despite its folk art qualities,

this is a painting of a woman who knows that she is important.<sup>10</sup>

A life like this one, which crossed so many different borders at such a volatile time and place in history, was almost inevitably politicized by the larger forces that shaped her life. Yet because of her sex, her eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century biographers have portrayed her as the passive instrument of religion and politics, rather than as an active player herself. Perhaps not surprisingly, her biographers have also emphasized one or two aspects of her identity over the others, depending on their own national and religious affiliations. First, Père Bigot, the French priest who claimed he baptized her and supervised her conversion among the Wabanaki before he brought her to Québec, celebrated her life and story at the grand, public investiture ceremony he financed and where he renamed her. We might consider him her first biographer, since in his investiture sermon he argued that it was not just her faith, but her life's story that the people of Québec were called together to celebrate. Père Bigot gave his sermon a telling name, "Thy Hand Shall Lead Me," and assigned Esther an essentially passive role in her providential captivity among the Wabanakis, and then her redemption by God and the French. "By what marvels of God's goodness do you find yourself to-day, my sister, happily transplanted from a sterile and ingrate land, where you would have been the slave of the demon of heresy, to a land of blessing and promise, where you are about to enjoy the sweet freedom of the children of God." Bigot might have had his own reasons for making this investiture such a spectacle, as he had been reprimanded by civil authorities for not keeping his mission Indians away from English overtures to peace and was removed by his superior from an Acadian mission for not looking after this aspect of French political interests. By 1713, Bigot had overseen the conversion of two English girls who became Ursuline nuns—Mother Esther, and before her, Mary Ann Davis. Secular French men were just as eager to celebrate her conversion to French religion, language, and law, as the number of important priests and politicians who took a personal interest in her over the following six decades demonstrates.<sup>11</sup>

The name Bigot gave Esther Wheelwright at her investiture bears commenting upon. Officially, she was re-named Marie-Joseph de L'Enfant Jésus. Perhaps she had some say in choosing her new name, although the fact that she more often called herself Mother Esther de l'Enfant Jésus suggests that Marie-Joseph was not her favorite name. Nevertheless, the symbolism of her name is striking if we think of Esther as a teenager who had already lost two families: she was taken away once from her English family, and then again from her Wabanaki family. The

name Marie-Joseph de l'Enfant Jésus embodies a family within it—Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. Esther's decision to remain with the Ursulines and to take on this name perhaps suggest that she was looking to create an enduring family for herself.

Mother Esther's two later biographers have followed the interpretive paths laid out by Père Bigot: Charlotte Alice Baker writes from the Protestant New England perspective, although from the vantage point of the late nineteenth century and portrays Esther's French "redeemers" as rather calculating fellows. However, she takes Esther's conversion to Catholicism seriously, and suggests that personal inspiration rather than ambition or political deal-making explains her conversion in the end. Gerald Kelly, at the end of the twentieth century, follows Père Bigot's providential understanding of Mother Esther's life in his unpublished manuscript biography, called (after Bigot's sermon) *Thy Hand Shall Lead Me*: "To those, however, who accept the principle of the working of grace in the human spirit," Kelly writes, "it will be clear, *post factum*, that the hand of God was guiding the young Captive and that the theme of Père Bigot's sermon was not merely empty symbolism." All three biographers, therefore, give their subject an essentially passive role, and assign the active roles in the drama to the men: French governors and priests, English parents and politicians, even God himself.<sup>12</sup>

In order to explore my proposition here today, "How a little English girl from Wells became a big French politician," and in the spirit of my discussion of permeable borders and identities, let's dramatically rename Esther. Let's call her Joseph Wheelwright, and do a little counterfactual gender-swapping while we're at it: What if Esther Wheelwright had been Joseph instead? What if he had been taken by the Wabanaki, learned their language, and was then purchased by a French priest who, impressed with his piety, encouraged him to become a Jesuit father? What if Father Joseph had left traces in the notarial records of working with other English captives, perhaps encouraging them to convert and to stay in Canada? What if his nephew Nathaniel Wheelwright, a Massachusetts official charged with bringing home English captives, came to visit not an aunt, but an uncle in Québec, an uncle who would rise to hold prominent offices in his order? Would we have any problem reading political motives and consequences into Father Joseph Wheelwright's actions? Probably not. In fact, we would almost certainly have no problem evaluating the politics of his border-crossing and his work in Canada with English captives during decades of warfare between the French, the Iroquois, the Wabanaki, and the English. Because of biogra-

phy's focus on the political man-of-action, every study of Father Joseph's life would put his contact with captives at the center of its analysis, whether it were written in French, English, or Wabanaki.<sup>13</sup>

If Father Joseph's life and work would be so easy to render, why is it still so difficult to see the public intentions and effects of women's lives and work? Linda Wagner-Martin talks of the "trap of the stereotype" in women's biography. Too often, the narrative arc of women's biographies is focused on the "Marriage Drama." Fans of Jane Austen's novels will recognize this quite readily: how the choice of a husband and the ensuing marriage powerfully shape the rest of a woman's life. Even feminist biographies and autobiographies published in the past decade fall into a parallel trap. For example, the recent telling of three women's lives: Blanche Cook's *Eleanor Roosevelt* (vol. 1), and the memoirs of both Claire Bloom and Mia Farrow all fall into what we might call the "Dissolution Drama," as the biography and both autobiographical texts build to the moment where Franklin Roosevelt, or Philip Roth, or Woody Allen, break the hearts of our intrepid heroines. Indeed, Cook argues that Eleanor Roosevelt's discovery of Franklin's adultery is the crucial turning point in her life, as it motivated her to find a meaningful life away from their home and family, as he had apparently done. Nell Painter's work on Sojourner Truth, and Elliott Gorn's biography of Mother Jones show that marriage and motherhood might be incidental to, or serve more of a symbolic than actual role in the political work that women do. For most historians, however, the presence or absence of men as husbands and lovers still plays a role central to the understanding of the women's lives.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps this is appropriate for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where everyone—male or female, enslaved, bound, or free—was no one at all outside of the context of their relationships to others. Self-made men or women like Sojourner Truth or Mother Jones are truly modern characters. Amidst a sea of new biographical studies about "founding brothers" and now and forever the "founding fathers," Rosemarie Zagarri's recent biography of Mercy Otis Warren stands out not just because of its female subject, but because of its approach. The author does a fine job of showing how Warren's life is truly unintelligible without understanding the roles that both she and her husband played in provincial politics. In the classroom, my students have sometimes faulted Zagarri for focusing overmuch on Mercy's father, brother, husband, and sons, but perhaps we should read this emphasis on family life as the only reasonable way to understand the public lives of anyone in a

