By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER | Posted: Sunday, May 4, 2014 12:00 am

In 1816, Ward Safford, a philanthropist, urged Jeremiah Evarts, the corresponding secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, to take decisive action to secure a permanent residence and a permanent instructor for "our Owhyhean (Hawaiian) & other Heathen youths." The new enterprise, Safford predicted, might grow into a "great institution" dedicated to education and spiritual training, "at which should be assembled heathen from any part of the world."

Out of this idea came a school located in the town of Cornwall, Litchfield County, Connecticut. Before it closed its doors in 1826, the Mission School had enrolled 95 scholars, drawn from Hawaii, East Asia and various Indian tribes of North America. Their median age was 18 and they spoke a total of 21 languages. Twenty-five of the young men had attained a religious conversion there.

In "The Heathen School," John Demos, an emeritus professor of history at Yale University and the author of "Entertaining Satan and The Unredeemed Captive," places the history of the Mission School in the context of quintessentially American optimism about universal salvation and, alas, distinctively American racial intolerance.

The scandal swirling around the marriage of Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee, to Harriet Gold, a white woman, he suggests, may not have been entirely unwelcome to board commissioners, who deplored prejudice but had concluded that "ignorant and civilized boys" might well be incapable of becoming capable, Christian men.

Although Demos steps on his narrative with digressions about his own visits to Connecticut, Hawaii and Georgia, his textured account of this utopian experiment in acculturation is engrossing and, at times, poignant. When the citizens of Cornwall opposed Boudinot's marriage and anonymous correspondents threatened his life, Demos indicates, the young man went into a tailspin.

In that frame of mind, Boudinot went to a Cherokee "ball play" (an ancestor of lacrosse), which missionaries regarded as the epitome of "heathenish ways." On the Sabbath he witnessed violent physical competition among players who were "literally naked ... and yet a large proportion of the spectators are female," followed by all-night dances.

Quickly regretting his actions, Demos reports, Boudinot told anyone who would listen that he had "never done such a thing before."

Along with John Ridge, another Mission School "graduate," Demos reminds us, Boudinot was a major player in Cherokee Removal, along the "Trail of Tears," from Georgia to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. The two men were subsequently murdered by Indians, who deemed their support for removal...
an unforgivable crime against the Cherokee nation.

Frequently characterized by a generous spirit of outreach to other people, and a patriotic and/or faith-based sense of obligation (a "mission") to make the world a better place, our nation's "redemptive project," Demos emphasizes, is an enduring legacy of "American exceptionalism." Although "the national narrative we favor so strongly has a triumphalist score," these projects, large and small, can be and often are "strewn with failure," with a "dark, tragic end," like the fate of Ridge and Boudinot, that "lies far from its bright beginning."

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