

Reading Boone's Writing: Issues in Backcountry Literacy

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On September 15, 1796, a statement was entered in the deposition book of Clark County, Kentucky, regarding the name and location of Lulbegrud Creek. Sixty-two-year-old Daniel Boone, explorer, hunter, and surveyor, had been called to provide a statement in a land dispute, and his recorded testimony was unexpectedly literary:

Saith that in the yr. 1770 I encamped on Red River with five other men, and we had with us for our amusement the History of Samuel Gulever's Travels where In he gave an account of his young master Glumdelick, caring him on a market day for a show to a town called Lulbegrud. . . . Alexander Neely came to camp one night and told us he had been that day to Lulbegrud and had killed 2 Brobdignags in their capital.¹

Two Brobdignags? The long hunters were intrigued by Neely's riddle, which they finally interpreted to mean that the giants of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* were incarnated in two large buffalo which he had slaughtered down by the creek. Hence they dubbed the place "Lulbegrud" (after Swift's Lorbrulgrud, the capital of the giants' land of Brobdignag). The creek name already appears on John Filson's 1784 map of "Kentucke," and Lulbegrud Creek runs into Kentucky's Red River to this day.² Boone's deposition helped settle a boundary dispute, but it is remembered today for its surprising literary allusion. The anecdote offers a piquant glimpse into backcountry culture: did eighteenth-century backwoodsmen truly read novels around the campfire? More largely, the story has provided the chief basis for historians' claims that Boone was literate; yet as we shall see, the anecdote—like Boone's own writings—also shows the difficulties of delineating literacy in the eighteenth-century backcountries of Carolina and Kentucky.

The literacy of Daniel Boone (1734-1820) has intrigued his biographers, and its liminal nature typifies the indefinite status of reading and writing on the frontier. Certainly Boone could read and write, although his youngest son implicitly contradicted the *Gulliver's Travels* tradition by recalling that his father "did not care for novels." According to Nathan Boone, the old explorer usually read the Bible and "history, which was his favorite reading."³ This description suggests a serious reader, perhaps even a learned man by today's standards. But the scraps of writing Boone left exhibit awkward phraseology and what we may term "creative spelling," characteristics that we associate

¹ Clark County Deposition Book I: 56, quoted in Tom Burns Haber, "'Gulliver's Travels' in America," *American Speech* 11:1 (Feb. 1936): 99-100; DM 4C93. All references to DM are directives to manuscript sources in the Lyman Copeland Draper Collection of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. In each case, I also have indicated an easily accessible print source.

² John Filson, frontispiece map of Kentucky, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* [New York: Corinth Books, 1962 (1784)]: n.p.

³ Neal O. Hammon, ed., *My Father, Daniel Boone: The Draper Interviews with Nathan Boone* (Lexington: The UP of KY, 1999): 139.

only with beginning readers. In any case, in the early romanticized Boone biographies, as Mary Lawlor remarks, it is not book-learning that matters; rather, Daniel Boone reads landscapes and physical data like a code, seeming “to cast the territory itself in many ways as a text for him to negotiate.”⁴ Boone’s brilliance lay in reading his environment and making his mark upon it. Or, as the young Daniel’s father Squire Boone supposedly told a frustrated schoolmaster, “let the girls do the spelling and Dan will do the shooting.”⁵ Here we find suggestions of an American backcountry reevaluation of literacy, in ways which contravene European ideals of progress and still have power to disconcert scholars today.

To investigate Boone’s literacy, and backcountry literacy in general, is to confront thorny issues of definition, of evidence, and of scholars’ own biases. In this peculiar area especially, the unknowability of the past may be compounded by our insular ideals: it is hard for us to comprehend a society where literacy is not central to identity. As William Gilmore has acerbically commented, “Reading some social and intellectual historians on literacy—not to mention historians of education—is like listening to a car dealer ooze on about the value of the auto in modern life. Definitions of literacy are often extremely rigid and elitist. Only its presence and possession—‘true literacy’—seems to separate the civilized from the barbarian.”⁶ Yet the ideal march of progress, from an oral culture to a fully literate one, is a chimera (as twenty-first century American culture demonstrates), and our educated preconceptions merely block our views of the past and our understanding of the present. Regarding “true literacy,” Shirley Heath has written about educational historians’ overly facile divisions of societies into “oral” and “literate,” suggesting that we consider ways in which, even in certain cultures of the United States today, oral communication about a piece of writing is more central than the act of reading. Heath calls such occasions, centered around a written text but not focused primarily upon reading that text, “literacy events.”⁷ Certainly the *Gulliver’s Travels* anecdote, and its subsequent use in a legal deposition, could qualify as such an event.

In any case, Harvey Graff and others have emphasized the relatively recent rise of literacy as a norm, let alone a measure of selfhood, of status, or of an entire civilization. From specialized and separate skills, in the ancient world and the Middle Ages, reading and writing gradually became the measure of a man—if not of a woman—and especially of social class in Western society. In particular the American backcountry, as it resisted class distinctions, only crept slowly towards valuing literacy. When literacy became a necessary attribute for leadership, the frontier was no longer the frontier.