colonial family. Thus, perhaps it is not the biographers of women who have erred in attending family life; maybe the biographers of men have slighted a crucial arena for understanding and explaining their subjects. (James Otis's next biographer will be compelled to follow Zagarri's example.)<sup>15</sup>

While we are examining the frontiers of gender identities, we should also look beyond the bounds of marriage and the nuclear family. Early modern British and colonial American scholars have recently argued that, to understand women's history, we must recognize that many women lived outside of marriage, voluntarily as well as involuntarily. The fixation of many colonial women's historians on marriage is revealing of the very Protestant and heterosexual assumptions that guide our analyses. But, is the only way to avoid the Marriage Drama in the telling of women's lives to choose a woman who never marries? Does a feminist biographer make her job too easy by choosing to write about a woman who becomes a nun? Perhaps not. After all, it would be a stretch to argue that by falling into the arms of the Catholic Church and marrying Jesus Christ, Mother Esther had escaped the clutches of patriarchy and gender politics. Like married women in the New World, the Ursuline sisters were situated in an earthly hierarchy and bound to obey the men above them who, it was believed, were by nature, custom, and church law their superiors in every way. Also, like their secular contemporaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious women strove to reconcile the imperatives of their faith and their New World mission with their duty to humble submission. By learning more about nuns and other women who lived outside of marriage and traditional family life, we should get a more varied and complex view of the possibilities and limitations of women's lives. We also leave behind the narrative of colonial American history that privileges stern and sterile Protestant religiosity and opens it to the experiences of people in the borderlands of French and Spanish colonies—New Mexico, Louisiana, Texas, and California, as well as Maine.<sup>16</sup>

### *A Political Woman*

We know a great deal about the missionary work of early French Jesuit missionaries and its political implications, so it would hardly be novel to argue that our fictional Father Joseph Wheelwright was engaged in work that had not just local, spiritual effects but also imperial and global implications. But can we really argue that cloistered nuns, pre-

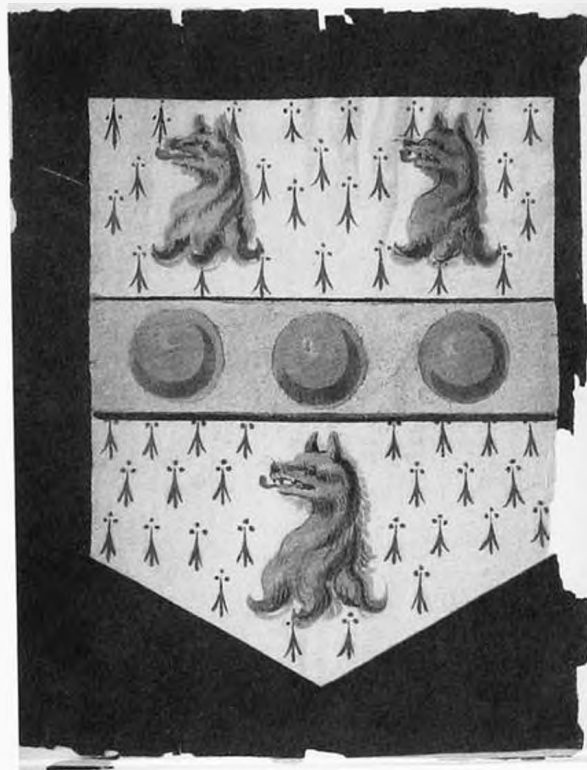


Figure 2. This copy of a silk coat-of-arms painted by Mother Esther may indicate her talent as a painter, as well as her interest in maintaining a connection with her New England family. It undoubtedly shows the Wheelwright family's abiding interest in its unredeemed captive. Wheelwright Family coat of arms, Unidentified artist [after original by Esther Wheelwright], watercolor on silk, nineteenth century. *Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.*

vented from engaging in the heroic, far-reaching missionary work among the Indians, could have played an equally important role in the political life of New France? Well, why not? There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that, like their secular counterparts in the New World, nuns in America had more liberty to serve their communities in a variety of ways. The rule of cloister was not as strictly enforced in Canada as it was in France, for a number of reasons. First of all, New France was like other frontier environments, in that primitive conditions and a very skewed sex ratio meant that the first and second generation of French women there had opportunities that their European counterparts lacked. Second, the evangelizing impulse that brought many of the sisters to the New World, and the array of social services the sisters provided to the primitive frontier communities of Québec, Montreal, and later, Three Rivers meant that they mixed among the lay people of their communities frequently.<sup>17</sup>

