

MOUNTAIN MAN:
FACT AND FICTION

An abstract of a Dissertation by
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May 1978
Drake University
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The problem. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine representative factual and fictional accounts of the mountain man, a pioneer to the Rockies in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Certain components are examined and weighed against each other in an attempt to ascertain the authentic image of the mountain man.

Procedure. Initially the historical mountain man is examined: his motives, his attitudes, his skills, his habits, his relations with the Indians. Next, the disagreement between William Goetzmann ("The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man") and Harvey Lewis Carter and Marcia Carpenter Spencer ("Stereotypes of the Mountain Man") is explored, and each image illustrated by examples from both history and fiction. Finally, through analysis of journals, accounts of travelers to the frontier, novels, poetry, and film, the building of this sometime roughneck into an alltime hero is demonstrated. Extensive study is given to Hugh Glass, one of the first mountain men, and to John Johnston, one of the last. The major sources dealing with Hugh Glass are Pirate, Pawnee and Mountain Man by John Myers Myers, The Song of Hugh Glass by John G. Neihardt, and Lord Grizzly by Frederick Manfred. Those dealing with John Johnston are Crow Killer: The Saga of Liver-eating Johnson by Raymond W. Thorp and Robert Bunker, Mountain Man by Vardis Fisher, and Jeremiah Johnson, a film directed by Sydney Pollack.

Conclusions. In the brief career of the mountain man (1822-1850) America found a culture hero. He was a loner and a wanderer, symbolizing the frontier spirit and American freedom. His thoroughness in trapping nearly exterminated his prey, the beaver. His expeditions led him deep into the Rocky Mountains where he discovered the mountain passes and river routes that would make possible western emigration. These two conditions signaled the end of his days in the Rockies and showed him to be the unwitting agent of his own demise.

He left little written record. One must therefore turn to the journals of company men, accounts of travelers to the western frontier, and later research. Four images occur separately and in combination: the Jacksonian man engaging in economic exploitation of the wilderness, the daring degenerate illustrating the effect of Frederick Jackson Turner's "corrosive influences" of the frontier, the explorer probing the Rockies, and the romantic hero moving away from the corruption of civilization to experience a oneness with Nature.

Rather than being a new type in American literature, he is an extension of the frontier hero seen in Davy Crockett and in Cooper's Leatherstocking. His life and habits are refined to suit public taste, and he emerges the romantic hero who is, most of all, free.

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A Dissertation
Presented to
The School of Graduate Studies
Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Arts

by
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Chapter I

The Free Trappers of the Rockies

Hugh Glass was so badly mutilated by a she-grizzly that none of the twelve members of his overland party believed he could live. Yet abandoned and motivated by thoughts of revenge, he dragged his torn and rotting body two hundred miles in pursuit of his false comrades. John Johnston viciously killed, scalped, and mutilated over two hundred Crow braves in retaliation for his wife's murder. Yet in his old age he boasted of never having killed a white man. Whether these things really happened or whether they are the dreams of some yarner¹ or fiction writer, they have become part of the stock material in mountain man literature. A question arises as to the extent that historical accuracy is a decisive component in recording the experiences of such men. The intent of this dissertation is to explore and compare the histories and fictions surrounding the mountain men, that group of trapper-explorers whose livelihood in the Rocky Mountains from 1822 onward was trapping beaver.

Following on the heels of Lewis and Clark, they floated tens of thousands of dollars worth of furs, mostly beaver, down the Missouri. These mountain men, variously called mountaineers and free trappers, differed from company trappers. The latter were hired and outfitted by specific

¹A yarner is a teller of tall tales.

companies and had responsibilities to their companies. For example, the one hundred and fifty men who signed on with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1822 for the first American trapping enterprise into the Rockies received rations, gear, and transportation to the site of the proposed depot at the mouth of the Yellowstone. Once there, they were expected to help build the fort and to give aid in case of Indian attack. They did not work on salary, but rather on a commission basis. Each man was allowed to keep half his catch; the other half went to the company.

In contrast the free trapper had ties to no company. He transported himself to the mountain country by steamboat, by horse, or on foot. His gear and supplies were purchased from mountain forts or stores, and the prices were as heavy as the traffic would bear. Each beaver trap cost about twenty-six dollars, a horse about sixty dollars, at a time when beaver pelts were selling for three dollars per pound. The supplier in the mountains marked up merchandise at his whim, often to four hundred per cent above wholesale.² However, willingness to outfit himself at his own cost brought the trapper a certain freedom. He had no responsibility to any company or to its employees. Rather than depending on established posts to do his trading, he sold his entire season's catch to whomever he pleased at the annual rendezvous, and despite the fact that mountain traders inevitably

²Don Berry, A Majority of Scoundrels (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 112. (All subsequent references to Scoundrels will be from this edition.)

undervalued the furs, he was nevertheless choosing his own buyer. Richard Oglesby, writing in The Frontier Re-examined, identifies this mountain man as "the highest evolution of the fur hunter."³

And who was this legendary and historical figure? Hiram Chittenden states, "Between 1820 and 1840 they [the mountain men] learned almost everything of importance about the geography of the West that was to be learned."⁴ He calls the beaver trappers the true pathfinders of the West, contending that it was their discovery of mountain passes that made possible western emigration. They not only brought back news of fertile lands beyond the mountains; they also discovered passes and river routes to get there. They were the first white men to travel west by way of South Pass, the Snake River route to Oregon, and the Gila River route to the Southwest.

Another facet of the legend is that the mountain man generally got along with the Indians, or that the Indians attacked the trappers without provocation. Although a comforting belief, this is largely fiction. The trappers were constantly on the watch for Indians and were just as aggressive in trapper-Indian encounters as were their opponents.

³Richard E. Oglesby, "The Fur Trade as Seen from the Indian Point of View as Business," in The Frontier Re-examined, ed. John Francis McDermott (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1967), p. 112.

⁴Hiram Martin Chittenden, The History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West (New York, 1902), II, ix, as quoted in Robert Glass Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men: The Trappers and Fur Traders of the Southwest (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 6.

For example, just after the rendezvous of 1832, Rocky Mountain Fur Company brigands were approached by a group of friendly Blackfeet. As the chief was in the act of shaking hands, he was shot by some of the whites, and the infamous Battle of Pierre's Hole ensued.

Repeated shows of this sort of violence demonstrate the extension of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's statement in Letters from an American Farmer (1782): "Americans are the western pilgrims. . . . The worst of them are those who have degenerated altogether into the hunting state."⁵ Indeed, the mountain men hunted more than beaver and buffalo; they also hunted Indian scalps for profit. Thus, a third aspect of the mountain man emerges: his savagery. Edwin Fussell, literary historian, interprets this degeneration as "a kind of cultural regression" which is the direct effect of the advancing frontier line,⁶ and sees it as antithetical to culture and refinement.

Wilson Clough agrees, adopting a neo-Crèvecoeur position. Both see the mountain man as a pioneer, leaving traditional life styles and developing new ones in order to survive in his new environment. Crèvecoeur's western pilgrim, "who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the mode of life he has

⁵ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (1782; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1957), pp. 39 and 49.

⁶ Edwin Fussell, Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 11.

embraced,"⁷ is precursor to Clough's "new kind of man in the New World,"⁸ who defies former duties and loyalties, who barter special skills and risks his life for exemption from the old regulations and confinements, and who, as he progresses westward, increases in crudeness and feisty independence. Indeed, while the frontier lasted, it did provide asylum from law, routine, and domesticity and allowed for the beast in man to break through.

The hardships of survival necessarily produced a tougher, more raw man. He had left behind the temperate winters of Kentucky, the gently rolling hills of Ohio, the safety of towns and settlements. Now he lived the life that was demanded of him by his new environment. Shedding the traditional patterns of civilized life, he reverted to the primitive to a greater degree than did other pioneers. In order to stay alive, he had to adjust himself to the wilderness. This meant slipping backwards on the "scale of civilization" to the point at which he would be as much at home as were the natives of that wilderness, the Plains Indians.⁹

Some mountain men, however, went beyond this point and became more savage than the savages. Edward Rose, who took

⁷Crèvecoeur, p. 39.

⁸Wilson O. Clough, The Necessary Earth (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964), p. 32.

⁹Ray Allen Billington, The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860 (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 52.

up residence with the Blackfeet, incited them after a war party in 1834 to mutilate the wounded by cutting off their hands, poking them with pointed sticks, and plucking out their eyes. Charles Gardner, stranded in a blizzard, ate his Indian guide. Eventually he was able to break a trail to the nearest settlement on his mule. He rode in carrying a shriveled human leg, which he threw down, growling, "There, damn you, I won't have to gnaw on you anymore."¹⁰ He was thereafter nicknamed Cannibal Phil and lived up to his name later when, marooned in the mountains by a snowstorm, he subsisted comfortably on the flesh of his current squaw.

The reputation of the mountain man suggests that, as well as being brutal, he was illiterate. Certainly it is evident that the physically demanding and time-consuming life of hunting and trapping made scant provision for either reading or writing. Many mountain men died leaving nothing recorded on paper. Jim Bridger and Moses "Black" Harris, for example, left a treasure of oral tales, but no diaries or journals. Hugh Glass' personal adventure, superhuman as it was, was never recorded first-hand. Indeed, he left one brief letter.

However, there were those who were well-read and religious. Among them were Jedediah Smith and Peter Skene Ogden. Osborne Russell describes in his diary the long winter evenings spent at the Yellowstone Camp, debating at "Rocky

¹⁰Billington, p. 49.

Mountain College."¹¹ Contrary to the prevailing picture of mountain men, the group there read Byron, Shakespeare, Scott, the Bible, and works of chemistry, geology, and philosophy. A trapper named W. T. Hamilton wrote, "It always was amusing to me to hear people from the East speak of old mountaineers as semi-barbarians, when as a general rule, they were the peers of the Easterners in general knowledge."¹²

Isabella Bird, English horsewoman and traveler who toured the Rocky Mountain range during the autumn and winter of 1873, wrote to her sister Henrietta about a free trapper called "Mountain Jim." Although her first impression of him was one of revulsion, as the weeks passed she learned that he was gracious and cultivated in conversation, and that he copied and recited the poetry of others and also composed his own. "Mr. Nugent [the trapper]," she penned, "is what is called 'splendid company.' With a breezy mountain recklessness in everything, he passes remarkably acute judgments on men and events; on women also. He has pathos, poetry, and humor, an intense love of nature, a considerable acquaintance with literature, a wonderful verbal memory, opinions on every person and subject, and a chivalrous respect for women in his manner. . . . Ruffian as he looks, the first word he

¹¹Robert Glass Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men: The Trappers and Fur Traders of the Southwest (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 49.

¹²Cleland, p. 50.

speaks -- to a lady, at least -- places him on a level with educated gentlemen, and his conversation is brilliant, and full of the light and fitfulness of genius."¹³

Then, however, there are illusion-wreckers such as William Goetzmann who claims in his essay "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man"¹⁴ that this figure was not one of history at all, but rather one of mythology. Instead of being a self-sufficient male hero, he was a dirty, smelly, pathetic primitive covered with lice. Because he spent so much time isolated in the mountains, he lost his knack for business and was unaware of current prices. Therefore, he was often duped by unethical traders. Rather than being individualistic, happy with his lot, and close to Nature, he was waiting for his opportunity to strike it rich and, once he did so, to leave the profession. Of course, this possibility was built into the trapping system. Thus William Ashley and Andrew Henry of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company retired, selling out to Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette, who in turn later sold out at a profit to Tom "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick and Jim "Old Gabe" Bridger. Having proven to his

¹³Isabella L. Bird, A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains, 9th ed. (1879; rpt. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1960), p. 125. (All subsequent references to Bird will be from this edition.)

