

GIRTY

Richard Taylor

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Reviewed by
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A HANDFUL of Americans today can place the name Simon Girty. Two centuries ago it was as often in the air as the names Washington, Adams, and Revere. The reputation of the notorious White Savage of the Ohio Valley extended even to the seaboard, where he was a common pedagogical emblem: the villain without redeeming grace, a native Tamburlane.

For he had violated the ultimate taboos. He was a man pledged to darkness, who as comrade and chief to the heathen had sworn to annihilate his own kind. Tales of the Great Renegade's cruelty, of his coldheartedness, of his delight in the screams of the tortured, overran the Frontier, the terror of adult and child alike. So popular was Girty as a paradigm of depravity, in fact, that decades after his death he was still being excoriated in offers of Calvinist outrage. Mr. Taylor offers this selection from Thompson's *Young People's History of Kentucky* (1897):

It would be well if the name of this monster could be erased from the annals of Kentucky, unless it may be assumed that some good can accrue to the young from a knowledge of how fiendish even a white man may become when he puts himself outside of the pale of Christian civilization. His life presents nothing to be imitated.

This florid evaluation Girty sets right with generous imagination. It's fitting that the book should have been published in the bicentennial year of 1777, the "Year of the Bloody Sevens," when in one vengeful summer the Ohio Indians nearly succeeded in ridding their lands of the Long Knives. Turtle Island has published the book for Taylor and

the Netzahualcoyotl Historical Society, a Berkeley group dedicated to the "multicultural study of New World history and literature"; their leanings are evident and refreshing. Literate and provocative, *Girty* is at once a moving novel and a welcome revision of myth.

Girty is for me the principal Cassandra of our heritage, a figure whose manner of being an American throws the entire American enterprise in the dock. He poses a racial challenge which this country has never been able to answer, for the answer would raise the unspeakables of miscegenation and the primitive. Living in a time when these issues were still unresolved, when our final solution had not yet been devised, he had the bad grace to opt for coexistence—a decision that was swiftly to prove anathema to his fellow settlers. The vilification which followed is hardly surprising. To believers in Progress, in perfectability, in the City on a Hill, Girty's choice must have seemed incomprehensible: a quirk smelling of atavism and the all-too-human, like the revenge of the 18th century upon itself. To inquire why, in mid-life, he abandoned the Revolution to side with the British "Hair-Buyer" General Henry Hamilton is to confront the deepest ambiguities of the immigrant Protestant culture, to glimpse what Frank Cowan (in *Girty*) calls "the unseen Savage of the White Man's Heart."

Katepacomen, as Girty was known to the Delawares, was born near what is now Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1741—the generation of Jefferson and Patrick Henry. His father, a hard-drinking Indian trader, was killed by an intoxicated Delaware named The Fish when the boy was ten. During the French and Indian War, in a raid on Fort Granville, the Girty family was captured and split up, and Simon was sent to New York to live with the Senecas, one of the Six Nations. Three years later a truce enabled him to return to the settlements, but by that time the cast of his life was formed. In the Revolution he served as a scout and interpreter (he knew four Indian tongues) until deserting in 1778 to become the Scourge of the Frontier. After the war he lived as a crown pensioner in Canada until his death in 1818.

All of this Mr. Taylor records with a shimmering, suggestive economy. The book is full of marvelous set pieces. There is the siege led by Girty at Bryan's

Station, the famous burning of Col. William Crawford (at which the renegade is said to have "laughed heartily"), his defeat of Daniel Boone's forces at the battle of Blue Licks. And this evocation of the dying man on his Canadian porch, rheumatic and blind:

What I sense now is not what I've always heard the blind do. Not some moonless dark without a dawn or center, bristles of light buried like preserves in some deep cellar in my head. No, my world is blanketed white, that gyrating gelid white you see when some blunt object strikes your closed eye. As the blow of a fist. Not just soupy white, but textured with a kind of grit which gives it depth. Rough like the surface of sandstone, but inviting to the touch. Not gloomy, as they say. The gloom is not being certain what comes next, or imagining what will. A fear of edges, sinkholes, low limbs, sleeping snakes. And after a week or so, after 75 years, this just doesn't worry me. I grow to trust the whiteness like a pillow. Black is not the color of my blooming.