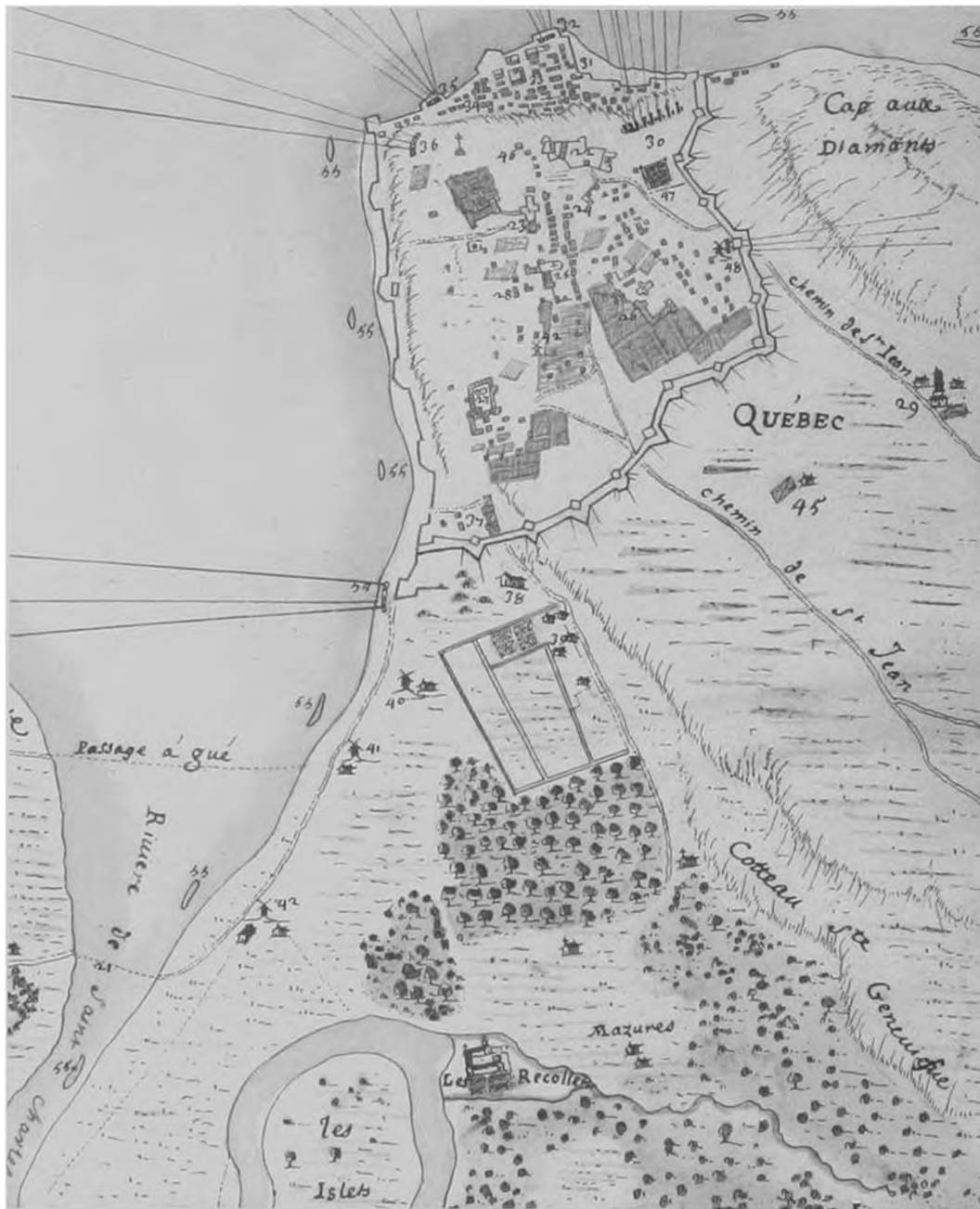


Figure 3. The Ursulines were quite literally at the center of the life of Quebec, with gardens and fields that surpassed any within the walls of the city (number 26). They were the largest women's order in Quebec (the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame are at number 28), and their holdings are shown on this ca. 1690 map as rivaling even those of the Jesuits (the Jesuit seminary and cathedral at 23, their quarters and a chapel at 25, and their gardens and grist mill at 42.) Robert de Villeneuve, "Quebec & Ses Environs en la Nouvelle France, Assiege par les Anglois le 16e d'octobre 1690" (detail), Composite Atlas, 1690 (RB 109496). Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



The Ursulines, a Counter Reformation order dedicated to teaching, played a large role as educators and evangelists in French colonial North America (Québec and New Orleans in particular), as did the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame at Montreal. These teaching orders worked not just with French and English captive girls, but with Indian girls and women as well, instructing them in academic subjects, religion, and women's domestic skills that were in such scarce supply in early New France. Mother Esther probably worked as a teacher for much of her career, but her talent in embroidery and painting was particularly nurtured and valued among the Ursulines. We know of her interest in painting through the portrait she sent to her New England family in 1763, and also by her painting of the Wheelwright coat-of-arms on silk, made as a gift for her New England relatives (fig. 2). The Ursulines of Québec and Three Rivers became expert at embroidery, and by the mid-eighteenth century they and their students specialized in designs influenced by Native American traditions, working their European art in American materials: birchbark, deer skins, dyed moose hair, and porcupine quills. Thus the Ursuline schools were not just sites where French nuns immersed their Indian students in French religion, language, and culture, but places where students and teachers collaborated in making distinctively embroidered boxes, fans, and other small items for the tourist trade, as well as liturgical items that were used in churches throughout New France. This was incredibly arduous needlework, as stitching with moose hairs rather than silk floss or other European-made thread necessarily meant re-threading the needle every few stitches. Because of her language skills and her life among the Wabanaki, which may well have included working with Indian materials used for clothing, moccasins, and hair and bodily adornment, Mother Esther may have been key to the development of this syncretic art form. This embroidery was also financially very important to the Ursulines, as they raised much of their own operating budget through its sale.<sup>18</sup>

The Ursuline convents seem to have been very open to the community throughout the pre-Conquest period as both seventeenth- and eighteenth-century visitors commented admiringly on the buildings' beauty (particularly the Ursuline chapel in Québec) and on the distinctive beauty of the nuns' embroidered liturgical items (fig. 3). Mother Esther's own nephew Nathaniel Wheelwright wrote in 1754 that "the Church is very handsomly adorned and their Chapels, in which are very curious imbroidery, all of their own work." A French visitor in 1759 made almost the exact same observations, commenting admiringly that