¹⁴William H. Goetzmann, "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," American Quarterly, XV (Fall, 1963), 402-415; rpt. in The West of the American People, eds. Allan Bogue, Thomas Phillips, James Wright (Itasca, Illinois: Peacock, 1970), pp. 350-354.

satisfaction that the mountain men were filthy and ambitious, Goetzmann proceeds to demonstrate that they were fickle, as well. He cites evidence that out of 154 known trappers, 117 had turned to other occupations by 1845. It would seem that this does not prove their fickleness. There simply were no more beaver; trapping beaver was obsolete. It would seem instead to prove their adaptability, exactly the trait which had previously enabled them to survive in the Rocky Mountain environment.

The mountain man was a loner, spending nearly his whole life in the mountains and coming into contact with civilization, such as it was, only once a year at the rendezvous. Bernard DeVoto reflects in The Year of Decision, 1846 that America already had two symbols of solitude: the forest and the prairie, and that the mountains provided a third.¹⁵ It was in this mountain wilderness that the trapper's woodcraft became his passport. His main concern was survival, and in order to survive, he did pretty much as the Indian did. DeVoto identifies the Plains Indians, the ones with whom the trappers came into contact, as "the most skillful, the most relentless, and the most savage on the continent" (p. 58), and the mountain man's craft had to enable him to move safely among them. In this new man, DeVoto states, "the frontiersman's craft reached its maximum and a new loneliness was added to the American soul. . . . He was in flight from the

¹⁵Bernard DeVoto, The Year of Decision, 1846 (Boston: Little, 1943), p. 57. (All subsequent references to The Year of Decision will be from this edition.)

sound of an axe and he lived under a doom which he himself created, but westward he went free" (p. 57). Both unhampered and unaided by official duties and responsibilities, he grew strong, self-reliant, and savage. In essence his ways became increasingly Indian-like. Washington Irving wrote after his travels west, "You can not pay a free trapper a greater compliment than to persuade him that you have mistaken him for an Indian."¹⁶

While some of the mountain men were slovenly and filthy in dress and grooming, others, like the city dandies back east, exhibited on their persons fringed and beaded shirts and moccasins and on their horses, which were their most highly valued possessions, fringed and beaded saddles and halters. They wore what John Neihardt designates as probably the only original American costume.¹⁷ This costume reeked because it was never removed from the time it was first put on until it was thrown out about a year later. In an emergency, however, the owner might lay it temporarily over an anthill so that the ants could eat some of the lice! The outfit consisted of a blue cotton company shirt under a buckskin hunting shirt which was decorated with colored porcupine quills or leather fringes and pulled in by a wide belt. Into the belt were stuffed a pistol, a tomahawk, and a

¹⁶Washington Irving, as quoted in Cleland, p. 52.

¹⁷John Neihardt, The Splendid Wayfaring, 1881-1913 (New York: Macmillan, 1920), p. 209. (All subsequent references to The Splendid Wayfaring will be to this edition.)

sheathed scalping knife, sometimes called the most dangerous border weapon. A whetstone hung from the belt. The pants depended on the weather. In summer a breechcloth and leggings sufficed. In colder periods buckskin trousers were substituted. The moccasins were beaded by his squaw, and she also made his leather garments. On his head, to protect him from sun and insects, was a skin cap decorated with animal tails or braided horsehair. Around his neck hung his "possibles sack," in which were kept pipe, tobacco, bullet mold, and awl. Over the left shoulder, so that they hung down by the right hand, were bullet pouch and powder horn. When in hostile territory, the mountain man would also don a special coat of mail, which hung from the shoulder to the knee. This was a deerskin shirt, soaked in water, hung out, and dried.

His skin was a weathered brown, and his solitary existence led him to be taciturn. He was a fine horseman, proud of his mount and his equipment, which was also beaded by his squaw.

His rifle became his best friend, and he often named it and spoke to it. He could not have a dog; its noise and movement would have endangered them both. Horses were stolen or shot with regularity by Indians. The high mortality rate among trappers made it unrealistic to plan future meetings with certainty, and conversation at such meetings always included discussion of friends who had "gone under." Even the mountain man's squaw was no permanent addition to his life.

When he tired of her, he sent her, gift-laden, back to her tribe. Thus his gun, essential to his survival, was also his friend.

His voice took on the tone used by the Indians. It was high-pitched and nasal, and emphasis was placed on each syllable.¹⁸ Farnham points out the similarities between the mountain man and the Indian in facial expressions, use of the hands while talking, and reluctance to speak in words when a signal would do as well.¹⁹

If he looked and sounded like an Indian, he also ate like one. He never was sure just when or whether the next meal was coming. For that reason he ate great quantities when they were available. Normal consumption when hunting was good was eight or nine pounds of meat per day. One trapper writes, "When we have plenty, we eat the best pieces first, for fear of being killed by some brat of an Indian before we have enjoyed them."²⁰ The gluttony was in contrast to starvation periods -- blizzards or desert marches during which a mountain man might bleed his horse to give himself nourishment, or cut off and eat his mule's ears, or boil and eat his moccasins. Like the Indian, he was willing, when necessary, to consume anything that walked, swam, wriggled, or crawled. On Hugh Glass' two-hundred mile ordeal he ate

¹⁸Billington, p. 52.

¹⁹Thomas Jefferson Farnham, as cited in Cleland, p. 52.

²⁰Billington, p. 51.

raw rattlesnake, raw gopher, and grass. The mountain man's favorite food was buffalo, and the whole carcass was eaten, a special treat being the fetus. Curiously, he rarely ate the beaver he trapped and skinned, except for the tail, which when roasted was considered a delicacy.

In fighting, too, he imitated the Indian. He crept from bush to bush and was unerring with his rifle. He always closed in hand-to-hand combat, using knife and tomahawk, and often finished by scalping his victim. John Johnston even developed an elaborate sort of karate footwork for which he wore three pair of moccasins, generally choosing to "hit below the belt." The scalps he collected were sold to tourists or bartered at trading posts. Many of these souvenirs found their way into British drawing rooms.

Scalping by whites did not originate with these wild men, however. In 1791 "an association of the most civilized, humane, and pious inhabitants of Pittsburg" offered one hundred dollars for "every hostile Indian's scalp, with both ears to it."²¹

Because of the precarious situation in which he lived, the mountain man hardened himself to loss of life. But if he was indifferent to death, it was to white and red men's alike. Joe Meek was with a party when one companion was trampled in a buffalo stampede. Asked to bring the body back to camp, Joe recounted later, "I should rather pack a load of

²¹Cleland, p. 34.

meat. . . . Live men are what we wanted; dead ones war of no account."²²

Nearly all the mountain men had Indian wives or concubines either for one season or for several. Obtaining them was no problem; they were either purchased or received as gifts. Jim Beckwourth, having struck his Blackfoot princess wife and left her for dead, was immediately presented by her chieftain father with a replacement, her sister. Some free trappers were adopted into Indian tribes, generally the tribes to which their wives belonged. A few, Beckwourth, Old Bill Williams, and Edward Rose, even became influential chiefs.

Trapping expeditions were constantly wary of ambush.

William Waldo wrote:

From the time we parted from Major Riley, at the western terminus of the Arkansas sandhills, until we were met by Ewing Young and his ninety-five hunters, we seldom obtained more than three or four hours sleep out of the twenty-four. Men became so worn down with toil by day and watching by night, that they would go to sleep and fall from their mules, as they rode along. For forty or fifty days, we were not permitted to take off our clothes or boots at night, and all slept with their pistols belted around them and their guns in their arms. In several instances, men seized their knives in their sleep and stove them into the ground, and the men became afraid to sleep together, for fear of killing each other in their sleep.²³

The life of the trapper was governed by the animal he hunted. Beaver fur is best in spring before shedding and in

²²Billington, p. 53.

²³Cleland, pp. 41-42.

late fall after the winter coat has come in. Between these two busy periods, the trapper took his cache by boat or pack animal to the annual rendezvous, the site of which had been selected the previous year, there being little communication between meetings. Pierre's Hole, west of Jackson Hole almost to the Idaho-Wyoming border, was the best known location. Alson Smith claims, "The summer rendezvous of the fur trade was a short-lived phenomenon lasting not much more than fifteen years, but it deserves more attention than it has been given because it was a pure essence, a perfect miniature of the western frontier life that has become a part of the American dream, a miniature now frozen into legend and preserved in tall folk tales, in improbable books, in shoot-'em-up films, in refurbished ghost towns with summer theatres."²⁴ Often the Rocky Mountain Fair, as the rendezvous was called, was attended by more than six hundred company men, hired trappers, and free trappers, plus whole villages of Indians who came to watch the festivities. Goods were overvalued, furs undervalued, and the trader had a corner on the market. But the trappers did not quibble about price. They were willing to pay three dollars a pound for tobacco or five dollars a pint for alcohol. After all, they were dealing in beaver, and the beaver were in the streams for the taking.

The rendezvous was also an opportune place for a trapper to find a new squaw to cook for him, sew his buckskins, dress

²⁴Alson J. Smith, Men Against the Mountains (New York: John Day, 1965), p. 25.

his skins, and entertain him. White wives were not available or even desired in that territory. They were considered to be too fine, unable to do the type of work the wilderness demanded, and less obedient than the American and Mexican Indian girls.²⁵

After the trading, the orgy began, and the trader got what was left of the trapper's money. Casks of raw alcohol were opened, and soon drunken wrestling matches and races and card games were under way. Orgies with passive Indian maidens competed for attention with games of "hand"²⁶ (during which the men lost not their hands, but their scalps, sometimes literally) and with shooting matches set up to prove a man's eye and his weapon. "Step right up! Shoot the whiskey off this man's head at seventy yards!" Nearly everything was gambled on. Not only would the trapper lose his entire year's earnings in one wild frenzy, but he would also gamble off his rifle, his horse, his wife, and occasionally even his own scalp. As the men got more drunk, the party got more wild. Duels were fought, usually with rifles at twenty paces,

²⁵ Smith, p. 31.

²⁶ "Hand" is a variation of the medieval game, Handy Dandy, in which one person palms an object, puts his hands behind his back, transfers the object from hand to hand several times, then asks a second person to guess which hand contains that object. A modern version is the game called Button Button, in which players are seated in a circle. One person goes to each seated player and appears to slip a button into his cupped hands. Since this person has only one button, only one player receives it. The object of the game is for another player or a representative of an opposing team to guess who holds the button. Both versions were played at the rendezvous.

blowing one or both parties apart. It was, according to Alson Smith, "Maleness gone berserk."²⁷ Brawls developed. When finally both the liquor supply and the mountain men were exhausted, the men stumbled back into the wilderness, again in debt to the trader, and slept it off for a few weeks before the fall hunt began.

Aside from this gathering, the trapper worked alone. The two worst dangers he encountered were Indians and grizzlies. James Ohio Pattie, mountain man and explorer to the Southwest, recorded having seen over 220 grizzlies in one day.²⁸ He also estimated that of the 116 men who began a year's trapping in the Southwest, only sixteen survived. If a trapper developed blood poisoning, gangrene, tetanus or venereal disease, there was no doctor to help him. He had to rely on the available homespun remedies of himself and his fellows. When Jedediah Smith was attacked by a grizzly and his scalp ripped loose halfway around, it fell to inexperienced Jim Clyman to sew him up where he lay.

Stanley Vestal makes this assessment: "Those mountain men were only a few hundreds in number, hardly more than a thousand all told. Of these the free trappers were the cream, men whose careers illustrated perfectly the principle of the survival of the fittest. To be rated one of the best of these is as proud a title to manhood as the history of

²⁷Smith, p. 25.