Defining Backcountry Literacy

⁴Mary Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000): 26.

⁵ John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of An American Pioneer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992): 16.

⁶ William J. Gilmore, “Elementary Literacy on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution: Trends in Rural New England, 1760-1830,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 92:1 (1982): 87.

⁷ Heath’s description (from the 1980s) may be all the more apt in today’s world of electronic communication. See Shirley Brice Heath, “Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions” in Eugene Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, ed., *Perspectives on Literacy* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1988): 348-370.

Literacy in eighteenth-century America is a complex subject, and historians have repeatedly questioned the statistics and revised their methodologies. For colonial and early republic New England, the statistics on reading and writing have been well-studied and even more well boasted, starting with John Adams's famous exclusionary claim, in 1765: "A native of America who cannot read and write is as rare an appearance, as a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic, i.e. as rare as a Comet or an Earthquake."⁸ Adams's vaunt (though eliminating some political and religious groups) may have included not only New England males, who are judged to have been 85% literate by 1760, and nearly 90% in 1790, but females (80% literacy by 1790)—and even apprentices, who were supposed to be trained in reading and writing.⁹ Yet these numbers, sometimes cited without question, have been subject to dispute for they are based upon signature literacy. In any case, Adams's generalization does not encompass African slaves, or the people we now call "Native Americans"; and it most certainly did not apply to backcountry inhabitants of Virginia, the Carolinas, and what would become the state of Kentucky.

In fact the availability of literacy statistics tends to parallel actual literacy rates: the ordered law-making and record-keeping towns of eighteenth-century New England possessed one of the highest percentages of literate citizens in the world, and thus we have good evidence for this claim. But for the isolated frontier communities of the backcountry, both literacy and its traces are much lower. David Hackett Fischer estimates that, in the mid-eighteenth century, "20 to 30 percent of males in the southern highlands were unable to read and write."¹⁰ In another example of these limited statistics, Fischer and Kelly note that, in Southside, Virginia "in the mid-eighteenth century 50% of adult males were unable to sign their names."¹¹ Again these numbers are based on very limited signature studies, which assume that the ability to sign one's name is a primary acquired trait for literacy.

Otherwise for the backcountry we find mostly anecdotal evidence, or very localized records of book ownership. The personal estimates often come from scornful outsiders. For instance, in the southern Carolina region of the 1760s, the dyspeptic Anglican missionary Charles Woodmason clearly judged his parishioners' literacy by their lack of engagement: "Very few can read—fewer write—Out of 5000 that have attended Sermon this last month, I have not got 50 to sign a Petition to the Assembly." On the other hand, when Woodmason ventured as far up as Anson County, in present-day North Carolina, he "found their Reading to be of no greater Extent than the Pilgrims Progress and Works of John Bunyan" —clearly still a barebones literacy in the English

⁸ John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law," No. 3. In *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 1: September 1755-October 1773, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1977): 120.

⁹ Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Inquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (NY: Norton, 1974): 13; David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996): 172; E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," in Cathy N. Davidson, ed., *Reading in American: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989): 62-63.

¹⁰ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (NY & Oxford: OUP, 1989): 718; see 716 fn 4.

¹¹ David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville and London: UP of VA, 2000): 92.

minister's eyes.¹² His comments correlate neatly with Elizabeth Cometti's study of backcountry book sales in the Hillsboro, North Carolina area. In the prosperous Piedmont-area Little River Store, from 1769 onwards, sales of Bibles, Bunyan, and other pious works were brisk. However when the shopkeepers in 1773 endeavored to branch out into contemporary literature (*Joseph Andrews*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, etc.) the fictions remained on the store shelf. Even John Milton's biblical epic *Paradise Lost* was a drug on the market.¹³ Other fascinating but necessarily limited approaches to the backcountry literacy question include the operation and productions of printing presses, and book ownership as specified through probate inventories.¹⁴ For instance, from inventories Elizabeth Perkins concludes that in Kentucky of the 1780s about one-third of the settlers possessed a book, "usually a Bible, testament, spelling book, or dictionary."¹⁵ In any case, can we truly count literate persons by enumerating the productions, sales, or ownership of books?

In fact, the measurement of literacy includes debates over its definition. Literacy usually must be demonstrated by written artifacts even though, as Eric Havelock argued, it "is a social condition which can be defined only in terms of readership."¹⁶ Unfortunately the act of reading does not leave artifacts. Moreover, we know that reading and writing were taught separately in colonial America and indeed up through the nineteenth century.¹⁷ But Gilmore's studies complicate this claim, and literacy measurement in general, by showing that frequently signing one's name "was taught before any other writing and usually before substantial reading instruction. Only the most elementary knowledge of grammar preceded signing." Moreover, because the statistics on signature literacy focus on property owners signing wills or deeds, the poorest classes may be under-represented in such literacy counts. Gilmore did conclude that signatures on documents remain the best measurement available for premodern literacy.¹⁸ Nonetheless, signature studies again raise questions for literacy historians: Would we, for example, call "literate" a person who has only just learned to scrawl his or her name on a document? As David Hall points out, Jonathan Edwards and other learned Puritans included knowledge of Latin in their definitions of literacy.¹⁹ Presuming that our expectations are a bit lower, do we nonetheless require fluent writing or precise spelling in order to dub an individual "literate"?