Figure 4. Mary Snell Wheelwright, Mother Esther's mother, never stopped hoping that her daughter would return to New England. This is a copy of Mary Wheelwright's miniature portrait delivered to Mother Esther by Major Nathaniel Wheelwright on one of his visits to his cloistered aunt in January 1754. Wheelwright also brought other gifts of silver and linen from his family on this trip to Canada. The gifts were a gesture of goodwill on the part of Mother Esther's New England family. Stories of this portrait suggest that only by refashioning it as an image of the Virgin Mary was Mother Esther permitted to keep it in her possession at the convent. Mrs. John Wheelwright (Mary Snell Wheelwright) as the Virgin Mary, by Miss H.P. Wheelwright, watercolor on ivory, copy after eighteenth-century miniature portrait. *Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.*

"their church in Québec is very beautiful, richly ornamented" with their embroidery "in the taste of the savage." The Ursulines at Québec maintained both a day school and a boarding school, so girls and their families were always coming and going. Besides the teaching and missionary orders, Hospital sisters like the Chanionesses in Québec provided acute medical care at the Hôtel-Dieu, as well as longer-term institutional care for disabled people, the elderly, and the poor at the Hôpital Général. Finally, scholars of the early women's religious orders have argued persua-

sively that the women who went to Canada in the seventeenth century may have intentionally sought to escape the conservative, cloistering impulse of French bishops at the time, and they fought to preserve their broader roles when the episcopacy in Canada tried to limit their activities. Thus, like both single and married women in colonial America, women in religious orders also had greater opportunities than their European counterparts and perhaps were able to leverage those opportunities more effectively than their secular sisters beyond the first two generations of European settlement.<sup>19</sup>

The services provided by these women's orders were not seen as incidental but rather as central to the mission and the well-being of New France itself. This might not seem so surprising in the case of the hospital sisters at Québec, Montreal, and Three Rivers. But late seventeenth-century correspondence between the governors and intendants of New France and the King's ministers in Paris make it clear that the teaching and missionary orders in general, and the Ursulines in particular, were vital to the colony's hopes. The Ursulines were charged with training and educating a diverse array of young women—Indians, French immigrants, and French Canadians—in the skills they would need to be virtuous Catholic wives and mothers, and to run proper French farm households. More often than not, French governors and intendants secured state support for this work. During the period of the Iroquois wars and the first major intercolonial wars between New England, New France, and their respective Native allies, recruiting and retaining women with strong bodies and French huswifery skills was not just a personal convenience for male *habitants*; it was a political necessity if the French were going to best their rivals for the control of North America. Thus, the arrival of an English girl and Indian captive who professed Catholicism was not just a symbolic victory ripe for propagandistic exploitation (as Mother Esther's English-language biographers have argued). Because she probably knew more Wabanaki than English, Esther Wheelwright would have been a propitious addition to the community of sisters in Québec because she was not just a symbol but a powerful instrument for extending the reach of French religion, language, culture, and political influence.<sup>20</sup>

We do not know many specifics about the nearly half century of Mother Esther's work from the time she joined the Ursulines in 1713 until her elevation as Mother Superior in 1760, but considering her background and her eventual election, we must assume that her work was vital to the mission of her order. The Ursulines remained a strong



Figure 5. A skilled New England diplomat unusual for his command of the French language, Nathaniel Wheelwright's connections to his famous aunt ensured that his name opened doors closed to other New Englanders. On his second journey to redeem New England captives in Canada in 1753-54, the French governor-general the Marquis Duquesne complimented the Massachusetts Governor for sending Wheelwright: "Your Excellency will now be Sensible to what Importance it is on Such an Occasion to make Choice of such a Person as Mr: Wheelwright for Negotiatour." This portrait of a confident and corpulent man suggests that Wheelwright did well by doing good for New England. NATHANIEL WHEELWRIGHT, attributed to John Singleton Copley, ca. 1753-54, oil on paper mounted on panel. *Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.*

and influential order through midcentury, when one primary source estimates that they had at least fifty women in community. Mother Esther's biographers believed that her family in New England maintained some kind of contact with her, but the primary sources that led them to this conclusion are unclear. The New England records indicate that Mother Esther's parents were distraught at their daughter's decision to remain with the Ursulines. Her mother apparently held out hope that she would return to New England and to Protestantism, even into Esther's middle age (fig. 4). After receiving a letter from her mother informing her of her father's death in 1745, Mother Esther kindly but firmly reminded her in 1747 "you know my dear Mother that the Lot which I have chosen hath been that of consecrating myself wholly unto the Lord, to whom I belong without reserve, being bound by Obligations which 'tis impossible for me to break. . . Thus you See my lovely Mother the impossibility there is of complying with the desire you have of my return to you." Mother Esther was then 51 years old, and had not seen her parents for more than four decades. Like other daughters who chose to remain in Canada after their captivity, Esther was explicitly disinherited by both her father's and mother's wills, unless she "by the Wonder working Providence of God be returned to her Native Land and tarry & dwell in it."<sup>21</sup>

We do know of at least one relative she received as a visitor: her nephew Nathaniel Wheelwright, on a diplomatic mission to retrieve captives, visited her several times in 1754, and reports on two of these visits in his journal (fig. 5). His record of these visits, though problematic, reveal the singular role that Mother Esther might have played as a political operator in New France as a New England-born, former Indian captive, and intimate of all three of the cultures seeking to be the authors of North American history. Wouldn't her fictional doppelgänger, Father Joseph, play such a role on the eve of the last great intercolonial war? Of course—so why should we expect anything less of Mother Esther?