²⁸Cleland, p. 44.

these United States affords."²⁹

But the era of the Rocky Mountain free trapper was brief. Soon they found themselves entering government service as guides and scouts, switching from hunting beaver to hunting buffalo, or retreating farther north or west from civilization. With the advent of the silk hat and the depletion of the beaver streams, they had found themselves without employment. By exterminating the beaver, they had inadvertently exterminated themselves.

²⁹Stanley Vestal, Mountain Men (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries, 1937), p. 256. (All subsequent references to Vestal will be taken from this edition.)

Chapter II

Our Hungry Need for Heroism

Sparring with Goetzmann

In reaction against Goetzmann's 1963 essay contending that the mountain man was an expectant capitalist, Harvey Lewis Carter and Marcia Carpenter Spencer in 1975 published a study of three hundred historical mountain men, challenging Goetzmann's thesis and setting forth what they believe rather to be the stereotypes of this historical figure.¹ These three stereotypes, the romantic hero, the daring but degenerate, and the expectant capitalist, will be the basis for the following exploration into the image of the mountaineer.

The first, the romantic hero, is seen by Goetzmann and by Carter and Spencer as originating with Washington Irving. Riding fearlessly into the wilderness, the mountaineer faces unknown dangers and eventually conquers hostile Nature for the benefit of those who will follow. Irving saw the mountain men of his time as more romantic than their predecessors because they no longer traveled by canoe, but had exchanged this mode of transportation for horses, reminiscent of the knights in the days of chivalry. He writes in

¹Harvey Lewis Carter and Marcia Carpenter Spencer, "Stereotypes of the Mountain Man," The Western Historical Quarterly, 6, No. 1 (Jan. 1975), 17-31.

Captain Bonneville, "The equestrian exercises, therefore, in which they are engaged; the nature of the countries they traverse; vast plains and mountains, pure and exhilarating in atmospheric qualities; seem to make them physically and mentally a more lively and mercurial race than the furtraders and trappers of former days. . . . A man who bestrides a horse, must be essentially different from a man who cowers in a canoe."²

The criteria for measuring this trait, selected by Carter and Spencer, are personal combat and distant wayfaring. The romantic hero, then, is that man who wanders far from home, engaging fearlessly in deadly combat. However, since all mountain men automatically fulfill the criterion of distant wayfaring, the study limited this quality to those who were classified as explorers or who had traveled beyond the limits of the United States or later settled on the Pacific Coast.

John Colter, a mountain man formerly attached to the Lewis and Clark expedition, qualified first as an example of the romantic hero by exploring. Later in the employ of Manuel Lisa, he explored further and also acted as trade agent among the Crows and Blackfeet, in that position being involved in tribal skirmishes, thereby passing the test of personal combat.

² Washington Irving, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, ed. Robert A. Rees and Alan Sandy (1837; rpt. Boston: Twayne, 1977), p. 11.

In fiction Boone Caudill, protagonist of A. B. Guthrie's novel, The Big Sky, fulfills the criteria also. Having run away from home and joined the crew of the keel-boat Mandan, he learns that one of his duties en route to Fort Union is to help fight off the Indians that attack the boat. His wanderings take him past Blackfoot country and beyond Colter's Hell, where he and his friend Jim Deakins attempt to locate a route that will be short and passable for wagons. Thus, he fulfills the criteria of fighter and wayfarer.

The second stereotype, the daring but degenerate, Goetzmann believes is a recent image. Carter and Spencer disagree, citing the writings of George F. Ruxton, Francis Parkman, and Lewis Garrard as evidence that the mountain man was seen as degenerate as early as 1846. This brave but uncivilized character, because he found it impossible to live within the constraints of society, fled to the wilderness where he could function in as brutal and degraded a manner as pleased him. Ruxton, Parkman and Garrard, young men who traveled the frontier in 1846, did not discount the romantic hero image. On the contrary, they saw it as reality. But to this reality they added their own perceptions -- that the mountain man was a daring degenerate as well, and not a totally admirable character. In Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains, Ruxton writes:

Constantly exposed to perils of all kinds, they become callous to any feelings of danger, and destroy human life as well as animal life with

as little feeling as they expose their own. Of laws, human or divine, they neither know or care to know. Their wish is their law, and to attain it they do not scruple as to ways and means. Firm friends and bitter enemies, with them it is "a word and a blow," and the blow often comes first. They may have good qualities, but they are those of the animal; and people fond of giving them hard names call them revengeful, bloodthirsty, drunken (when the wherewithal is to be had), gamblers, regardless of the laws of meum and tuum -- in fact, "White Indians." However, there are exceptions and I have met honest mountain men. Their animal qualities are, however, undeniable. Strong, active, hardy as bears, daring, expert in the use of their weapons, they are just what uncivilised man might be supposed to be in a brute state.³

Ruxton uses this same brutal man concept in his novel Life in the Far West. The protagonist, a greenhorn unknowing in the ways of the wilderness, winters at the Brown's Hole rendezvous near the Green River and quickly adjusts to his mountain environment. "Before the winter was over, La Bonté had lost all traces of civilised humanity, and might justly claim to be considered as 'hard a case' as any of the mountaineers then present."⁴

The criteria for measuring this trait are also two-fold: drunkenness and "other." Drunkenness was so common among mountain men that only those who indulged to the extent that other mountain men commented negatively on it are counted. The second category, "other," includes any other trait generally thought to be degenerate, such as

³George A. F. Ruxton, Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains, pp. 241-242, cited in Carter, p. 21.

⁴George A. F. Ruxton, Life in the Far West, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (1848; rpt. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1951), p. 78. (All subsequent references to Life in the Far West will be from this edition.)

horse-stealing, abandoning wife and children, or taking scalps for bounty. Historically, Peg-leg Smith qualified both for drunkenness and for horse-stealing. John Johnston, on the other hand, met the criterion of degeneracy in terms of "other" because he took scalps to sell, but he never indulged in liquor.

Fictionally this type is illustrated by Gullion in Harvey Fergusson's novel, Wolf Song.⁵ He is the hardest-drinking member of the trapping party. The first night out he "kept marching around the fire, blowing his horn, and every time he reached the jug he stopped and took a long gurgling swig and then went on with his war talk louder than ever."¹ He was a violent man of questionable background. "Both his ears were clipped off across the top. He claimed they had been bitten off in a ruction at Taos but anyone could see they were cut clean and some knew they cut the ears off convicts in the state of Deleware. Gullion was a good traoper and scared of nothing but when he got fight in him he was bad . . . he said he'd bitten the nose off a man for telling him to go to hell once" (p. 115). This is the daring degenerate, free to exoress his brutality.

The third stereotype is Goetzmann's creation, that of the expectant capitalist, an ambitious, enterprising fortune-hunter who believed that by taking advantage of the quick riches on the frontier, he could gain the wealth necessary to insure him a life of ease and status when he

⁵Harvey Fergusson, Wolf Song (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1927), p. 7. (All subsequent references to Fergusson will be from this edition.)

chose to return to the East. In his essay "The Mountain Man as Jacksonian Man," Goetzmann writes, "The fact is, however, that many mountain men lived for the chance to exchange their dangerous mountain careers for an advantageous start in civilized life. If one examines their lives and their stated aspirations one discovers that the mountain men, for all their apparent eccentricities, were astonishingly similar to the common men of their time -- plain republican citizens of the Jacksonian era."⁶

In measuring the Jacksonian leanings of the mountaineers, Carter and Spencer categorized their sample population as to monetary gain: success, moderate success, failure, and negative. Success indicated that the mountain man's life ended in relative affluence; moderate success, that he had made a good living and had something to leave his descendants; failure, that despite his efforts and ambition, he had died leaving nothing; negative, that he had never expected to advance materially, but only to make a living.

Jedediah Smith, company trapper who bought into the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, retired from that enterprise wealthy and moved on to other endeavors, a success in economic terms even though he was killed in a Comanche ambush at the age of twenty-three. John Colter, free trapper, retired in his mid-thirties to a farm outside St. Louis

⁶Goetzmann, p. 351.

where he died of jaundice two years later, leaving his wife the farm, title clear, and a small estate. He was categorized as moderately successful. Jim Beckwourth, mulatto blacksmith who joined General Ashley's second expedition in order to make his fortune, did so but lost it, dying in 1866 in a Crow tipi, a failure in economic terms. Mountain Jim, described by Isabella Bird in her letters, chose not to return to civilization even after the trapping fields were bare. The freedom of the mountains was his way of life, and money meant little to him. Thus he is classified as negative.

These criteria can be applied to fictional characters as well. Surely the possibility of wealth was there. Earle A. Shilton, past president of the Chicago Literary Club, stated that in 1830 beaver pews (or skins), weighing about two pounds each, were selling for six dollars a pound in St. Louis, and that two partners might take a thousand pews in one season.⁷ That would be a \$6,000 annual salary in the 1830 economy! Surely Ruxton's character Killbuck speaks the voice of capitalism in his remark, "Thirty year have I been knocking about these mountains from Missoura's head as far sothe as the starving Gila. I've trapped a 'heap,' and many a hundred pack of beaver I've traded in my time, wagh! What has come of it, and whar's the dollars as

⁷Earle A. Shilton, "'Gone Under' -- A Saga of Mountain Men," The Westerners Brand Book, 20, No. 3 (May 1963), 18.

ought to be in my possibles?"⁸

In Guthrie's The Big Sky, Summers, the wise older hunter-trapper who initiates Caudill and Deakins, is moderately successful. Having spent many years in the Rockies and still retaining his scalp, he retires from mountain life, taking his earnings to buy a farm where he spends the rest of his days. Emerson Bennett's 1855 novel The Prairie Flower revolves around a mystic figure named Holden. Earlier in his life he had entered the trapping profession, intent on making his fortune. Despite his ambition, occupational dangers overcame him. His wife and child were killed by Pawnees, a calamity which affected his reason and caused him to reject all seeking after earthly goods, living thereafter in the wilderness as a recluse. His attempt and defeat place him in the category of failure. Lost-Skelp Dan of Vardis Fisher's Mountain Man must be termed negative. When he was killed, he left no legacy, but he had been contented with his mountain life, having refused to retire to the settlements. The only thing he had required of the Rockies was a living.

Obviously, mountain men as a whole cannot be pigeon-holed into one of Carter and Spencer's categories or another. Neither can an individual mountain man be so simply identified. Jedediah Smith, "The Knight of the Buckskin" whose rifle and Bible were his constant companions, rivaled Lewis

⁸Ruxton, Life, p. 17.

and Clark in geographical exploration. This, plus his experience in combat against the Indians, qualified him as a romantic hero. However, he was additionally one of the most financially successful mountain men, making him an expectant capitalist as well.

In some cases the criteria of the categories are misleading. John Johnston was not an expectant capitalist, and because of his limited wayfaring, he cannot be termed a romantic hero. He was brutal, cannibalistic, and mercenary in his vendetta against the Crows; yet because he never indulged in alcohol, he cannot quality as daring but degenerate.

These three stereotypes, then, must be considered as exactly that -- stereotypes. They are patterns by which to measure this literary hero, the mountain man.

The Building of the Mountain Hero

Although the setting for his adventures remains necessarily the same, and although the basic facts of mountain existence described in different sources do not change, the mountain man is variously seen as a bloodthirsty savage, a courageous explorer, and a sentimental recluse. Factual and fictional accounts reveal him to be a Jekyll and Hyde figure. On the one hand he is gentle, soft-spoken Grizzly Adams, friend to humans and animals alike. Studying the literature about these mountain men and assessing it in terms of the three stereotypes should clarify not only what the mountain men were truly like, but also what writers and

their readers have wished them to be like.