¹² Charles Woodmason, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*, ed. Richard J. Hooker (Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 1953): 52; 22.

¹³ Elizabeth Cometti, "Some Early Bestsellers in Piedmont North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 16 (1950): 331, 332.

¹⁴ See Hugh Amory and David B. Hall, eds, *A History of the Book in America* (Cambridge: American Antiquarian Society, Cambridge UP, 2000): 159 on a 1790 printing press in Lexington, KY.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Perkins, *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley* (Chapel Hill & London: The U of NC P, 1998): 208.

¹⁶ Eric Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976): 18.

¹⁷ Hall 172 and Monaghan 57-58. See also Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago & London: The U of Chicago P, 1981): 143.

¹⁸ Gilmore 93; 145; 94.

¹⁹ Hall 151-152.

Daniel Boone himself illustrates the complications of defining literacy in the southern backcountry. Born in settled Pennsylvania, he attended only a bit of school, at most.²⁰ The breadth and the limitations of his academic achievements were nicely summarized by Lyman Copeland Draper, the pre-eminent Boone researcher of the nineteenth century:

When he was about fourteen years of age, his brother Samuel, nearly seven years his senior, married a very amiable and intelligent young lady named Sarah Day, who taught her young brother-in-law Daniel to read and spell a little and, in a rude manner, to form letters. He could at first do little more than write his own name in an uncouth and mechanical way. To these humble beginnings, he added something as he grew up, by his own practical application. . . . He could read understandingly and write intelligently. His compositions bear the marks of strong common sense yet, as might be expected, exhibiting defects in orthography, grammar, and style by no means infrequent.²¹

Here we may observe a typical New World educational sequence: first an “uncouth and mechanical” signature literacy; then a laboriously-won reading ability, improved in adulthood; and finally an adequate but never error-free writing competency. Boone’s signature, like his writing in letters and notes of sale, is in a cramped, non-fluid round hand typical of the lesser-educated. We can only guess at his reading comprehension; he may indeed have read *Gulliver’s Travels* aloud around a campfire with other early explorers of Kentucky. But the written deposition abounds in variations from Swift’s tale and spelling: Lubegrud Creek should be “Lorbrulgrud”; Lemuel Gulliver himself is re-named “Samuel”; and “young master Glumdelick” is “young mistress Glumdelclitch” in the novel. Perhaps some of the misnomers can be attributed to the recording clerk. Certainly, as Tom Burns Haber noted, the deposition was made twenty-six years after the event, and it is remarkable that the aging Boone recalled Swift’s names at all.²² A young boy who met Boone the year before his death recalled that the elderly hunter told a tall tale about killing a hairy giant called a “Yahoo”—another evidence that Swift’s satire remained in his memory to the end, although, as suggested by the differences, not with perfect accuracy.²³

Although spelling variations were common in written English throughout the eighteenth century, we should not identify Boone’s spellings with the alternative spellings used by highly educated writers. He employed variations more typical of seventeenth and early eighteenth century English writers—and this old-fashioned approach characterized backcountry learning, such as it was. During Boone’s lifetime,

²⁰ The amount, if any, of Daniel Boone’s formal education is debated by his biographers, but he probably exaggerated when he told his children he never attended a day of school (Hammon 11); see Faragher 16-17.

²¹ Lyman Copeland Draper, *The Life of Daniel Boone*, ed. Ted Franklin Belue (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998): 112.

²² Haber 100.

²³ Swift’s “Yahoos” are savage hairy humanoids but not ten feet tall as Boone described them. DM 16C23-26;

Faragher 309.

even in the American colonies, standardized spelling for one's own writing was very gradually becoming the norm. In colonial schooling, spelling books were used to teach reading, not as standard references for writing (which meant elaborate penmanship); "[n]ot only did the child not write in the course of learning to read, the teacher did not need to know how to write either."²⁴ For the many lightly educated people who only advanced partway along the literacy path, it is hardly surprising then that precise ordering of letters seemed unneeded and perhaps even an effete frill. Scholars and socially-prominent citizens concerned themselves with correct spelling: Thomas Jefferson advised his daughter to "Take care that you never spell a word wrong. . . if you do not remember it, turn to a dictionary."²⁵ But another future United States President, the backcountry-born Andrew Jackson, jested that he could never respect a man who only knew one way to spell a word.²⁶ In the backcountry, dictionaries and standardized spelling still were little valued: in short, that famous frontier individualism rejected literacy as the measure of a man.