The document that may reveal Mother Esther as a master politician is Nathaniel Wheelwright's journal of his 1753-54 diplomatic mission to New France. He and Phineas Stevens were charged with reclaiming several children from the Mitchell and Noble families taken from their parents' homes in Maine by the Wabanaki during some of the border hostilities that continued between the King George's War and the Seven Years' War. Since 1750, the children had been held in the mission villages of St. Francis and Bécancour. Their fathers had personally attempted a similar mission, which apparently broke down because neither man spoke

French and the French Governor Duquesne did not like their choice of translator. Duquesne had never met Wheelwright although he and Stevens had served on a similar mission to the French and Wabanaki the previous year, which had successfully returned eight captives. Although initially suspicious, he apparently appreciated the Massachusetts's Governor's French-speaking diplomat, as he wrote enigmatically to Gov. Shirley that "Your Excellency will now be Sensible to what Importance it is on Such an Occasion to make Choice of such a Person as Mr: Wheelwright for Negotiatour." Did he say this because of the Wheelwright family's long connection to Canadian affairs? Possibly—we can't know. Maybe he was just impressed to receive an Anglo-American diplomat who actually spoke French. Once again, the thirty-three-year-old Wheelwright went off to Canada to negotiate with the Wabanaki and the French. Is it purely coincidental that Wheelwright was twice called to negotiate with the peoples who had taken and held his aunt earlier in the century—even at the same village where she was likely discovered by Père Bigot? If so, was it pure coincidence that he reports in his journal of the second trip that "I went often to Visit my aunt La mère de L'enfant Jesus at the Convent"? Would we even ask these questions if Nathaniel had stopped to visit with his uncle Father Joseph "often" in the course of his official, diplomatic mission? At the very least, we probably wouldn't dismiss these visits as purely familial.<sup>22</sup>

Nathaniel clearly liked his aunt, describing her as "of a cheerful disposition," and seems flattered by her suggestion that "she thought she might confide in me as a friend and near Relation." In their only conversation reported directly in his diary, Nathaniel claims that his aunt wanted to correct some misunderstandings about how she was "detained in Canada, after she got out of the hands of the Indians." Since she was taken into the home of the governor of New France, people believed that he must have paid to put her in the convent school, and then later paid her *dot* when she became a nun. She confirmed that there was a time when she was to be returned to New England, but "finding an opportunity to Reimburse himself; or Reather get money (as seems to be the principal of most of the French, who have at any time got Captives out of the hands of the Indians) and at the same time have the Credit of doing a Charitable Action, he forfeited his word, and sold her to a priest, who had a sum of money given him by a Lady in France to make a Nun, and who paid Monsr. De Vaudruielle fourteen hundred Livres for the expences he had been at as he said for her Ransom and during her stay with him, as he produced an account which he made amount to that ex-

travigant sum. Thus she was put into the Convent without the least Obligation to Monsr. De Vaudruille or his Family.”<sup>23</sup>

Can this story be true, either in its substance or in Wheelwright's telling of it? Why would this be the one conversation with his aunt that Nathaniel records? Reading it in the full context of the diary provides a clue. This story, about a greedy and treacherous French governor reveals the contingency of his authority and, in fact, highlights the agency of a wealthy woman in the politics of captive negotiations. Further, by placing it in the chronology of Wheelwright's mission, we might understand why Mother Esther decided to tell her story to her nephew at that moment and why he might have been inspired to record only this aspect of her biography. A few months earlier, Wheelwright had been involved in a captive negotiation with a Wabanaki woman from Becancourt, who had met him in Three Rivers, taken a thousand livres from him, and promised to return with six-year-old Frances Noble. As time passed Wheelwright grew concerned, but was reassured by the French that the woman would keep her word. Instead, she returned to inform Wheelwright that she would not hand over the child, and when he protested to the governor of Three Rivers, Rigaud de Vaudreuil (the son of Governor Vaudreuil, his aunt's former captor), he instructed the interpreter to tell her to bring the child to him, “but,” Wheelwright writes, “this he did without an air of authority as becoming a Governour.” Upon this weak command, “the squaw laught in his face at this and every thing he said; at which I was surprised to see him insensible; he then reply'd to me saying, what will you do you see she is obstinate and she is an Indian.” Wheelwright, clearly irritated at what he saw as ineffectual French leadership, told the governor that “I did not regard her as an Indian in the woods with whom I myself as a Stranger had made an agreement and she deceived me but I looked upon her as a person not only in his Government, but in the town where he was Governour, and I was very sorry he could not do me justice.” Finally, he writes, I “took the Liberty to say it was a shame that so inconsiderable a people should be suffer'd to impose on either the French or English.”<sup>24</sup>

These were both stories of little captive English girls nearly returned to New England, stories of weak French men strongly (and perhaps wrongly) influenced by capricious women, stories of the greed inspired by ready ransom money, and stories of the family connections of fathers and sons, aunts and nephews. Maybe this recent humiliation was easily recalled when his aunt told a story that had so many of the same themes and connections. Should we then assume that this story is just fiction, or

at very least a heavily self-interested and self-absorbed memory of a conversation? No, because to do so turns it once again into a story about the men. Wheelwright's interest was probably piqued because of the unflattering portrait of French officials in general, and of Rigaud de Vaudreuil's father in particular. But if the story were told to him by Father Joseph, a dedicated educator and missionary who had spent years among the Wabanaki and nearly five decades with the French, wouldn't we assume there might be a lesson for his nephew in this simple story?

Perhaps there is a plausible alternate reading of the story Mother Esther told her nephew, one that accounts for her connections in Québec, her experiences among the Wabanaki and her Indian pupils at the convent school, and her observations after nearly a half century close to the center of political intrigue (and her teenage years at the center of it). Perhaps we can read the story Nathaniel Wheelwright wrote in his diary as a New Testament parable, told by an experienced teacher and devoted follower of Christ. Perhaps Mother Esther's confession to Wheelwright, that "she thought she might confide in me as a friend and near Relation," was not a spontaneous sentimental outburst, but a charming intimacy deployed by a practised diplomat hoping to guide one much younger but equally ambitious. So, she tells a story that seems to take away some of the luster and power of her male secular (supposed) benefactor, returning the credit of her religious life to the Church and its pious female donor. What was the moral of the story she told her nephew? That French governors are self-interested, yes, but that there are other powerful forces at work in Canadian affairs, like the Church and its benefactors. To look to a French governor as the seat of all authority was surely a mistake that would lead only to personal and professional frustration. Perhaps she even wanted to signal to Wheelwright that women—even Indian women—have influence in New France that they did not have in New England. Perhaps, despite that greater influence, she could not appear to advise him directly, and as a practised hand at negotiating the masculine hierarchy of the Church, maybe she decided to convey her political advice in the form of a parable.<sup>25</sup>