Originally stepping from the pages of monthly magazines, stories by frontier travelers, and his own journals and letters, the mountain man has been both discredited and glamorized. A full-page illustration in Harper's Weekly, October 17, 1868, features twelve insets depicting the story of a trapper's life. Included in the collage are a trapper shooting a moose at a range of three yards, another shooting a poaching Indian from five yards, one whose arm is being gnawed by a cougar, one wearing snowshoes and carrying a rifle while approaching a herd of buffalo directly, and finally a trapper smoking away his evening beside the fireplace while half a dozen wolves literally howl down his chimney. Assuredly his was a dangerous occupation, and men in danger by choice always intrigue those who dare not venture so far. The mountain man gambled against Indians, grizzlies, hunger, and Nature herself. Henry Chittendon estimated that one hundred men died in the service of the American Fur Company alone. In 1850 Antoine Robidoux, owner of a trade center in the Rockies, declared that he could account for only three survivors out of three hundred hunters and trappers who had been in the Rocky Mountains thirty years before.⁹ These men were where the action was! While Emerson was speculating on transcendentalism and Whitman was glorifying the common man, the mountain man was fighting

⁹Cleland, p. 34.

Indians and panthers and grizzlies with a Bowie knife. He saw herds of forty thousand mustangs, or of up to twelve million migrating buffalo.¹⁰ The West was full of story material waiting for writers.

And writers there were. A composite picture of the mountain man comes basically from three sources: first, the men themselves; second, others who traveled the frontier and met these men first-hand; and last, writers who, because of limitations of geography or date of birth, had no direct experience with mountain man life, but instead relied on second-hand sources and their own imaginations.

First-hand Accounts

Surely the most authentic information concerning the life of the trappers comes from their own journals. As a rule the free trappers did not keep journals or records, partly because of their active and physical life, partly because of the extra though small baggage it would require, partly because their life was chosen to free them from duties (including diaries), and partly because many of them could neither read nor write. More numerous are journals kept by company men, since they traveled in groups with pack animals, and were also required by their employers to keep records.

Don D. Walker, writing of mountain man journals, describes them as useful in allowing the writer to

¹⁰Mody Boatright, Mody Boatright, Folklorist: A Collection of Essays, ed. Ernest B. Speck (Austin: Univ. of Texas, 1973), p. 69.

experience imaginatively mountain existence. The danger of his not taking advantage of the opportunity to do so is that he will produce flat characters with limited experiences. Walker warns, "As long as the mountain man is conceived on the elementary model of a man whose personality expands or contracts with his alimentary canal -- when it is full of meat, he is happy; when it is empty, he moves like a bear to the hunt -- or on the equally elementary model of a man who has a fur ledger for a brain, we can have only limited prospects in fiction."¹¹ Limited, and certainly not romantic! Walker complains that writers have not yet produced a believable mountain man character, that the figures thus far have been too simplistic. His hope is that the mountain man journal will give writers the insight necessary to create a more authentic character. On the other hand, he cautions against giving the journal so much importance that the literary work becomes instead an exercise in historical research (p. 308).

Through the journals brought back by the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806, Americans east of the Mississippi were able to imagine the grandeur of the mountains, the power of the rivers, the endless plains. Subsequent descriptions by trappers and traders firmed up this vision.

¹¹Don D. Walker, "The Mountain Man Journal: Its Significance in a Literary History of Fur Trade," The Western Historical Quarterly, 5, No. 3 (July 1974), 318. All subsequent references to Walker's "The Mountain Man Journal" will be from this printing.

Most of these trader and trapper journals were not written for publication. Of those that were, some were tampered with by well-meaning editors who thereby gave a refinement to the product more appropriate to the drawing room tastes of the genteel reading public than to the western writer.

One of these edited journals is Voyages from Montreal on the River St Laurence Through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans; In the Years, 1789 and 1793, written by Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who claims at the outset, "I am not a candidate for literary fame."¹² Be that as it may, Mackenzie's account, oftentimes effusive, never daring or degenerate, does emphasize the greatness and power of North America's New West. For example, he tells of a cliff that "commands a most extensive, romantic, and ravishing prospect."¹³ The prairie is described almost as a park: "Some parts of the inclining heights are covered with stately forests, relieved by promontories of the finest verdure, where elk and buffalo find pasture" (p. 128). Walker suspects that Mackenzie's editor, William Combe, took liberties with the style of the manuscript, although keeping the facts intact. He therefore complains that we are not

¹²Alexander Mackenzie, cited in Don D. Walker, "Ways of Seeing a Mountain: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Fur Trader as a Writer," The Possible Sack, 3, No. 9 (Aug.-Sept. 1972), 1.

¹³Alexander Mackenzie, The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (1801; rpt. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1970), p. 128. (All subsequent references to Mackenzie will be from this edition.)

seeing through the eyes of a trader at all, but through the eyes of an editor.¹⁴

He cites in contrast the 1801-1814 journals of Alexander Henry, trader and trapper for nearly eighty years. Henry's writings were edited, too, but by a man with high regard for the author's own words, Elliott Coues. Even though Coues recognizes a lack of imagination in the original journal, he allows its prosaic tone to carry the account of Henry's travels on the frontier, rather like the journals of Lewis and Clark. In addition to describing the topography, Henry logged hundreds of details of his surroundings, including varieties of trees, sorts of game animals available in given areas, and snow conditions. While filled with cliches, such as towering summit, grand sight, dreary waste, this journal records the facts of day-to-day existence in the Rocky Mountains. Surely there is no record here of the romantic hero. Nor does the daring but degenerate trapper insinuate himself. Numbers of pelts, tribal receptions, and trade goods are listed, suggesting that the most appropriate label would be that of expectant capitalist. However, in dealing with these early journals, one must remember that he is not dealing with the mountain men proper. They do not reach the scene until the early 1820's.

Lucy Lockwood Hazard in The Frontier in American Literature notes that the generation from which the mountain men

¹⁴Walker, "Ways," p. 4.

came gave less comparative value to the Bible and to theology than had earlier generations, that it was instead more concerned with the external world. "We read more details of geographical location; we read fewer details of spiritual development; we read more details of fights with the Indians; we have no details of that fight within self which is said to be the ultimate test of manhood."¹⁵ Indeed, these mountain men seem to be more concerned with keeping their scalps, rather than their souls, intact.

Certainly this is evident in the Memorandum of the Voige by Land from Fort Smith to the Rocky Mountains. This journal, not written for publication, lay with the writer's family for three generations before its discovery as something of historical and literary worth. In addition to its contents, The Journal of Jacob Fowler, as the Memorandum is now called, is important for pointing up the difficulties that surround the study of such a manuscript.

Although Major Jacob Fowler lived as a wealthy farmer near Covington, Kentucky, he was not extensively schooled. After losing over two thousand acres due to debt, he went west where there was even less need for "correct" style and syntax. Thus, his Memorandum created great problems for his readers. First, his penmanship was largely of his own making; he himself determined what his letters should look like. If an n looked like an r to other people, that was no cause

¹⁵Lucy Lockwood Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (1927; rpt. New York: Ungar, 1961), p. 96.

for him to worry; he was writing for himself. Second, his spelling was neither correct nor consistent. He spelled the same word three and four different ways. Third, punctuation was almost absent and capitalization random. Finally, the manuscript itself was very old when the editor received it. The ragged-edged pages were gathered into sixteen-page packets, the outsides of which were badly soiled. This, plus the faded ink and the fact that Fowler had written on both sides of the paper, made deciphering the text tedious. The reaction of editor Elliott Coues, who had also worked with Alexander Henry's journal, was:

At first sight, this manuscript appears illegible; no one can read it off-hand, Nevertheless, this writing proves readable upon sufficient study of the alphabetic characters which Fowler invented to suit himself. . . . The syntax is the sort which has been happily called 'dash-dialect' -- Fowler has no other punctuation than the dash, excepting a sporadic period here and there, usually misplaced, and an occasional stab at the paper which is neither one thing nor another and may therefore be overlooked. . . . Its [his spelling] entire originality, its effusive spontaneity, its infinite variety, will charm the reader while it puzzles him, and make the modern manufacturer of Dialect despair of his most ingenious craft.¹⁶

Coues chose to have the manuscript printed without corrections in order that the readers might experience as authentic a journal as possible. Of course, Fowler's penmanship is now no problem, the typesetter having intervened.

Gone is the "wonderful display of uncultivated nature" of Mackenzie, gone the "vast beds of eternal snow" of Henry.

¹⁶ Elliott Coues in Preface to The Journal of Jacob Fowler, by Jacob Fowler, ed. Elliott Coues (1822; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 7-8.

Fowler confines his description of the landscape to entries such as the one of October 6, 1821: "We set out Early over Butifull High Pirarie leavel and Rich and at Eight miles West We fell on the arkensaw River Heare there is plenty of timber all a long the River on both Sides as far as We Cold See."¹⁷

In addition to geographic description, the journal reveals the dangers of Rocky Mountain existence. Hunger was a common enemy. On "tusday 26th Feby 1822" the party had been unable to procure game for several days and finally resorted to killing one of the horses for sustenance. The theme of hunger, indeed of starvation, will recur in mountain man literature, both in factual and fictional accounts.

Dealings with Indians are recorded, and also information about which Indians were trustworthy. Fowler believed the Kiowas to be the best Indians, so far as manners and attitude. The chief of this tribe even undertook to protect the trader and his goods while the party was in his area (p. 54). However, at other times the group was less fortunate. Early on their journey, October 11, 1821, they suffered their first disappearance of a horse. Fowler comments, "the Hors is no doupt Stolen and With the knoledge of the Chiefs. these last Indeans appeer more unfriendly and talk Sasy and bad to us but this Is to be Exspected as the Come

¹⁷Jacob Fowler, The Journal of Jacob Fowler, ed. Elliott Coues (1822; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 54. (All subsequent references to Fowler will be from this edition.)

from the upper villege and are Said to be a Collection of the Raskals from the other villeges."

Finally, there are also recorded those tales of heroism and horror that captured so effectively the imaginations of those back home. In a detailed entry Fowler recounts Lewis Dawson's mauling by a white grizzly and his subsequent death and burial. He describes how the wounded bear attacked Dawson and how, when Colonel Glenn's gun missed fire, a large slut raced at the bear, distracting it so that Dawson retreated. This drama was enacted three times, the last ending with the Colonel, Dawson, and the grizzly all climbing the same tree. The bear again caught Dawson, pulling him backwards down the tree. Finally the Colonel's gun fired, but the bear continued, now twice wounded. When the rest of the party arrived, having been slowed in their approach by the thick undergrowth, they completed the kill. Dawson, however, had been so badly mauled that, despite the amateur medical attention given him by members of the party, he died three days later, probably the first American citizen to die and be buried in what is now Colorado (p. 47).

Tales like that of Lewis Dawson, for the story of his encounter with the white grizzly was carried back east, convinced the public of the courage necessary for a man to face the wilderness. Such a man would easily be considered a romantic hero, and accounts of travelers to the western

frontier were peopled with such romantic heroes and with daring degenerates.

Even while these accounts were being written, the mountain men were in the process of developing their own genre, the tall tale, with themselves as heroes. Few trappers were inclined to spend time reading, and few books were available on the frontier, but talk was everywhere. Bernard DeVoto, historian who studied the fur trappers as recreation, points out that Americans have always been storytellers, and states that no one, not the riverman, not the lumberjack, not the cattleman, has surpassed the mountain man in storytelling.¹⁸ Indeed, the mountaineers tried continually to outdo one another at yarning, as it was called, and had great respect for their two best liars, Moses "Black" Harris and Jim Bridger.