Boone as Writer

Daniel Boone himself inadvertently played an part in literacy's temporary recusant status in the backcountry, through becoming a leader—hunter, explorer, calm in danger and at home in the wilderness—with virtually no need of books or writing. In fact he acted the natural hero so well that books and poetry about him were published in his own lifetime. The romanticizing of Boone's history began when he was still in mid-life, with the publication of his friend John Filson's *Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784) and its appended "Adventures of Col. D. Boon." This original account of Boone's part in the settlement of Kentucky (supposedly told by Boone himself) is accurate in details although ludicrously high-flown in vocabulary and diction: the narrator is prone to descriptions such as "The sullen shades of night soon overspread the whole hemisphere, and the earth seemed to gasp after the hovering moisture."²⁷ Nevertheless the brief biography, quickly translated into French and German, made Daniel Boone a minor celebrity in Europe. He was celebrated as the new American hero by Chateaubriand and by Lord Byron: "General Boon, backwoodsman of Kentucky, / Was happiest amongst mortals anywhere," gushes the garrulous narrator of Byron's *Don Juan*. "Crime came not near him. . . . Health shrank not from him. . . . Simple, serene, the antipodes of shame, / which hate nor envy e'er could tinge with wrong."²⁸ Thus the European reading classes both praised and condescended to the backcountry hero, who they saw as enacting a white version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's noble savage. Byron's fictionalized Boone is a natural nobleman who lives harmoniously with the wilderness, an ideal that American writers contemporary with Boone reworked into the tamer of a

²⁴ Monaghan 57-58.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "To Martha Jefferson, Nov. 18th, 1783," in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Memorial Edition, Vol. IV (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903): 447.

²⁶ Fischer, *Albion's Seed* 718.

²⁷ Filson 55. It is worth noting that Boone himself never spelt his name "Boon" as Filson does. Unlike highly literary English Renaissance poets such as John Donne and William Shakespeare, he maintained a standard spelling for his own name.

²⁸ *Don Juan* VIII 484-485; 489; 490; 499-500.

savage land. In 1813 Daniel Bryan, a distant relative, published a 250 page epic poem, *The Mountain Muse*, focused on Boone as a harbinger of civilization, implanting a republic with his “patriot hand . . . in the direful Wilderness.”²⁹

The object of literature rather than its user, Boone both resisted and played into this myth-making. He scorned Daniel Bryan’s epic poem but delighted in Filson’s flowery descriptions, exclaiming, “Every word true!”³⁰ In any case, unlike the boastful Davy Crockett (1786-1836), Boone never provided a written account of his own life, although as an old man he twice narrated his memoirs to others. Ironically, the vicissitudes of pioneer life, in frontier Missouri where Boone lived his final years, precluded publication of each account: one version was lost in the Missouri River, as family members hastily escaped an Indian threat, and the other simply disappeared when the son-in-law who was editing it died.³¹ Boone’s verbal facility is suggested by the eagerness of listeners, from Filson on, to record his memories; but the fact that he himself never tried to write an autobiography indicates the modesty of his writing abilities—or of his ambitions.

Nevertheless, we do have some self-accounts written by Boone, though not for general publication, in the numerous letters he wrote throughout his life. These letters, scattered around the United States in libraries, museum archives, and personal collections, show us the circumstances under which Boone and his contemporaries used written language. Even more, the circumstances themselves suggest reasons for the backcountry’s rough literacy achievements. Boone’s letters fall into three classes: first, we find accounts of efforts to settle Kentucky and the resultant warfare, written as official reports to his backers or military superiors in the East, and often written out by someone else but signed by Boone. Second, Boone sent many short notes of business, which show his clear though inelegant script along with his disinterest in punctuation. Third, he wrote a few personal letters. All three classes of letters utilize unusual spellings and unsophisticated syntax, especially those wholly penned by Boone himself. They also, however, demonstrate his concern for accuracy in content, as opposed to accuracy in writing usages.

For example, this 1775 epistle to Boone’s sponsor Judge Richard Henderson employs careful, detailed reporting of dates, places, and names:

After my compliments to you, I shall acquaint you of our misfortune. On March the 28th, as we were hunting for provisions, we found Samuel Tate’s son, who gave us an account that the Indians fired on their camp on the 27th day. My brother and I went down and found two men killed and sculped, Thomas McDowell and Jeremiah McPfeeters. I have sent a man down to all the lower companies to order to gather them all to the mouth of Otter Creek. My advice to you, Sir, is, to come or send as soon as possible. . . . for the people are very uneasy, but are willing to

²⁹ Faragher 320-321; quoting from Daniel Bryan, *The Mountain Muse: comprising the Adventures of Daniel Boone; and the power of virtuous and refined Beauty* (Harrisonburg, VA: Davidson and Bourne, 1813).

³⁰ Faragher 7.

³¹ Hammon 135, 136.

stay and venture their lives with you; and now is the time to flusterate their [that is, the Indians'] intentions, and keep the country whilst we are in it.³²

As narrative, this account is vivid and pithy. Some of the language may be second-hand, and the spelling and punctuation have been cleaned up, since the letter is only signed by Boone. His Irish-born son-in-law, William Hays, is a likely amanuensis in this case.³³ However, the courteous address, the orderly chronology, the calm tone of authority, and the occasional irregular term (“flusterate”) typify all of Boone’s military and exploratory reports and backcountry writings in general, even for more educated writers such as Hays. “Sculped” was a common, rather vivid backcountry variant for “scalped.”