As it turns out, Mother Esther's connections in New France were extensive, and it appears that she was very involved with the sizeable community of English captives there from the very beginning. In 1711, as a teenager and recent convert she served as godmother for Dorothée De Noyons, who was the daughter of another New England girl, Abigail Stebbins, and her French husband Jacques de Noyons. She was neither the first nor the last young English girl put into the convent school in



Québec, so she almost certainly encountered other captives as her students. Perhaps she herself reached out to them. Susanna Johnson reports in her captivity narrative that when visiting two captive girls in the convent school in 1756, she met two nuns who had been taken from New England families, “one, by the name of Wheelwright, who had a brother in Boston, on whom she requested me to call, if ever I went to that place.” Was it a brother, or a nephew that she meant? Nathaniel Wheelwright would be the likelier subject, as he might well be interested to hear Johnson’s observations during her captivity among the Wabanaki and then in a Québec prison. Alternatively, if Mother Esther truly meant for Johnson to visit a Wheelwright brother, then this indicates that Mother Esther maintained connections to her birth family through a variety of relatives, who might have been useful in a variety of ways. Johnson took Mother Esther’s advice, and said that she “received many civilities from her brother.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, in the context of eighteenth-century Québec, even with just these few tantalizing clues about the nature of her work, we cannot go along with Charlotte Alice Baker’s analysis of Mother Esther’s elevation to the role of Mother Superior. The New England biographer writes that “strangely enough, at the moment of the establishment of the English Supremacy in Canada, the first (and last) English Superior of the Ursulines of Québec, was elected.” What was so strange about her election, given her diplomatic skills and personal connections? Gerald Kelly, following in Père Bigot’s footsteps, saw her election as more providential than political, but as so often happens in colonial America, there is a very strong correlation between providence and political self-interest. There can be little doubt that the Ursulines believed that it was in their best interests to elect someone with diplomatic skills and friendly connections in the English-speaking world, especially after the English General Murray installed a number of his wounded men in their convent. Like a newly crowned king or a recently elected governor, Mother Esther had her portrait painted shortly after she assumed the leadership of her community of women. This was not a tradition among the Quebec Ursulines—in fact, Mother Esther’s was the first and only portrait of a Superior painted in the 120 years since the order’s founding. Gerald Kelly and others have suggested that it was an Ursuline—an insider in the community, a self-taught artist—who painted Mother Esther’s portrait. Because of the Ursuline production of embroidered *objets d’art* over the previous several decades, there were probably several talented sisters who could have produced the image of their Superior. In any case, her

portrait is powerful evidence that Mother Esther understood herself to be an important person within and without the convent walls. The painting, unlike Esther, went back to New England in the care of another nephew, Joshua Moody, shortly after it was completed. A gift to her family, and proof of her successes in the world and in God's work, it survives as powerful evidence that her biography has yet to be explored in full.<sup>27</sup>

In the course of her life, Mother Esther made it clear that all aspects of her identity were important. While she ended her days among the French and knowing little of the English language, her New England roots were clearly important to her French sisters and to herself. It was she who maintained contacts with her family there, by, at least, entertaining her nephew Nathaniel and sending the portrait, and she who chose to call herself by her English first name until her death. But because she spoke French and Wabanaki, because she resisted her family's pleas to come home, and because of her Catholicism, her life has been lost to New England history. Only by rejecting the teleology of the nation-state narrative, and returning to a colonial world of permeable religious, cultural, and linguistic borders, can we understand the lives of women like Mother Esther. Maine history, with its profane sailors, French-speaking migrants, religious dissenters, Indian communities, and determined women is therefore restored to the center of New England and American history, rather than relegated to its "imagined periphery."

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## NOTES

1. Alan Taylor, "Center and Peripheries: Locating Maine's History," *Maine History* 39 (2000): 3-15; quotations from pp. 12-14.

2. Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 106-125; Charlotte Alice Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives, Carried to Canada* (1897; reprint Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1990), 35-68; Wheelwright folder, Miscellaneous Collections, William J. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. For an overview of seventeenth-century English settlements in Maine, see Edwin A. Churchill, "Mid-Seventeenth-Century Maine: A World on the Edge," and Emerson W. Baker, "The World of Thomas Gorges: Life in the Province of Maine in the 1640s," in *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega*, ed. Emerson W. Baker, et al. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 241-282. For Wabanaki attacks see, for example, James P. Baxter, *Documentary History of the State of Maine*, (Portland: Maine Historical Society, 1907-16), 4:348-79, *passim*; Manuscript collection 77, box 1, folder 10; box 2, folders 27, 32, 42; Manuscript collection S-888, misc. box 33, folder 21, Maine Historical Society, Portland. Volume 36, p. 52, Massachusetts Archives, Boston Massachusetts (hereafter Mass. Archives). For examples of the militarization of Maine in the 1680s and 1690s, see *Province of Maine Records, 1680-1692*, vol. 3 of *Province and Court Records of Maine* (Portland: Maine Historical Society, 1947), 21-22, 36, 62, 86, 153, 155-56, 190, 216, 229.

3. Mass. Archives, 71: 871, 877; 36:75-76, 447a; 37: 32a, 84a, 144, 259; 51: 182-182a, 241-44, 342-43, 363; 70: 280; 72: 103-104; Emma Lewis Coleman, *New England Captives Carried to Canada* (1925; reprint Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1989) 1:428; 1:395-398; Mass. Archives, 71: 765. Coleman *New England Captives*, 1:428

4. Harald E. L. Prins, "Children of Gluskap: Wabanaki Indians on the Eve of the European Invasion," in *American Beginnings*, 95-117; Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Northeast*, vol. 15 of *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 109-159. Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1:33-36; John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Missions Among the Indian Tribes of the United States, 1529-1854* (1883), chaps. 2-3. For a good general comparison of French and English colonial styles, see James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

5. Axtell, *The Invasion Within*, chap. 12 ; Daniel Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 40 (1983): 528-559; Alden T. Vaughan and Daniel K. Richter, in "Crossing the Cultural Divide: Indians and New Englanders, 1605-1763," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings*, 90 (1980): 23-99. Vaughan and Richter found that females of all ages were likelier to remain among their captives than males of all ages, but girls taken at ages 7 to 15 were the most likely to stay among the Indians or French redeemers. One study that has taken a microhistorical approach to the story of a New England girl and the effects of her captivity on her family is John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1994). Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1:425-26; Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives*, 47-52.

6. Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives*, 49-50; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press/Laval University Press, 1969) 2: 64-65 (hereafter referred to as *DCB*). Prins, "Children of Gluskap," 103-04; Ann M. Little, "'Shoot that rogue, for he hath an Englishman's coat on!': Cultural Cross-Dressing on the New England Frontier, 1620-1760," *New England Quarterly* 74 (2001): 238-273. John Gyles, taken captive by some Wabanaki warriors from his family's farm at Pemaquid in 1689, described the long journey into captivity that took him from village to village up the Penobscot and St. John's Rivers in *Memoirs of Odd Adventures* (Boston, 1736), 1-12. If Esther were adopted by an agriculturalist group in southern Maine, she would have learned to grow crops like most Native women in what is now New England. Prins says that the climate North of the Kennebec River made for too short a growing season for most cultivated crops, Prins, "Children of Gluskap," 103-104.

7. For overviews of Native and Anglo-American women's lives, see for example Carole Shammas, "Anglo-American Household Government in Comparative Perspective," and Richard White, "What Chigabe Knew: Indians, Household Government, and the State," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 52 (1995): 104-144, 151-156; Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman, eds., *Women and Power in Native North America* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Nancy Shoemaker, ed., *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

8. I am indebted to Emerson Baker for this insight.

9. Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives*, 35-68; Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1:425-428; Vaudreuil, as quoted by Coleman, 1: 427. Baker and Coleman claim that it was Bigot who paid the dowry, but Mother Esther herself suggested in 1754 that Vaudreuil attempted to take the credit for it (see discussion below). For a dramatic telling of a similar tale of an English daughter in captivity who remains in Canada, see Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive*.

10. Gerald Kelly to Charles D. Childs, March 21, 1975, in Wheelwright Genealogy, Box 9, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter Mass. Hist. Soc.); personal communication with Anne Bentley, Curator of Paintings, Mass. Hist. Soc., January 4, 2001.

11. Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives*, 54; *DCB* 2: 64-65.

12. Baker devotes a chapter of *True Stories* to a mini-biography of Mother Esther, 35-69; Gerald M. Kelly, *Thy Hand Shall Lead Me: The Story of Esther Wheelwright*, unpublished manuscript, ca. 1970s, Mass. Hist. Soc., quotation from p. 116.

13. This is an exercise suggested by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 80-85, in which she speculates on the literary possibilities and likely sad fate of Judith (rather than William) Shakespeare. The discussion that follows is greatly indebted to Bonnie Smith's *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Harvard University

Press, 1998). Although a small percentage of male captives remained in Canada, there is no known case of a New England boy captive taking holy orders in Canada.

14. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 11-43. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 1, 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Claire Bloom, *Leaving a Doll's House: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996); Mia Farrow, *What Falls Away: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Elliott Gorn, *Mother Jones: the Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). Literary biographers have been more effective at breaking this mold, perhaps because they have a clearer body of work to focus on than historians sometimes think they have; Diane Wood Middlebrook's stunning biography of Anne Sexton comes to mind: *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

15. Rosemarie Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1995).

16. Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, *Single-women in the European Past, 1250-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), especially Froide's introductory essay, "A Singular Past," 1-37. One effort to reconcile women's opportunities and strictures in New World convents is Natalie Zemon Davis's mini-biography of Marie de l'Incarnation, the founder of the Ursulines at Québec in *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 62-139.

17. Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 34 (1977); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

18. Leslie Choquette, "'Ces Amazones du Grand Dieu': Women and Mission in Seventeenth-Century Canada," *French Historical Studies* 17 (1992): 627-655; Clark Robenstine, "French Colonial Policy and the Education of Women and Minorities: Louisiana in the Early Eighteenth Century," *History of Education Quarterly* 32 (1992), 193-211; Vincent Grégoire, "L'Éducation des Filles au Couvent des Ursulines de Québec à l'Époque de Marie de l'Incarnation (1639-1672)," *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 17 (1995); Davis, *Women on the Margins*, 62-139; Patricia Simpson, *Marguerite Bourgeoys and Montreal, 1640-1665* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997). A new study of Ursulines and lay women of African descent in Louisiana argues that together these women were instrumental in the early Catholic evangelization of Louisiana's enslaved population. See Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," *William*

and *Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 59 (2002): 409-448. Mère St.-Thomas, *Les Ursulines de Québec depuis leur établissement jusqu'à nos jours* (Québec, 1866), 360-61; Joyce Tayler Dawson, "In Search of Early Canadian Embroidery Abroad," *Material History Bulletin* 27 (1988), 39-42. Mother Esther herself commented on the brisk sale of their embroidered objects to "English gentlemen" ("Messieurs les Anglais") after the British conquest and laments the fact that the order was dependent on this income in a 1761 letter quoted by Saint-Thomas, 361, and in translation by Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives*, 66. Elaine Forman Crane has argued that women's needlework was a means by which women could express themselves artistically and politically. See Crane, "Religion and Rebellion: Women of Faith in the American War for Independence," in *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 52-86.