Fiction writers have used a man's ability in yarning to parallel his prowess in the mountains. Early in Fergusson's novel Wolf Song, the protagonist Sam Lash is noticed as "an upandcoming liar but he couldn't shine with old Rube" (p. 4), the seasoned trapper. Rube, the reader learns, has been to the famous petrified forest, actually a fabrication of "Black" Harris. Likewise in The Big Sky, A. B. Guthrie reveals Jim Deakins' acclimation to mountain life in a night scene at rendezvous. By the light of a campfire, veteran

¹⁸Bernard DeVoto, Across the Wide Missouri (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1947), p. 44.

hunter-trapper Summers describes how his rifle, Patsy Plumb, can shoot around corners and even kill a buffalo that is over the horizon. Guthrie comments that young Jim Deakins also "was getting to be a smart liar -- as good as Summers, almost."¹⁹

Within the mountain man, the word liar carried no malicious intent. The reason for these stories was less to deceive than to entertain. Oftentimes the veterans took advantage of the gullibility of their listeners, especially listeners unfamiliar with frontier life. In his 1830-1835 diary Warren Angus Ferris writes, "Early in the journey, met a party of fifteen. . . . They recognized us as 'mangeris de lard'²⁰ and told extravagant yarns as they pleased, and we believed as little as we liked. . . . If we could accept their word for it, each of them was more than a match for several grizzlies or Blackfeet. . . . Many an hour I sat and listened to extempore adventures. Each veteran seemed to have had 'a most enormous adventure.'²¹ One of these tales described chasing an antelope over a spur of the Wind Mountains for a week without stopping for food. Another recounted the riding of a grizzly bear at full speed through a village of Blackfeet.

¹⁹A. B. Guthrie, The Big Sky (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), pp. 204-206. (All subsequent references to The Big Sky will be from this edition.)

²⁰Mangeris de lard meant pork eaters, or those who must carry domestic supplies, as opposed to experienced trappers who lived on game.

²¹Warren Angus Ferris, Life in the Rocky Mountains (1836; rpt. Denver: Old West, 1940), p. 5.

Most of their stories were chronicles of their lives, and true or false, eventually sounded like yarnings. Sam Lash's true explanation of his escape in Wolf Song became a recital of obstacles that only a giant could overcome: "I rubbed out a Cheyenne that tried to leave me afoot, and he put a knife in my humpribs. . . . I killed my own horse in the ruction. And then I got caught in the damndest storm that ever broke, and lost another horse in that and caught the ague in this cut. . . . I've had every kind of hard luck this side of hell!" (p. 193). It was half a complaint and half a boast. Only a giant could succeed under such conditions.

The yarns were heavily strewn with Indian fights and grizzly bears and supernatural beings, with mapmaking and accidents and violence, with trapping and trailing and plant lore because it was these things that made up mountain life. Within this yarning lay their truths. The mountain man's distaste for the Indian, for example, is revealed in a yarn Neihardt lifted from Ruxton and used in The Splendid Wayfaring:

'Injuns! Injuns!' was what the greenhorn yelled; 'we'll be tackled tonight, that's sartin!' 'Tackled be damned!' says I; 'ain't we men too, and white at that?' (p. 50).

Probably the best known yarn is one originated by "Black" Harris and recorded by Ruxton in Life in the Far West. It describes Harris' discovery of a "putrified forest" in the Black Hills (pp. 7-9) and celebrates the far

wanderings of the mountain men and the strangeness of the sights they saw. To make matters better, it is told to a lady in St. Louis who believes the whole thing. Again, the intent is less to deceive than to entertain, and Harris proves himself a master at the art of "Sunny Lying."

Jim Bridger also told a tale of a petrified forest in which petrified birds sang petrified songs, and one of an eight-hour echo that was useful as an alarm clock since it could be wound up by shouting, "Time to get up," when one went to bed.²²

Seated around a campfire by summer or holed up in a mountain shack by winter, the mountaineers held forth with their combination of fact, fancy, and exaggeration. It was their way of preserving the history of their trade: the fabulous barefoot escape of John Colter, the atrocities committed by Edward Rose, the burying of his companions in desert sand by Jed Smith so he could bring them water, the march in Spanish leg-irons of James Ohio Pattie. Every mountain man had truly had at least one "enormous adventure." And these were the men of whom the frontier travelers wrote.

Travelers to the Western Frontier

One of the first frontier travelers was the American writer Washington Irving, whose books Astoria, Captain Bonneville, and A Tour on the Prairies developed from his journey west. Irving, as previously indicated,²³ perceived

²² DeVoto, Across, p. 169.

²³ See page 19, above.

the free trapper to be a romantic hero. However, Irving also brought with him eastern values, for which he was later criticized by Henry Nash Smith, who complained that Irving's account of his tour of the West should have been more objective. This is the greatest problem with travel literature -- that readers expect it to be objective. Don D. Walker attacks this problem by criticizing in turn Smith's complaint. Walker points out that it is impossible for a man to come into any situation with no experience. Thus, it is only natural that Irving or anyone else would bring his preconceived ideas and feelings into the West with him. True, this does not provide for an objective view, but, claims Walker, "history is the story of men, not cameras."²⁴

Less blinded by romantic notions, Francis Parkman carried with him into the wilderness just as many preconceptions. A native Bostonian and the Harvard-educated son of a Unitarian minister, Parkman recorded his travels over the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails as one uncomfortable in that wilderness. He frequently criticized Western emigrants and Indian life, and saw the Western landscapes not as grand, but as desolate, "a sublime waste."²⁵ Of the degeneracy of the mountain men, Parkman was certain, writing of them as

²⁴ Walker, "The Mountain Man Journal," p. 317.

²⁵ Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail (1847; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 293, as quoted in Edward Halsey Foster, The Civilized Wilderness (New York: Free Press, 1975), p. 42.

"the half-savage men who spend their reckless lives in trapping among the Rocky Mountains. . . . Their hard weatherbeaten faces and bushy moustaches looked out from beneath the hoods of their white capotes with a bad and brutish expression, as if their owners might be willing agents of any villainy. And such in fact is the character of many of these men."²⁶

Lewis H. Garrard, only seventeen at the time of his western tour, recognized the brutality of the mountain men, but was more sympathetic to, and less judgmental of, their situation. In Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail he writes, "My companions were rough men -- used to the hardships of a mountain life -- whose manners are blunt and whose speech is rude -- men driven to the western wilds with embittered feelings -- with better natures shattered -- with hopes blasted -- to seek, in the dangers of the warpath, fierce excitement and banishment of care. Yet these aliens from society, these strangers to the refinements of civilized life, who will tear off a bloody scalp with even a grim smile of satisfaction, are fine fellows, full of fun, and often kind and obliging."²⁷ Daring, primitive, unable to live within the confines of society, these are the heroes of Garrard.

Better traveled than either Parkman or Garrard was a young English soldier and adventurer, George F. Fuxton. He

²⁶Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail, ed. E. N. Feltsgog (1847; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 68.

²⁷Lewis H. Garrard, Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1955), p. 63, cited in Carter, p. 20.

trapped, fought, and lived with the Rocky Mountain fur trappers in the 1840's, enduring the standard mountain man hardships of cold and starvation. Although initially he saw these free trappers as crude and savage, his understanding of them grew over time. In May of 1847 he returned to England where he wrote two books detailing his odyssey. One was factual, Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains, and the other fictitious, Life in the Far West. Although the characters in the latter are semi-fictional, their experiences are not. They are based on stories Ruxton heard from the trappers he had encountered in America.

LeRoy Hafen, prominent American historian and editor of Ruxton's Mountain Men calls it "the best existing account of the legendary mountain men and of the day to day details of the colorful and dangerous lives they led."²⁸ Ruxton views the mountain men as whites having reverted to the primitive. He writes, "With the natural instinct of the primitive man, the white hunter has the advantages of a civilized mind, and, thus provided, seldom fails to outwit, under equal advantages, the cunning savage" (p. 6). He is adamant about the trappers' superiority over the Indians, admiring:

their quick determination and resolve in cases of extreme difficulty and peril, and their fixedness of purpose, when any plan of operation has been laid requiring bold and instant action in carrying out. It is here that they so infinitely

²⁸George Frederick Ruxton, Mountain Man, ed. LeRoy Hafen (1848; rpt. New York: Holiday House, 1966), p. 48. (All subsequent references to Ruxton's Mountain Man will be from this edition.)

surpass the savage Indian. Ready to resolve as they are prompt to execute, and combining far greater dash and daring with equal subtlety and caution, they possess great advantage over the vacillating Indian, whose superstitious mind in a great degree paralyzes the physical energy of his active body. By waiting for propitious signs and seasons before he undertakes an enterprise, the Indian often loses the opportunity by which his white and more civilized enemy knows so well how to profit (p. 67).

As well as commenting on the heroism and daring of the mountain men, Ruxton makes comment on their economic ambitions. He mentions that although one tolerably successful hunt would allow a mountain man to resume civilized life in the settlements with enough money to buy a farm, this trapper chooses to gamble off his entire annual earnings year after year and return to the mountains. Thus in Ruxton's experience the stereotype of the expectant capitalist does not stand.

Ruxton himself was caught up by the romanticism of the mountain man's life style. In a letter printed in Blackwood's Magazine, November 1848, Ruxton wrote, "Although liable to an accusation of barbarism, I must confess that the very happiest moments of my life have been spent in the wilderness of the Far West. . . . Such is the fascination of the life of the mountain hunter, that I believe not one instance could be adduced of even the most polished and civilized of men, who had once tasted the sweets of its attendant liberty and freedom from every worldly care, not regretting the moment when he exchanged it for the monotonous life of the settlements, nor sighing, and sighing

again, once more to partake of its pleasures and allurements."²⁹ Indeed, he became "half froze for buffler meat and mountain doins"³⁰ and undertook a second trip west in 1848, but fell ill in St. Louis during an epidemic and died there before he could return to the Rockies.

Both his mountain vernacular and the authenticity of his experience lend vigor to Ruxton's writing. He reproduced the dialect by rough phonetic spelling, having gotten a feeling for it during his time of living among the mountain men. The tales he includes are from true mountain experience, and incidentally are repeated in later mountain man fiction.

One, an episode in which Joseph Reddeford Walker shoots and stabs an Indian chief repeatedly and then scalps him, is modified in the Blackfoot-mountain man skirmish in Vardis Fisher's novel, Mountain Man.³¹ Its climax is the chief's subsequent rising as if from the dead for a final attack on his foe, and being again shot down. Another, found in Mountain Man (pp. 175-176) and also in Winfred Blevin's collection, Follow the Free Wind,³² is the account of two Indians,

²⁹Ruxton, Life, p. 228.

³⁰Clyde Porter and Mae Reed Porter, Ruxton of the Rockies, ed. LeRoy Hafen (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 216.

³¹Vardis Fisher, Mountain Man: A Novel of Male and Female in the Early American West (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), pp. 275-277. (All subsequent references to Fisher's Mountain Man will be from this edition.)

³²Winfred Blevins, Give Your Heart to the Hawks (New York: Ballantine, 1973), pp. 206-207. (All subsequent references to Blevins will be from this edition.)

a Crow and a Sioux, betting at a game of "hand." Having nothing left to bet, the Sioux wagers his scalp and loses it to the Crow. However, in a rematch, the Crow loses everything and finally resorts to betting his life on the next "hand." He loses, and the Sioux collects his due, leaving with both his own scalp and that of the Crow hanging from his belt. These accounts nearly match Ruxton's, except that his Burnt-wood Sioux, after plunging a knife into the Crow's heart, wears the two scalps suspended from his ears thereafter (Ruxton, Life, 101-102).

Ruxton, then, in addition to supplying information about the image of the mountain man from the perspective of an Englishman-adventurer-turned-trapper, began the writing of mountain man literature in the vernacular of those very men, and the recording of the tales that would make them legendary.