The adherence to conventional phraseology may surprise us in a lightly-educated writer, especially when joined to numerous errors as in this business note:

Dear Col the Land Bissness your father Left in my Hands is chefly Dunn and Rady to be Returned Sum I have Regestered and I have at your Request paid by a Later payd Sum money for that bisness and Not thinking of this oportunity have Not time to Draw up your acoumpt Request the faver of you to send me by the Bearer James Briges ten pound and this Shall be your Resite for that Sum and you Will ablyge your omble sarvent

Daniel Boone

NB I have a number of plat to Regester at the general Cort and am Scarse of Cash Please to oblige me if possible

D B

August the 23 1785
To Cl William Cristen³⁴

In this typical sample of Boone’s business correspondence, the phonetically-spelled “you Will ablyge your omble sarvent” concludes a request for payment; this phrase, Boone’s standard epistolary sign-off, probably reflects the lingering Cornish accent acquired from his immigrant family.³⁵ The above letter, certainly not edited by a third party, is notably more loosely-spelled and lacking in punctuation than Boone’s military dispatches. Those contemporaries who recopied his battle reports not only had standardized the spelling but carefully inserted colons, semicolons, and periods. Those helpful re-writers, too, were concerned with convention. Like the wilderness report above, however, this legal note demonstrates Boone’s strong sense of pertinent detail. Despite an almost incoherent syntax (paralleling the almost incoherent financial games

³² Boone to Richard Henderson, April 1, 1775; DM 17CC; quoted in Faragher 115.

³³ Robert Morgan, *Boone: A Biography* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2008): 166-167.

³⁴ DM 14C5; quoted in John Bakeless, *Daniel Boone* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1965): 325.

³⁵ Daniel Boone’s father had emigrated from Devonshire as a young man, and his entire family was remembered, in the Quaker community of western Pennsylvania, as speaking with Cornish accents (Faragher 10).

Boone played in his Kentucky surveying deals), he explains the obligation, names the bearer and the required sum, and does not forget that the colonel will need a receipt. His use of conventional phraseology might seem to parody literate letters. Yet as we shall see this backcountry creative conventionalism does help explain the lacunae in Boone's writing about himself.

For he rarely mentioned his own thoughts or feelings in writing. In a striking exception, a letter written in old age to a faraway sister-in-law, Boone summarized his religious beliefs:

how we Live in this world and what chance we Shall have in the next we know Not. For my part I am as ignerant as a Child all the Relegan I have to Love and fear god, beleve in Jeses Christ, dow all the good to my nighbour and my Self that I Can, and Do as Little harm as I Can help. . .

³⁶

This letter was addressed to Sarah Day Boone, who had taught him to read and write long ago. Its author clearly feels no self-consciousness about spelling or punctuation as he writes to his former tutor; even the very important words in an epistle about religious faith, "God" and "Jesus Christ," are misspelled and remain uncorrected. As for punctuation, the entire document bears only one original period—rather effectively, after "we know Not." The rest consists of run-on sentences. In his unedited letters, Boone showed himself adept in the use of commas but almost totally lacking in end-stops. In all of his letters, even this most personal one, progression, not reflection, characterized his personal rhetoric. This habit also suggests the traits that made him a backcountry leader: concrete achievement, not precise style; pushing ahead, not pausing to muse or to engage in circular self-examination.

What then of events that demanded self-evaluation and reflection, circumstances where the public, conventional constructions cannot contain private responses? Two letters written by Daniel Boone reflect exceedingly painful personal experiences on the public stage. These documents offer instances in which we might assume that deep personal emotion will intrude into Boone's accounts of significant historic events—but in each, the personal is shunted away from public view. In these letters, which purport to be factually accurate and are historically supported, we note the silences and the marginal areas which suggest that much of a man's life cannot be written. Their very containment suggests much about the ethos of backcountry literacy.

Backcountry literacy may have allowed for enjoying the fantasies of *Gulliver's Travels*, but it gave less scope to personal tragedies of life, such as death in battle. The 1782 Battle of the Blue Licks was one of the most significant disasters of the settler-Indian conflicts in late eighteenth-century Kentucky. In this battle, 182 militia members, under Boone and Colonel John Todd, were ambushed by several hundred Indian warriors. Boone had first warned against advancing into a likely trap but was spurred into galloping forward when an unstable soldier impugned his courage. The resulting slaughter of seventy-seven militiamen included Colonel Todd, so that Boone was left to report to the Governor of Virginia.

³⁶ DM 27C88; quoted in Faragher 312.