19. M. de Bougainville, "Mémoire sur l'Artillerie du Canada" (Jan. 11, 1759) in *Rapport de L'Archiviste de la Province de Québec pour 1920-1921* (Québec: Ls-A. Proulx, 1924), 4:60, Québec Archives (hereafter cited as QA), writes of the Québec Ursulines that "leur église est très belle à Québec, riche en ornements; on y élève des demoiselle; on y tient des écoles externes, et on y travaille beaucoup en broderie, ainsi que quantité des ouvrages faits dans le goût des Sauvages, et que l'on envoie comme s'ils les avaient faits. Celles des Trois-Rivières ont encore plus de réputation pour ce genre d'ouvrages," 60 (translation in the text by the author); Nathaniel Wheelwright's diary of the Canadian expedition of 1753-54, Jan. 26, 1753/4, Mass. Hist. Soc. Choquette, "Ces Amazones du Grand Dieu"; Davis, *Women on the Margins*; Patricia Simpson, *Marguerite Bourgeoys*. A letter from Monsignor John-Olivier Briand to Joseph-Francois Perreault, grand vicaire, Dec. 14, 1772, recommends strict adherence to the rule of cloister for the Ursulines, which indicates that Canadian bishops had not been able to rein in the sisters' freedom even after the British Conquest, QA 10:96.

On secular women: see Kathryn A. Young, "'... sauf les perils et fortunes de la mer': Merchant Women in New France and the French Transatlantic Trade, 1713-1746," *Canadian Historical Review* 77 (1996): 388-407; Josette Brun, "Les Femmes d'affaires en Nouvelle-France au 18e siècle: le cas de l'Île Royale," *Acadiensis* 27 (1997): 44-66, which both suggest that while French Canadian women seem to have somewhat more influence in business than Anglo-American women in the eighteenth century, only in widowhood did they have the liberty to act on their own behalf.

20. Barbara E. Austen has argued for the clear political importance of captured English women in "Captured . . . Never Came Back: Social Networks Among New England Female Captives in Canada, 1689-1763," in *New England/New France, 1600-1850*, ed. Peter Benes, *Annual Proceedings*, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife (Boston: Boston University, 1989), 28-38. For evidence of the state's drive to bring more properly trained housewives into New France, see, for example, the correspondence of Governor Frontenac and Minister Colbert, QA 7:44, 60, 65-66, 82 (1673-74); the correspondence of Governor Frontenac and Intendant Bochart Champigny to the Minister, QA 8:351, 359, 377 (1697-98). Copies of this and other official correspondence between

Québec and Paris are in the Francis Parkman Papers, Mass. Hist. Soc. See, for example, lettre de M. du Chesneau, 10 Nov. 1679, vol. 1, p. 56; Lettre de Monsieur de Meulles, intendant a Québec, Nov. 12 1682, p. 94-95, 100; Lettre de M. Lefebvre de la Barre, Québec, Nov. 4 1683, p. 120; de Meulles, Nov. 12 1684, p. 197-98; letter of Champigny, Nov. 16 1686, vol. 2, p. 456; lettre de Champigny and M. de Dénonville, Gouverneur Général, Nov. 6, 1687, p. 572-74, 594-95.

21. In "État présent du Canada" by the Sieur Boucault (1754), he estimates that there are "au moins cinquante religieuses" (at least fifty sisters) in the Ursuline convent in that year, QA 1:41. Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1:429-431. On the relations between New England families and their daughters in Canada, see Ann M. Little, "Abraham in Arms: Gender and Power on the New England Frontier, 1620-1760" (ms. in progress), chap. 4.

22. Benjamin Mitchell and Lazarus Noble had gone to Canada with the permission of the Massachusetts government to try to get their children back in the summer of 1753 (Mass. Archives, 74: 62-65, 69-70, 109a), but claimed that they were rudely rebuffed by the French Governor. On the Stevens and Wheelwright expedition of 1752, see Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1: 115-117; 335-346; Mass. Archives, 74: 57-59, 62-65. While they obtained the liberty of eight men, usually by purchasing them from their French masters, they failed to return another thirteen English people, four young women and nine young men. Gov. Wm. Shirley to Gov. Duquesne (letter of introduction for Wheelwright), Oct. 22, 1753, Mass. Archives, 5: 554-57; Gov. Duquesne's reply, dated "Mountroyal" Dec. 1, 1753 (apparently a contemporary translation, or perhaps written in English by the French?), 5: 558; Nathaniel Wheelwright's diary of the Canadian expedition of 1753-54, Nov. 29, 1753, June 13, 1754, Mass. Hist. Soc., (hereafter Wheelwright Diary).

23. Wheelwright Diary, June 13, 1754.

24. Wheelwright Diary, March 8 and 13, 1754.

25. The labor activist Mother Jones, active at the turn of the twentieth century, was a master of deploying an apparent submission to the feminine ideal (in her case, the nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity and motherhood) to her own ends most notably by shedding her birth name and taking the public name of "mother." Gorn, *Mother Jones*; Mary Harris Jones, *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1996).

26. Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1: 212-214; 2:118-124, 147-151, 320; Susanna Johnson, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson*, 3d ed. (1814; reprint Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1990), 89-90; Austen has identified 26 English girls at the Ursuline *pensionnat*, 1690-1760, Austen, "Captured . . . Never Came Back," 30-32. She says that this is a small number compared to those who must have ended up at the Congrégation de Notre-Dame in Montreal, as the majority of captive girls were enrolled there. The other New England-born nun Johnson met was probably Mary Ann Davis, another convert of Bigot's, who became Marie Anne Davis de Sainte-Cécile of the Chanionesses at Québec, Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1:268-270.

27. Baker, *True Stories of New England Captives*, 63. Baker was perhaps following the example of Saint-Thomas, who wrote that Mother Esther's election was "une singulière coincidence" with the English conquest of Canada, 46.; Coleman, *New England Captives*, 1:433; Kelly, "Thy Hand Shall Lead Me," *passim*; Kelly to Childs, March 21, 1975.

Given her noted skills in painting and embroidery, her long life that defied the traditional boundaries of national histories and women's lives, and her remarkable gift for reinventing herself along the way, we might consider an alternative theory: perhaps the determined grimace and intense countenance of Mother Esther's portrait were inspired by the literal reflection of an old woman squinting into a smoky eighteenth-century looking glass. At age 67, her vision failing after a lifetime of close needlework, perhaps she painted her own features as she saw them gazing back at her.