Frederick Olmstead, writing in 1859 of his travels on the frontier, asked, "Is it not time that the people of the free west were delivered from the vague reputation of bad temper, recklessness, and lawlessness, under which they suffer?"³³ Isabella Bird not only agreed with him, but in her own writings set out to accomplish that deliverance. Her letters to her sister Henrietta in 1873, written in ink that had been thawed at the back of a cabin stove, were

³³ Frederick L. Olmstead, A Journey Through Texas; or, A Saddle-trip on the Southwestern Frontier (New York: 1859), xix, as quoted in Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 41 (March 1955), 589.

compiled and published in the English weekly, Leisure Hour. She wrote of the frontier, its settlers, and its mountain men with enthusiasm, readily acknowledging the degraded character and appearance of the mountain men, and in particular of her special acquaintance among them, Comanche Bill, to whom she referred as Mountain Jim. Horrible stories were told about him around the fires of camps and homes in Colorado. Mothers threatened their naughty children with warnings that Mountain Jim would get them if they misbehaved. Yet her descriptions of this rough character are mixed with a generous portion of romanticism, producing somewhat of a "doppelgänger" or Jekyll-and-Hyde figure:

His face was remarkable . . . smooth-shaven except for a dense moustache and imperial. Tawny hair, in thin, uncared-for curls, fell from under his hunter's cap and over his collar. One eye was entirely gone, and the loss made one side of his face repulsive, while the other might have been modeled in marble. 'Desparado' was written in large letters all over him. I almost repented of having sought his acquaintance. His first impulse was to swear at the dog, but on seeing a lady he contented himself with kicking him. . . . I asked for some water, and he brought some in a battered tin, gracefully apologizing for not having anything more presentable. We entered into conversation, and as he spoke I forgot both his reputation and appearance, for his manner was that of a chivalrous gentleman, his accent refined, his language easy and elegant (p. 79).

Miss Bird, like George Ruxton, was enchanted by the land in which she wintered, despite the severe hardships. Her comments upon leaving for home reveal the excitement she had experienced and the special relationship that she felt the

wilderness people had with Nature: "No more hunters' tales told while the pine knots crack and blaze; no more thrilling narratives of adventures with Indians and bears; and never again shall I hear that strange talk of Nature and her doings which is the speech of those who live with her and her alone" (p. 244).

Enter, Imagination!

Finally, there were writers who lacked direct experience on the frontier, but who nonetheless chose to write about the mountain men. One of the earliest and best-known of these authors is James Fenimore Cooper. Seeing in the mountain man the new wild west hero, he tried in The Prairie (1827) to transplant his character Leatherstocking out beyond the Mississippi River. Leatherstocking, however, did not fit there, first, because Cooper was unfamiliar with the West about which he was writing, and second, because fur trapping was considered to be a poor substitute for hunting by Cooper and by Leatherstocking himself.

Shortly after, Timothy Flint produced a novel, The Shoshone Valley (1830). Flint, like Cooper, perceived the mountain man as degenerate. He believed the mountain life to be attractive to them because of the lures of unrestricted love, polygamy, and violence, and in a perversion of Ruxton contends that few who have "tasted its dangerous joys can return with pleasure to the tedious routine of settlements." ³⁴

³⁴ Timothy Flint, The Shoshone Valley: A Romance, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, 1830), as cited in Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (1950; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 89.

In general the novelists of the 1840's showed the fur trapper to be a wild, reckless monster, having fled to the wilderness to escape the control of the law and once there, enjoying wild freedom. David Coyner's The Lost Trappers (1847), first purported to be an historical account of the adventures of Captain Ezekiel Williams based on Williams' own journals, agrees in sentiment with Flint. This narrative details the journey of Williams and twenty other trappers up the Missouri in 1807. It was an ill-fated mission; only Williams and two others survived. Although Coyner names and describes many of the dangers in the life of a trapper, he does not see these dangers as romantic, nor does he see the trapper as such. The greenhorns are disparaged for not behaving in accordance with the laws of their new environment: "A party of raw and inexperienced men, in these expeditions, generally buy their wit, at this dear rate."³⁵ The seasoned trappers, on the other hand, are spoken of with contempt for having adapted to these very laws:

On the outskirts of civilized society then, as now on the frontier of the West, there has always been a certain motley class of men, trappers, traders . . . who seem to have become disgusted with the tameness and monotony of civilized life, and made exiles of themselves, by going where the restraints and the security of laws are not felt. For these men, who by the way are very numerous, savage life seems to have its peculiar charms. They take to themselves wives, and domesticate themselves among the different tribes in the west, and live and die among them. If one of these men

³⁵David H. Coyner, The Lost Trappers, ed. David J. Weber (1847; rpt. Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1970), p. 47.

should happen to return to the abodes of his white brethren, he feels like a fish out of water, and is impatient to get back to the country of his choice (p. 82).

Of Coyner's writing ability there is no doubt. He convinced his readers that the account was true, even though as historians learned more about the Trans-Mississippi West and about Williams, Coyner was to fall into disrepute. Not only had he never been to the Far West; neither had he had access to Williams' journal, nor had he even met the man! Upon scrutiny, errors were discovered in names, places, and dates, as well as in the story itself. For example, Coyner tells of Williams' leading the expedition overland that returned Mandan Chief Big White from Washington, D.C., to his tribe. Actually Manuel Lisa led that expedition, and by boat. Coyner borrowed material from previously published accounts such as Washington Irving's Astoria, which he quotes directly without giving Irving credit. He combined this material with information from first-hand sources and produced a book that seemed authentic. As a pastiche, The Lost Trappers reflects the views of the day, which were also Coyner's own, that "those desperados of the frontiers, outlawed by their crimes, who combine the vices of civilized and savage life . . . are ten times as bad as the Indians, with whom they consort" (p. 59).

In an 1855 novel, The Prairie Flower, Emerson Bennett signals a new development -- the possibility that the

mountain man may be a composite of positive and negative traits. Washington Irving's Captain Bonneville had been only positive; Flint's Boone had been only negative. But Bennett's Holden, called Long Beard by the Indians, carries possibilities for both. As a young man Holden "drank such follies, even as the ass sucketh up the east wind."³⁶ After seeing a party of Shawnees kill his wife and child, he swears revenge, then later forsakes the bloody trail to live in peace and meditation in the wilderness. Repeating the standard mountain man themes -- love of freedom, indifference to hardship and danger, hate of dull community life -- Bennett also introduces the scalping of Indians by mountain men. This was an innovation. Cooper had never condoned scalping by whites, although in reality it was practiced, even in New York state. However, as the literary hero moved west, he was allowed to become increasingly Indian-like.³⁷

This increased savagery is also evident in Harvey Fergusson's novel Wolf Song, which was made into a moving picture by Paramount. Wolf Song emphasizes the daring and degenerate nature of the mountain man.³⁸ Although there is a love interest, it is shown as infatuation and passion, rather than as romance. The story opens as a band of ten trappers,

³⁶Emerson Bennett, The Prairie Flower (New York: Putney and Russell, 1855), p. 33.

³⁷Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (1950; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 91.

³⁸See also page 23, above.

"their buckskins black with blood and shiny from much wiping of greasy knives" (p. 1), their thick, dirty hair hanging to their shoulders, rides toward Taos, eager for white liquor and brown women.

After bathing in a sulphur pool, protagonist Sam Lash, who at this point feels at home simply lying beside any road, attends the local fandango, where he and his comrades fight it out with the greasers over the attention these intruders are paying to the ladies present. Too late! Sam has already fallen in love with one of them, a *señorita* named Lola Salazar, daughter of a wealthy Catholic ranch-owner. On the trappers' exit from town, she becomes a willing kidnap victim, and the rest of the book details the contest within Sam -- that contest between the freedom offered by the mountains and the love offered by The Woman.

Wallace Stegner in his essay "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" points out two forces that are frequently seen in western fiction. They are the freedom-loving, roving man and the civilizing woman. Stegner phrases it, "Male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and tamed."³⁹ In the case of Sam Lash:

Think what he would he always thought back to her.

Go where he will a man comes back to a woman. She pulls him down. . . . She sucks the power out of him and longing to go.

³⁹ Wallace Stegner, The Sound of Mountain Water (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 195.

She makes him plow and build who would rather wander and fight (p. 200).

During Sam's struggle of conscience, Fergusson includes a sympathetic and strong vignette about a young brave, Black Wolf, who sets out alone on a horse-stealing raid in order to win his intended bride. This chapter has earmarks of romanticism. An orphan lad in love with an unattainable maiden, he has fasted and been granted a vision, and is now on his Quest. As he rides, he sings Wolf Songs, those songs always sung by lone warriors and always about women. In combat with Sam Lash, Black Wolf receives a mortal wound, and Sam, in a gesture of respect and compassion, lets him die in peace and refrains from taking his scalp.

Wounded himself, Sam makes his way to a mission where, unknown to him, Lola Salazar is hiding. In an unsatisfactory climax Sam's destiny is decided by the Padre, who uses a forced conversion to convince Sam that what he really wants is to move onto the Salazar ranch and manage the estate.

Both in plot and in diction, Fergusson draws from Ruxton's Life the Far West (1848). The precipitating event of the entire story, the capture of a wealthy Mexican bride, comes from Ruxton's pages (p. 193), as does the fandango leading to the capricious act (pp. 187-188). Other borrowings include a mule that is invaluable to her master because she can smell Indians (p. 214), the fatal game of "hand" between the Crow and the Sioux (pp. 101-102), and the tall tale about a petrified forest (pp. 7-9).

One of the rare mountain man novels with no Ruxton references is Ethel Hueston's The Man of the Storm (1936), appropriately subtitled A Romance of John Colter Who Discovered Yellowstone. Although the Yellowstone Library and Museum Association insists that Colter did not discover Yellowstone,⁴⁰ the book is most assuredly a romance. Less than half deals with John Colter; the author seems more concerned with telling of the development of St. Louis under Spanish, French and American flags and with getting the female characters married off. But when John Colter does appear, he is indeed a romantic figure! Young and handsome in his military uniform, he immediately and unwittingly captures the heart of his future bride, orphan Sally Dale. Despite the fact that he is in his mid-thirties when he returns to St. Louis from the Lewis and Clark expedition and considered old for a mountain man, Hueston persists in referring to him as "young Colter." In a romantic prose style, she tells of his meeting Sally Dale: "Colter clung to the small hand. Her pretty bronze curls were neatly bound, allowed to ripple only a little about the small ears and the white throat. Her hazel eyes glowed warm and bright. Her provocative red lips trembled with smiling welcome. About her was a halo of familiarity, sweet to one long accustomed to the alien and

⁴⁰Merrill H. Mattes, Colter's Hell and Jackson's Hole (1962; rpt. Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1976), p. 19.

the strange."⁴¹ There is nothing degenerate about Sally Dale, and surely not about her suitor, John Colter. He is the romantic hero.

Even Colter's beliefs about the Indians, as they come from Ms. Hueston's pen, are noble. While William Clark tries to convince him of the legitimacy of Manifest Destiny, Colter resists: "White men are so smart in most things and so dumb where red men are concerned. This was their country first; it was their land, their forests; the game was their game. By what right did we come and claim it. . . . At least we should offer them something besides barren reservations. We should make payment in more than blue beads and bottles of rum. We might at least try to make them our friends instead of our implacable foes" (pp. 245-246).

The Indians are not seen as vicious savages, but as victims to whom the dominant white society owes payment and compassion. This stance undoubtedly reflects America's changing attitude toward her native population. The 1920's and early 1930's saw a reversal in Federal Indian Policy. The most significant change was from emphasis on assimilation and the dissolution of the tribe to making the tribe once again the focus of Indian loyalty. John Collier, appointed Secretary of the Interior in 1933 by Franklin Roosevelt, was responsible for passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934, making the tribe the focus of

⁴¹Ethel Hueston, The Man of the Storm: A Romance of Colter Who Discovered Yellowstone (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1936), p. 180. (All subsequent references to Hueston will be from this edition.)

tribal economy as well. The debates of this period, both in Congress and across the country, encouraged a deep sympathy for the plight of the Indian. Two popular themes in western literature from this time onward are unfair treatment of the Indians and despoliation of the wilderness, in short, of guilt.