In his subsequent letter about Blue Licks, we find a stringently restricted use of literacy. Boone understandably does not mention the poor decisions leading up to the fight. As usual, he provides an orderly narrative report that covers dates, times, leaders of columns and flanks, and the retreat:

on the 16th of this Instant a Large Number of Indians with Some white men Attacted one of our frontier Stations, Known by the name of Bryans Station, the Seige Continued from about sunrise till about ten o'clock the next Day. . . having pursued about 40 Miles, on the 19th Instant, we Discover the Enemy Lying in await for us, on Discovery of which we formed our Column into one Single Line, and Marched up in their front. . . where the Enemy was so Strong that the pushed up and Broke the right wing of the first fire. So the Enemy was Immediately on our Backs so we were obliged to Retreat. . . .³⁷

He also mentions the return of the survivors eight days later, to bury the scalped and bloated dead, "which were 43 found on the ground, and Many more we Expect Lay about that we Did not See as we Could not tarry to Search very Close."³⁸ Boone's signature is followed by an orderly "List of the Slain," in which he carefully spells out the names and ranks of the ten dead officers, following with numbers: "Privates 67" and "Wounded 12." What he does not say is that his twenty-year-old son Israel was among those sixty-seven unnamed privates. Israel had been shot as he insisted on standing ground next to his father, who found and buried his bloated body the next week. In later years, Boone's descendants would remember that whenever he spoke of the Blue Licks battle, he blamed himself, and he wept.³⁹ But no such reflection, not a word of shame or of sorrow, intrudes upon the public military report. To even name Israel Boone would be to break the conventional public hierarchies. If Daniel Boone's sense of writing rules was weak, he bore a very strong belief in maintaining the traditions for official letters.

However, the crux of Boone's career is embodied in a letter that evidently no longer exists, a piece of writing that, ironically, described the most famous of his extended exploits. In the Revolutionary winter of 1776-77, George Rogers Clark had formed a Kentucky militia in which Boone served as captain. Kentucky settlers had more immediate concerns than a war for independence, since the Shawnee chief Blackfish had been attacking their settlements throughout that spring and summer. By fall, some settlers had been killed and others terrorized into leaving; supplies were scanty. Thus in January 1778 Boone, with thirty other men from Boonesborough, ventured to the Lower Salt Licks in order to make the salt needed to preserve their meat. We have disputing accounts of what happened next, mostly in oral not written memories.

According to Boone's own account, he was hunting for meat to feed the young men making salt, when he was spied by a Shawnee scouting party. After a short chase,

³⁷ Daniel Boone to Benjamin Harrison, August 30, 1782; reprinted in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* 3:275-6; quoted in full in Addendum to Willard Rouse Jillson, *The Boone Narrative: The Story of the Origin and Discovery coupled with the Reproduction in Facsimile of a Rare Item of Early Kentuckiana to Which Is Appended a Sketch of Boone and a Bibliography of 238 Titles* (Louisville, KY: The Standard Printing Company, 1932): 43.

³⁸ *Ibid* 44.

³⁹ Hammon 78.

the Indians caught up with him; he surrendered his rifle but followed his usual habits of assumed ease, joking and greeting those he recognized by name. The Shawnees, for their part, were delighted to have captured the famous Boone. But when they took him to their chief, Blackfish flatly informed him that the Indians planned to destroy the now-defenseless Boonesborough—but first they would descend upon the salt-makers and kill them all. Boone urged them not to slaughter the young men. Rather, he promised that he would go and persuade them to surrender, on condition that the Indians treat them well. Then the Shawnees could either adopt their captives or sell them to the British for ransom—and the same process could be carried out later with the women and children of Boonesborough. Boone was using “duplicity,” he said later, in order to save lives.⁴⁰

For the most part, the strategy worked nicely. The salt-makers, after protest, agreed to surrender. But they were resentful and suspicious, especially as they suffered hard months of captivity in the Indian villages. Above all their suspicions were fed by the sight of Boone, who was adopted by Chief Blackfish himself, living in cheerful amity with his captors. Moreover, when taken to Detroit, he met privately with the British Lt. Governor Henry Hamilton—to whom he suggested, according to Hamilton’s own report, that probably the starving Kentuckians would soon surrender to the Indians and the British.⁴¹ Several of the unhappy salt-makers, whether languishing in British prisons or remaining in Shawnee villages, believed to the end of their lives that Daniel Boone had betrayed them—first to the Shawnees, with whom he seemed so strangely at home, and second to the British forces, who treated Boone with a respect not accorded the other captives.

Thus it was for the crime of treason, against the newly-formed American government, that Captain Boone would be court-martialed in the autumn of 1778, based upon disputing oral accounts. Written documents apply little here, for none existed—except for the enemy Hamilton’s letter to the Canadian governor, which in any case was not available to the court. The undisputed facts—that his strategy saved the lives of many of his men, that he eventually escaped from the Indian village to warn Boonesborough of the coming attack, and that he then not only helped fortify the settlement but successfully defended it against Blackfish and his warriors—did not outweigh the strange marginality of his behavior. Boone’s own explanation remained the same to the end of his days: he was using trickery to save lives. He told Governor Hamilton of the Kentuckians’ vulnerabilities, precisely so that the British would believe that the settlers were no threat. Was Boone a white man or an Indian? A Patriot or a Tory? One suspects that he found both racial and political categories largely irrelevant, except as they enabled him and those in his care to survive. The categories mattered deeply to his opponents, however, and so he was court-martialed.

