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John Demos. *The Heathen School: A Story of Hope and Betrayal in the Age of the Early Republic.* New York: Vintage, 2014. 368 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-679-78112-7.

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Published on H-AmRel (September, 2016)

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John Demosâs book recounts the rise and fall of the Foreign Mission School, an ambitious project of international and interracial religious education in the Early Republic. The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions founded the institution in 1817. Their goal was to train young men from all corners of the globe to carry Christianity and âcivilizationâ back to their homelands. Demosâs narrative transforms the little-known history of the school and its students into a case study in the origins of American exceptionalism and an object lesson in the conflict between race, religion, and equality.

Early chapters of *The Heathen School* set the scene for the American Boardâs audacious experiment. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, the China trade set Americaâs sights far beyond its borders. Protestant leaders, believing it the nationâs special mission to convert the world, mobilized missionary campaigns to the Pacific and elsewhere. Demos uses the story of Henry Obookiah, a native Hawaiian, to illustrate how these efforts shaped the lives of indigenous individuals and inspired the creation of the Foreign Mission School. American merchants brought Obookiah to New England in 1809 to receive a Western education. Prominent clergy such as Timothy Dwight of Yale became his patrons and promoters, overseeing his studies and publicizing his exploits. As other Sandwich Islanders arrived to follow in Obookiahâs footsteps, enthusiasm for starting a school for âheathenâ youth grew among members of the American Board. Cornwall, Connecticut, won a bidding war for the school site and donated a building in the town center for its use.

The new academy would educate indigenous men, nurture their conversion, and ultimately prepare them for missionary service to their home countries. Gathering students from around the globe under one roof served important symbolic purposes by declaring America both the agent and the proving ground of the Christian millennium. And in an age of race-based slavery, universal education affirmed both the intellectual and spiritual fitness of nonwhite people. The diversity of the student body would manifest the American Boardâs commitment to ââevangelizing the worldââ (p. 34). In the beginning, the schoolâs multiracial ethos succeeded. Along with donations came students: more Hawaiians, some South Asians, a few whites, and the first of many Native Americans, who made up a majority of matriculates by 1819.

In the schoolâs prime, the student body averaged thirty to thirty-five pupils. Its classical curriculum resembled those of other secondary programs at the

time. Examinations took place as part of public exhibitions, during which students also sang, prayed, and performed skits reenacting their transition from âsavageryâ to âcivilization.â Local audiences relished these events, which helped stoke enthusiasm for the schoolâs mission and sustain its coffers. Harmonious performances masked some of the schoolâs internal problems, including language barriers, disciplinary issues, and disease. Romances between foreign students and white townswomen proved more difficult to hide, however.

Cornwall had played host to a white-Indian marriage in the mid-eighteenth century, but as Demos shows, âthe 1820s were a different timeâ (p. 143). Resentment for some tribesâ support of the British amplified stereotypes of Indian âsavagery,â while pseudoscientific justifications for slavery propagated notions of inherent and inexorable racial difference. Even those who endorsed racial âamalgamationâ imagined pairing white men and Indian women in order to subordinate Native culture in the service of white âcivilization.â Thus, in 1824 when the daughter of the Mission Schoolâs steward married John Ridge, son of a Cherokee chieftain, they created an uproar among local whites and consternation among the American Board. Intermarriage tested the limits of the schoolâs universalism. Demos writes: âwhile not explicitly condemning the marriage, school authorities distanced themselves from it as much as possibleâ¦. Plainly, their greatest concern was to preserve the schoolâs good nameâ (pp. 156-157). Yet the damage to its reputation was doneâredone, in fact, when another Cherokee student, Elias Boudinot, became engaged to a white woman. That pair married in 1826. The same year, facing declining enrollment, scarce funds, and widespread public opposition, the Foreign Mission School closed.

Demos ably demonstrates how disagreements over these interracial marriages played out in the press, on the town green, and within families. Scholars of race and religion will appreciate his analysis of these debates, which reflect the larger conflict between Christian egalitarianism and color prejudice in early American religion. And historians of the Jacksonian era will gain a richer understanding of Indian Removal from Demosâs account of Boudinot and Ridgeâs educational experience. In time, both became leaders of the Treaty Party supporting Cherokee emigration. Parsing their arguments in favor of removal, Demos finds an âintense concern with *degradation*, *contamination*, and *pollution* through contact with racial and cultural othersââin short, the logic of their white antagonists âframed â¦ in reverseâ (p. 259, authorâs italics).

As he endeavors to untangle such knotty subjects, Demos pauses periodically to recount his visits to the sites associated with his story. These interludes lend a sense of place but do not substantially advance his argument. Greater attention to what Demos calls âthe bitter ironyâ of Native slaveholding would help shed light on the significance of blackness to the larger question of color in the Early Republic, a topic fruitfully explored by such scholars as Barbara Krauthamer, Tiya Miles, and Gary Zellar (p. 247). Nevertheless, *The Heathen School* represents an important contribution to studies of race, missions, and education in the early nineteenth century. Demosâs tragic narrative recovers the initial exhilaration and ultimate despair of the American Boardâs experiment. Within nine years, a project considered providential crumbled before the emergent realities of racism. The failure of the Foreign Mission School portended the drawing of a color line across much of the American religious landscape in the ensuing years.

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Citation: John Frederick Bell. Review of Demos, John, *The Heathen School: A Story of Hope and Betrayal in the Age of the Early Republic.* H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. September, 2016.

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