In Hueston's novel John Colter's struggle to choose between Woman and Wilderness comes after he has married. The contrast between Sally the Settler and John the Explorer is revealed in their opposite perceptions of land. She believes it is meant for cultivation; he, that it is meant to be forest. Colter has scant aptitude for farming: "A truant breeze from the north was all too apt to bring Colter irresistible memories of vast herds of buffalo crossing the plain in search of winter quarters, and in a trice he was striding off into the forest. If Sally saw him, she ran in fond pursuit, led him back, sheepishly enough, to the garden awaiting garner and put the hoe into his hands" (p. 223). Although he was invited to go west twice, once for Clark and the second time with the Astoria expedition, he allowed his domestic responsibility to take precedence. Evidently the safer life of the settlements was not healthy for this explorer. He died of jaundice only two years after his marriage.

Ethel Hueston has written a fictional story and placed it in an historical framework which is, for the most part,

accurate. She does err in stating that the enmity of the Blackfeet for the whites dates from a Blackfoot raid on a Crow camp in which Colter was a guest. In actuality it dates from Meriwether Lewis' fatal shooting of a Piegan Blackfoot, member of a party who had stolen some rifles and then tried to escape with the expedition's horses.⁴² As can be expected, given her writing style, Ms. Hueston cleans up considerably the exchange between Colter and his partner John Potts just before they are captured by Blackfeet, but for the most part, she is true to those facts she chooses to use.

The Man of the Storm, like Hueston's twenty-two previous books, is undistinguished, as well as unrealistic. It does, however, exemplify the romantic approach to the figure of the mountain man.

A more realistic novel is A. B. Guthrie's The Big Sky (1947), its protagonist, Boone Caudill, joining Colter on the list of romantic heroes.⁴³ He does not come into the daring degenerate category, since neither drunkenness nor "other" vices qualify him. Nor is he an expectant capitalist, his reasons for going west being to escape an oppressive and brutal father and to fulfill a longing for adventure, rather than to seek his fortune.

Tall and silent, this romantic hero overcomes the dangers of hostile Indians, henchmen from a rival fur

⁴² Bill Gilbert, The Trailblazers, ed. Ezra Bowen (New York: Time-Life Books, 1973), p. 31.

⁴³ See also page 21, above.

company, disease, cold, and starvation. Singular among mountain men and perhaps again reflecting the post-Collier attitude toward Indians on the part of Guthrie, Boone protects a weak, drunken Indian named Poordevil from a strong, degenerate trapper named Streak at rendezvous. He becomes a master at woodcraft and wanders on horseback through the wilderness accompanied by his sidekick Jim Deakins in search of the fair Indian maiden, Teal Eye. When he finds her, he marries her and moves in with her tribe, following mountain man custom.

There are heavy borrowings from Ruxton. Summers teaches Boone to eat buffalo, dog, elk, and painter.⁴⁴ "Meat's meat," says Summers. "Snake meat or man meat or what" (p. 107). This sets Boone wondering whether Summers has ever eaten man meat. Another mountain man lays the rules thus: "Meat's meat, I say, bull or cow or whatever. But man meat ain't proper meat to this child's way of thinkin'" (p. 191). He had unknowingly tried it once down with the Diggers, who had claimed it was jerked goat.

The aversion to eating human flesh was common among mountain men and was a relevant concern, since occasional Indians practiced cannibalism, and in crisis situations some mountain men were known to have done the same. Ruxton wrote, "'Meat's meat,' is a common saying in the mountains, and from the buffalo down to the rattlesnake, including

⁴⁴ Painter is mountain vernacular for panther.

every quadruped that runs, every fowl that flies, and every reptile that creeps, nothing comes amiss to the mountaineer" (Life, p. 98).

However, when Ruxton's characters partake of meat extorted from a traveling band of Indians, they reveal that not just any meat is acceptable:

"Man-meat, by G__!" he [Killbuck] cried out; and at the word every jaw stopped work; the trappers looked at the meat and each other.

"I'm dog-gone if it ain't!" cried old Walker, looking at his piece, "and white meat at that, wagh!" (Life, p. 146)

Another passage excerpted from Ruxton and used by Guthrie and several other writers is the invitation of one dying friend to another: "I never et dead meat myself, and wouldn't ask no one to do it neither; but meat fair killed is meat any way; so, boy, put your knife in this old nig-gur's lights, and help yourself . . . maybe my old hump ribs has picking on 'em."⁴⁵

True to the predictions of Ruxton and Flint, when Boone returns home to visit his mother, he finds he cannot fit back into his old surroundings. Yet at the same time he realizes that his mountain life cannot long continue. He and Summers, who has now retired to a farm, discuss the invasion by the settlers bound for Oregon. Summers laments, "They got the bit in their teeth, some of 'em. . . . I reckon they'll be trompin' over the trails we made and

⁴⁵ Ruxton, Life, p. 127. In Guthrie it appears, "Me and you never et dead meat, but meat fair-killed is meat to eat. There's a swaller or two on my ribs. Take your knife, Boone . . ." p. 308.

climbin' the passes you and me saw first and pokin' plows in along the river bottoms where we used to camp. . . . They got a hunger, they have" (p. 385).

The fate of the mountain man when his territory is invaded and when the supply of beaver diminishes is treated by Don Berry in his 1960 novel, Trask. Elbridge Trask, proud of his days trapping in the Rockies, takes a sturdy wife and settles on the Oregon coast. His task is now to learn how to be content with his new world. Through the Indians with whom Trask comes in daily contact, Berry explores the Indian problems of drunkenness, dependency, and lack of self-respect, all of which have been caused by the whites who have come to the territory, especially the missionaries. Charley Kehwa, speaking for the Clatsop Indians, wonders aloud why the whites refuse to allow the Indians to continue with their own gods. He correctly points out that the Indians have not attempted to convert the whites to Indian beliefs. The Indian way is the way of acceptance, and this is the lesson Trask must learn.

Even when he has gone as far west as possible, the mountain man is not safe from civilization. George Roode, eastern industrialist, wants to explore the possibility of building a sawmill on the coast. Just as mountain men had previously resented the encroachment of the wagon trains into their Rocky Mountains, Trask and his wife Hannah now resent this new threat. Hannah complains that they, the

first settlers, had broken the land and that now "some fat cheechako porkeater"⁴⁶ was coming to try to make money off it and to take advantage of their toil and knowledge.

Searching for a new wilderness into which to flee, Trask experiences crisis. The choice he must make is that between the Indian way of acceptance and his own stubborn habit of force. He is told not to cut down a tree that is in his path, that it does not intend to harm him, that he should instead walk around it accepting its presence. This is difficult for the man who has heretofore viewed the world as something to master. It is not until one of his Indian companions has fallen to his death and Trask has killed the other mistaking him for an enemy that he is able to complete his Searching. And he does it in the traditional Killamook⁴⁷ way of sojourn into the wilderness, fasting, and experiencing a vision. Not only is he at last able to see himself as part of all nature, but he is finally able to accept Charley Kehwa's counsel, "You're not a trapper anymore. You're a settler. Uses different muscles" (p. 193).

Over one hundred fifty years ago the first Ashley-Henry expedition ascended the Missouri River. Ever since Cooper, writers have been producing mountain man literature featuring strong heroes. One sees no weaklings on those pages. First,

⁴⁶Don Berry, Trask (New York: Viking, 1960), p. 61. (All subsequent references to Trask will be from this edition.)

⁴⁷The Killamooks are an Indian tribe on coastal Oregon just south of Clatsop lands.

such a man could not survive on the frontier. Second, a weak man could not survive on the pages of heroic literature.

R. W. B. Lewis in The American Adam describes the Adamic myth as having an air of adventure and a sense of promise and possibility.⁴⁸ This air and this sense are constant in mountain man literature. Adventure is the name of the game, promise and possibility the lure.

As the contemporary reader immerses himself in the stories of a Hugh Glass or a Jedediah Smith, he tastes the adventure and the promise, and the possibility that he, too, may have heroic potential. Roy Harvey Pearce contends that when reading a literary work, the primary interest is not in the factuality of a situation, but rather in its possibility and in that possibility within oneself.⁴⁹ Thus, to celebrate the freedom and courage of Jim Bridger is, in a way, to celebrate the freedom and courage of mankind.

What better staging for the free individual than the dramatic, essentially romantic mountain fur trade? The beauty, the danger, the daring of daily existence provide the backdrop for a hero. Paul Crisler Phillips states, "The tendency to portray the fur trade as a romantic pageant has produced a glorious literature that men will treasure for

⁴⁸R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1955), p. 1.

⁴⁹Roy Harvey Pearce, Historicism Once More (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 17.

as long as heroism has a place in human esteem. . . .

Caught on the frustrations of modern life, the North American of today yearns for the great individualists of the past."⁵⁰

These, then, are the mountain men.

⁵⁰ Paul Crisler Phillips, The Fur Trade (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1961), II, p. 574, as quoted in Don D. Walker, "Philosophical and Literary Implications in the Historiography of the Fur Trade," Western American Literature, 9, No. 2 (Summer 1974), p. 87.

Chapter III

Hugh Glass: The Man Who Met the Bear

They called him the mountain man's mountain man.¹

Small in stature and scarred from smallpox, he was celebrated around campfires of white men and red men alike who told the story of his courage and tenacity. This was the man who had tangled with a thousand-pound silvertip grizzly and lived to tell the tale. It is less the actual combat, however, than the living that became his Most Enormous Adventure. Everything that could happen to a mountain man happened to Hugh Glass.

With a background far less than genteel, Glass joined the second Ashley expedition scheduled to leave St. Louis in March of 1823. An ad was run in the Missouri Republican on January 16, 1823:

For the Rocky Mountains

The subscribers wish to engage One Hundred MEN, to ascend the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains,

There to be employed as Hunters. As a compensation to each man for such business,

\$200 Per Annum,

will be given for his services, as aforesaid. For particulars, apply to J. V. GARMIER, or W. ASHLEY, at St. Louis. The expedition will set out for this place on or before the first of March next.

ASHLEY AND HENRY²

¹Dale Van Every, The Final Challenge: The American Frontier 1804-1845 (New York: Morrow, 1964), p. 235.

²John Myers Myers, Pirate, Pawnee, and Mountain Man (Boston: Little, 1963), p. 68. (All subsequent references to Myers will be from this edition.)

It is possible that Glass saw this ad. However, response to it was well under expectations. A similar ad run the previous year had brought far better results. To complete the party, General Ashley appointed Jim Clyman to act as recruiter for the enterprise, combing the taverns and bawdyhouses of St. Louis in search of suitable, or at least willing, adventurers. The results as adjudged by Clyman: "Falstaff's Battalion was genteel in comparison."³ Whether Glass signed on with the expedition in answer to the ad or to Clyman's invitation, the company itself was a vicious crew, and Glass was well schooled to take care of himself among such ruffians.

One might well question whether Hugh Glass was not as rough as the rest. According to Wallace Stegner, he could have been, without undermining his status as a western hero (p. 197). Whether a man were immoral or virtuous was not a deciding factor, nor whether he was dangerous. Stegner describes the horseback virtues as "the manly virtues of tenacity, courage, ability to bear pain and hardship, generosity, self-trust, magnanimity of spirit" (p. 199). Certainly Hugh Glass was bearer of these, as illustrated by his life prior to meeting Ashley.