Numerous passages of like vividness make the book simultaneously wrenching and cathartic. Mr. Taylor has managed to salvage a human personality out of the detritus of legend, to make a stock villain—without denying the villainy—complicated and real.

Girty is not an easy book: not a good read (which is to say no sluggard's delight), but a hodge-podge of excerpts and poems and interior monologues and quotations that makes you think of those boxes of private papers you find in rare book rooms and must fashion into a life. We get an amusing "Vita" of the subject; historical entries, told in good academesse, about his military campaigns; segments from the journals of Dr. John Knight, witness to the Crawford burning, and William Calk, one of the defenders of Bryan's Station; an advertisement from a 1788 Kentucky paper seeking the return of a horse stolen by Girty; a group of speeches delivered by him on behalf of the Six Nations; the conjugation of the Delaware verb "to burn." All of it shot through with prescient poems and held together by a consistently arresting prose.

Mr. Taylor captures the spaciousness, the brooding danger, of a time when, as Girty's friend Simon Kenton puts it, "there was nobody in the wilderness *but God and us*." Girty's soliloquys in "The Meadow" and "A Stirring of Leaves" exhibit a man entirely at home in a non-Wordsworthian landscape, while a sketch of him facing down an antagonist while holding a brand to a powder keg suggests the recklessness that caused the Delaware chieftain *Katepacomen* to do him the honor of exchanging names. From such vignettes a character emerges: crotchety, arrogant, fearless, fanatically honest, a terror when drunk, and (like red and white on the Frontier) capriciously merciful and cruel: a character immeasurably more credible than the pitiless bogeyman of legend.

Though you can't say the outlines are clear. Mr. Taylor's is an impressionist's portrait, a stew of hints, adumbrations, tracks in the snow. He uses the image of tracked snow frequently, and it's an appropriate one for the book. To read it you must be, as the author calls Girty himself, a student of signs; in the end his motivations remain blurred. This too,

however, seems fitting. At one of the most charming moments in this ingenious potpourri, Mr. Taylor, with disingenuous humility, backs away from the abiding question:

No one quite knows how to explain why a white man could choose to live among heathens, among Indians, and adopt their ways so completely as to turn on his own race. This bothers them since it suggests something is wrong with "them." They drum their minds for reasons and this is what they come up with.

A list of reasons follows, including the traditional explanations that Girty was impatient with the American army's payment schedule, in love with plunder or British largess, and/or hungry for red women. It ends with the plumb, "simply following the tendencies of my nature, which are variously described as blood-thirsty, unpitying, cruel, fiend-like, brutal, depraved, and wicked." Taylor/Girty's response to this is a superb bow to enigma, a reduction of purpose to a few unyielding knowns:

All of the above are true. None of the above are true. Who wants to know? What difference does it make? Human motives, mine at least, reduced to several laws. I am my only fort. Plug your wounds with buzzard down. Test your powder when it rains. Cats draw lightning. Crows make poor umbrellas.

The mystery is not revealed. Girty is a monster who dotes on his children, a torturer with a heart of gold. "The perfect friction with the world / is snow which falls on water." Yet, if the historical figure remains clouded, the character of the man in Mr. Taylor's presentation is as sharply drawn as human paradox. Reduced to several laws, we are left with the novel's stirring coda, a litany of Delaware essentials beginning with "I am hungry, I thirst," and ending with *N'leheléche*, "I live, exist, draw breath."

Thaddeus Tuleja, whose novel *Land of Precious Snow* was recently published by Python Press, is currently writing popular music reviews and researching a book on torture.