The trial itself lacks authoritative documentation, suggesting simultaneously the marginality of literacy and the seriousness in which the written word was held in early Kentucky. We know the specific counts against Boone, which all hinge on his supposed partiality to British government; we also know that he was not only acquitted but promptly promoted to Major, evidently in recompense. But we know these details through a single account, given forty-nine years later by Daniel Trabue, who was

⁴⁰ DM 6S128; Faragher 158.

⁴¹ DM 11C96; Hamilton’s letter is quoted in Meredith Mason Brown, *Frontiersman: Daniel Boone and the Making of America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana SUP, 2008): 135.

eighteen years old at the time.⁴² The trial records disappeared. Boone himself, who in old age loved to reminisce, often described his captivity but never mentioned the trial. His youngest son Nathan claimed he had never heard about his father's court-martial, delicately referring to the trial as a "court of inquiry."⁴³ In Filson's narrative, "Boon" remarks that, after the siege of Boonesborough, "nothing worthy of a place in this account" occurred for a long time.⁴⁴

This written silence is underscored by the fact that we do know of a letter, written by Boone to his wife Rebecca (who, thinking him dead, had returned with their children to North Carolina). We know, from family members who read it, that this letter recounted his long captivity, his escape, and the survival of Boonesborough—and that Daniel told Rebecca that he must remain in Kentucky because charges of treason were being brought against him by fellow officers. But from this peculiar intersection of the personal and the public we have only one sentence, quoted decades later by a cousin who vividly recalled Boone's summary statement of the British role in his dilemma: "God damn them," he wrote, "they had set the Indians on us." Rebecca was shocked by her husband's improper language, which broke the barriers of epistolary convention, and she burned the letter. One cousin recalled that she first took scissors and cut the curse from the page.⁴⁵

The absence of records for Boone's court-martial, whether they were deliberately or inadvertently destroyed, tells us much about backcountry attitudes towards the written word. If military reports were meticulous in content, they also solidified immediate history, for their writers and their audiences: one maintains silence over the loss of one's son, because one hopes to achieve that dignified self-control in life. Likewise, court records of a military trial would permanently inscribe its accusations and debates in the communal mind; even if the average inhabitant of backcountry Kentucky never read those records, they would constitute a "literacy event," the possession of "something in writing" which solemnizes a group understanding of reality.⁴⁶ As it happened Boone's contemporaries, those who knew about and participated in the trial, frequently reminisced about the salt-makers' captivity and the siege of Boonesborough, but rarely mentioned the court-martial. Even his nineteenth-century biographers overlook it. Boone himself presumably was spurred to his unusual profanity by intense anger and humiliation—and was delivered from a permanent recorded memory by Rebecca's strong frontier intuition of what should, and what should not, be written and read.

Notes on Women and Backcountry Literacy Rates

Rebecca Boone's interference in Boone's recorded posterity raises questions of gender and literacy in the backcountry. If we tend to see literacy as one measure of a man, what of the measure of a woman? Even the marginality of Daniel Boone's literacy is intensely masculine, standing as it does on the cusp between the frontier myth of

⁴² Chester Raymond Young, ed., *Westward into Kentucky: The Narrative of Daniel Trabue* (The UP of KY, 1981): 63-64.

⁴³ Hammon 70.

⁴⁴ Filson 70.

⁴⁵ DM 22C14; Brown 160.

⁴⁶ Heath 350-351.

Nature's nobleman and the soon-growing expectations that the leaders of American society must be literate. In the settled parts of the new United States, "Literacy connoted cultural authority; illiteracy, cultural inferiority and exclusion. This pattern of meaning was crucial to the cosmopolitan or genteel culture that emerged to supplant learnedness in eighteenth-century America."⁴⁷ Still Boone's clever stances, on the edge of settled society, bear some resemblance to those of the literary picaresque outsider such as Huckleberry Finn, who in the mid-nineteenth century would represent a peculiarly American kind of hero.⁴⁸ Even by the early nineteenth-century, as Cathy N. Davidson has emphasized, an American picaresque tradition presented a world of men, using "a narrative strategy of circumlocution" to enable the unprivileged to comment on politics in the young United States.⁴⁹ Thus the semi-literate picaresque may be seen as a riposte to the polite society which attempted to impose a kind of hierarchy in new settlements. One could be a man in full without high reading or writing abilities. Thus even in its outsider nature the frontier picaresque would seem to claim literacy's cultural authority for backcountry men.

And the statistics for backcountry female literacy are particularly scanty, although it is assumed that the women lag behind the men. Could Rebecca Boone read for herself her husband's letter, which shocked her so? We do not know; perhaps it was read aloud. If so, the material existence of a curse, presumably in Daniel's own handwriting, was sufficient cause for its material destruction, in Rebecca's eyes, and the episode nonetheless suggests the seriousness with which even illiterate backcountry Americans regarded the written word. Faragher assumes that neither Rebecca Boone nor her daughters ever learned to read. He bases his claim of the Boone women's illiteracy largely upon a single journal entry of a visitor to their household—"she can not read"—and their marks on deeds and bills of sale.⁵⁰ His conclusion is characteristic of the necessarily anecdotal and piecemeal evidences for literacy or illiteracy in the backcountry. We also know that in later life Jemima Boone had narrated her story for publication, only to lose it in the same canoe that swamped her father's memoirs.⁵¹ Of course Daniel Boone too had narrated his autobiography, despite his ability to read and write.

If the first women settlers in the backcountry were literate, they probably gained that literacy before moving to the frontier. In any case, as mentioned above, wide-ranging studies are difficult for the backcountry and statistics are sparse, usually limited to case studies of book sales, newspaper production, book ownership, or signature capability in a limited geographical area. Although literacy was generally much less than in New England, it was not uniformly low but closely related to property ownership and ethnic origins.⁵² Women tended to be property owners, and to sign documents, less than men did. And since we know that many Americans may have been able to read but were

⁴⁷ Hall 153.

⁴⁸ See Barbara Fuchs, "An English *Picaro* in New Spain: Miles Philips and The Framing of National Identity," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2:1 (2002): 55-68, on the ways in which this Renaissance Spanish literary trope was transformed in New World history.

⁴⁹ Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford and NY: OUP, 2004): 234.

⁵⁰ Faragher 17.

⁵¹ DM 6S269-70; Faragher 305-306.

⁵² Fischer 716.

not trained to write, we should be aware that this limited literacy state may have applied particularly to women.⁵³ Finally, we cannot discount the possibility of simple bias. Fischer unquestioningly quotes Thomas Abernethy on the backcountry-raised Rachel Donelson who became Andrew Jackson's wife: she was "the daughter of a man of considerable prestige, one of the richest and most distinguished of the western Virginians, but she went into the forest when a young girl, and the result was that she was barely literate, and she smoked a pipe on occasion."⁵⁴ Both historians, in mentioning the poor literacy of Andrew Jackson's wife, follow her contemporaries' prejudices about her low-bred pipe-smoking ways and ignore the copious correspondence between the Jacksons throughout their marriage.⁵⁵ Her letters are at least as well-written as those of Daniel Boone, whose biographers eagerly proclaim his literacy.

Fischer and Abernethy seem correct, however, in noting a temporary degeneration of literacy when families entered the backcountry. In New England, "because of the increasing attention to childhood education in the later part of the eighteenth century, young people, especially women, tended to be more literate than old people."⁵⁶ Of course New England was becoming increasingly civilized and even sophisticated, during and after the Revolution. The reverse experience applied to those emigrating to the frontier: the parents might be literate, and even well-educated—but unless they made extraordinary efforts, their offspring saw little opportunity and even less need for book-learning. The prominent backcountry families studied by Fischer "cherished the memory of immigrant-ancestors who had been highly placed in North British society—not at the very top, but high enough to have a coat-of-arms on the silverware, or to send a younger son to the university. . . . [however] This backcountry elite was not distinguished by learning" but by material possessions.⁵⁷ This frontier re-evaluation of literacy needs may also explain another negative progression: in early eighteenth-century Virginia, it seems about two thirds of the male population was literate, yet at the end of that century, nearly half of middle to lower-class men in Virginia could not read or write.⁵⁸ In this case, indentured servants, slaves, and transported convicts—up until 1776—probably augmented the backcountry illiteracy rate. Nevertheless these numbers too fit a backcountry paradigm for temporarily lessened education.

Finally, we should note that the later eighteenth century is the time, and middle to lower the class, of the Boone family and friends during their storied migrations from Pennsylvania into the Virginia and North Carolina backcountry, and then into Kentucky. Daniel Boone exemplifies the educative degeneration described above: schooled, if at all, only briefly in Pennsylvania; tutored briefly by his older brother's wife; three years later moving west with his family to settle in backcountry Carolina. Some of Daniel's siblings had more learning than he, but his elder-born children seemed to have less. He married

⁵³ Hall 150ff; Monaghan 53; 72-73.

⁵⁴ Thomas P. Abernethy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy* (Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 1932): 160-61; quoted in Fischer 755.

⁵⁵ Historians also frequently mention the pipe-smoking practices of Rebecca Boone and Jemima Boone Calloway (Morgan 412; Faragher 344) . It is difficult to imagine a similar associative *non sequitur*, of tobacco and illiteracy, in any evaluation of a backcountry man's abilities.

⁵⁶ Davidson 188.

⁵⁷ Fischer 755.

⁵⁸ Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987): 249-251.

Rebecca Bryan, who had been born in the backcountry, probably resulting a lower literacy than his. As women's education tended to be less advanced, so they sank below the men in schooling—but only for a time. Women, the traditional bringers of domestic culture to men, soon learned to value education, and women would become the promoters of literacy in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States, including the Southern backcountry.

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- Paraphrased references to DM are directives to manuscript sources in the Lyman Copeland Draper Collection of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. In each case, I also have indicated an easily accessible print source.