In 1817 as commander of an American ship, he was captured by the notorious pirate of the Gulf of Mexico, Jean Lafitte,⁴ who in accordance with the custom of the

³Berry, p. 25.

⁴Myers, p. 41.

profession, gave Captain Glass a choice between walking the plank and joining the pirate crew. Glass chose the latter and spent the next year pillaging and plundering ships that ventured into the Gulf. He was active enough that once he had left the ranks of Lafitte, he avoided all ports, perhaps wary of meeting someone who might remember him from his days under the Jolly Roger and demand retribution. Eventually he reached the limits of his conscience and, according to information he later gave the Reverend Orange Clark, staged a private mutiny.⁵ He and a companion refused to participate in some untold, particularly repulsive picaresque chore, and as a result placed themselves at the mercy of Lafitte himself. Knowing just how merciful their buccaneer leader was, the two reluctant corsairs decided to risk an escape.

Their route to freedom consisted of a two-mile swim from Lafitte's headquarters at what is now Galveston, Texas, to the mainland and a hike through Karankawa country⁶ to United States holdings. In their concern to avoid the cannibal tribe, the two fugitives cut north, entering Wolf Pawnee country, now the state of Kansas.

⁵Myers, p. 45.

⁶The Karankawa Indians peopled the mainland on both sides of Galveston Bay and were a cannibal tribe. In fact, one group of pirates had gone ashore to hunt fresh meat and been distracted by a Karankawa squaw, whom they attempted to abduct. Only one of the would-be kidnappers escaped to tell the story; the other three to five (The number is uncertain.) were killed and eaten by the squaw's rescuers (Myers, pp. 44-45).

The Wolf Pawnees at this time practiced human sacrifice, and it was this tribe that made prisoners of the escaped picaroons. Glass' companion was killed first. Slivers of pine were inserted under his skin and he was touched off, a literal human torch. It was not until after his partner was dead that Glass brought forth a packet of vermillion and presented it to the chief. This gift changed his status from that of prisoner to that of prince. The chief adopted him as a son. Consequently Glass, the former Pennsylvanian, lived as a Wolf Pawnee for the next three years, learning how to exist on the Great Plains and taking the warpath against the Cheyennes, the Comanches, and the Sioux.

The opportunity to again change his position came in 1822 when his adoptive father, the Pawnee Chief, visited St. Louis to meet William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Hugh stayed in the city and signed on with the Ashley expedition of 1823. Although he had never been in the Rockies, he was tough and had an intense will to survive. It is this will, in fact, that made his name known throughout the West.

George Calvert Yount adds further details of his background, claiming that Glass had been apprenticed to a Pittsburgh gunsmith named Henry Wolf and had run away, resulting in placement of an ad in the April 23, 1795, issue of the Pittsburgh Gazette offering a six-pence reward for

information leading to his capture.⁷ However, neither this, nor the tale of his reluctant piracy, nor the story of his capture and adoption by the Pawnees was the cause for his fame. Instead, the spotlight shone on his Most Enormous Adventure. And it is this adventure alone that stands in novelistic and poetic treatments.

Having signed on with General William Ashley for the 1823 expedition into the trapping fields, Glass was one of a party of ninety-six would-be mountaineers that left St. Louis on March 10, 1823, on two keelboats, the Yellow Stone Packet and The Rocky Mountains. His misadventures began May 20 when the keelboats stopped at the Aricara villages to trade for horses. Transactions were completed in friendly fashion by nightfall, and the party bedded down on the shore of the Missouri, despite a storm that threatened, in order to guard their new steeds.

Some of the group, including an Aaron Stephens, returned to the village to partake of the fabled Aricara hospitality. Around three in the morning General Ashley was awakened onboard by the news that Stephens had been murdered and mutilated. The storm, now full force, made evacuation of the men and horses impossible, and soon it was dawn. The Indians opened fire on the party, killing horses and men alike. Survivors took cover behind the corpses of the animals and returned fire. Ashley attempted a rescue, but his

⁷George Calvert Yount, George Calvert Yount and His Chronicles of the West, ed. Charles L. Camp (Denver: Old West, 1966), p. 270n.

unmanageable squadron had been angered. They preferred to stay on the beach and fight. By the time these would-be avengers realized their desperate situation, the boatmen were too frightened to go in to shore. Those stranded on the beach were forced back into the river where some were shot, some drowned trying to swim to the boats, and some were swept downriver by the current. Ashley picked up the few he could and set off, drifting downstream. American casualties were fourteen dead and nine wounded, one of them being Hugh Glass.⁸

After the arrival from the Yellowstone of Major Henry and his fifty reinforcements, and after the fiasco in which Colonel Leavenworth further muddled the waters of Indian relations, Ashley left overland with a dozen men to seek a pass through the Rockies that was unguarded by Blackfeet. Glass was not among them. Instead he was one of the thirteen⁹ who set out on foot with Major Henry for high country. The Indian mishap had cost them valuable time; it was now August 16, and trapping season would open shortly.

Glass' stubborn habit of solitude lay him open to his next confrontation. Because they were in Aricara territory, Major Henry gave orders that the men band together. The discipline of the party, however, was less than military. Glass himself is said to have preferred even to sleep apart

⁸Van Every, p. 186.

⁹Myers, p. 104.

from the others. Conflicting reports have him either designated as a hunter for the party and therefore traveling apart from it under orders, or obstinately refusing to obey orders and wandering off alone to hunt for buffalo berries, abundant in that country.

Whichever the case, he was making his way on foot through a thicket the fifth day out when he stumbled onto an enormous she-grizzly and her two nearly-grown cubs. The rifles at that time were one-shot weapons, a full thirty seconds being necessary for reloading, so after the one shot, Glass pulled his knife and waited for her attack. The growls of the bear and the screams of the man brought the rest of the party to the rescue, but not before Glass had been severely mauled. He had lacerations of the scalp, face, chest, back, shoulder, thigh, and arm. Part of his rump was torn away. A rip in his throat bubbled blood with each breath. In what appeared to be the final scene, the shaggy monster of the Rockies lay dead atop her victim.

Upon investigation, Glass proved to be alive, but his wounds were so extensive that no medical procedures, except cleansing, were followed. Every man there, save perhaps Glass himself, knew that their party would number one less by morning.

They were wrong. They woke to discover Glass tenaciously hanging onto life, sometimes conscious, despite the wounds that made it impossible to move him. Henry was

forced to make a decision. Either Glass must be left here to die alone or the entire party must be ordered to wait until he could be buried, thus perhaps sacrificing the fall hunt. Henry compromised. He called for two men to remain behind and perform the necessary chores of waiting till Glass died and burying him, or of waiting till he was well enough to travel with them to the fort on the Yellowstone. No one doubted that the former would be the case.

There were no volunteers. Such duty would both expose a man to hostile Indians and prevent his taking as many beaver once he did reach the trapping grounds. The Major then added a monetary inducement, probably of eighty dollars.¹⁰ Finally two men reluctantly stepped forward, John Fitzgerald and nineteen-year-old Jim Bridger.

As their ten companions disappeared westward, these two settled into the thicket to begin the death-watch. A grave was dug. Glass, however, refused to die. For five days he continued, floating in and out of consciousness.

Meanwhile, Fitzgerald and Bridger were growing increasingly nervous about the Aricara and impatient to overtake the expedition. Fitzgerald, the older of the two, made the proposal. Glass surely was going to die soon. Already they had stayed longer than Henry had expected would be necessary. In order to maintain their own safety, they should leave the invalid and travel with all speed to join the rest of the party at Henry's fort.

¹⁰Berry, Scoundrels, p. 50.

Since they had promised to stay until Glass' demise, however, they would have to prove that he was in reality dead. Although Indian practice was to bury a warrior's weapons with him, the mountain man had no such custom, the habit being to confiscate for their own use the weapons and equipment of any deceased trapper they came upon. In accordance, therefore, Fitzgerald and Bridger took Glass' gear, including his flint and steel, his knife, and his rifle.

Now twice a victim, once of the grizzly and once of his own comrades, Glass was conscious at their departure, though he was unable, due to the tear in his throat, to speak. He then lapsed into a coma which lasted, by his own estimate, four or five days,¹¹ during which time he was robbed again. Wolves tugged off the robe covering him, but they did not attack the man.

When he woke, dehydrated and hungry, he was still unable to propel himself. Fortunately, he lay within reach of a stream, and buffalo berries and wild cherries hung low overhead. In addition, he was able to kill a rattlesnake with a stone and eat that. Fury at having been abandoned helpless welled up in him, and he swore revenge on the deserters.

Gaining strength from the food and rest, he started out, not cross-country to the Yellowstone, but back along

¹¹Myers, p. 135.

the Grand toward Fort Kiowa. The distance was shorter, the route was marked by the Grand and the Missouri Rivers, and the travel was downhill, all important considerations to a man in his condition. Facing his one hundred fifty mile overland march, Glass found himself unable to stand upright, much less walk. He began to crawl.

His training with the Pawnees served him well; he foraged for roots, crickets, and ants. He ate raw gopher. Witness to a pack of wolves pulling down a buffalo calf, he waited till they had satisfied their first hunger, then hobbled toward them waving a stick to drive them off and claimed the remainder of the carcass for himself. The calf became not only his food, but also his shelter for the next few days. It shielded him from the September night winds, and the red meat strengthened him so that when he moved onward, he was able to do so upright.

Following the Grand to the Missouri, he turned south and was discovered by a friendly party of Sioux. They cleaned his wounds and provided him with transportation¹² to Fort Kiowa.

He arrived there approximately October 11, missing General Ashley by only two weeks. Still determined to square debts, Glass re-equipped and joined a trading party heading upriver by pirogue¹³ to the Mandan villages a few days later.

¹²There is disagreement whether this transportation was by horseback or by bullboat.

¹³A pirogue was a large dug-out canoe.

Just below the villages he disembarked, perhaps to hunt for the party, perhaps to shorten travel time by cutting overland to avoid a bend in the river. The piroque moved on, its seven passengers unaware that the lower Mandan village had been given to the Aricara for temporary lodging. The hostile Rees¹⁴ opened fire on the boat, killing all men aboard. Again Glass had escaped death.

That same day as he was traveling afoot, Aricara squaws spied him and carried the news to the village. Immediately a number of braves gave chase. They were thwarted in their pursuit by two mounted Mandans who rode swiftly from their own village, pulled Glass up onto one of the horses, and galloped with him to the safety of adjacent Fort Tilton.

Because of recent Indian hostility, no one at the Fort was willing to accompany Glass farther, so he set out alone again for his destination two hundred sixty miles distant. Leaving in the dark of night to avoid detection by the Rees, he walked upriver along the Missouri, arriving at Henry's Fort only to find it had been deserted. The entire garrison had moved two hundred twenty miles farther up the Yellowstone to the Mouth of the Bighorn to avoid trouble with the Blackfeet. Glass followed them, arriving at the new Fort Henry amidst a New Year's Eve celebration.

The mountain men present were stunned. Some believed he was a ghost. The one man who understood the situation

¹⁴The term Ree is a mountain man abbreviation for the Aricara Indian tribe.

immediately was Jim Bridger. Glass, seeing the fear on the young man's face, reprimanded and forgave him, then demanded to see Fitzgerald. This miscreant, however, had traded the life of a trapper for that of a soldier and had gone downriver as Glass came up, taking with him Glass' prized rifle. His pursuer planned to follow as soon as the weather allowed.

That opportunity came February 29, 1824. Major Henry needed a messenger to carry dispatches to General Ashley. Glass, together with four companions, was chosen. They traveled by foot until the ice broke, then constructed bullboats¹⁵ to carry them downriver toward yet another adventure.

Paddling into Pawnee country, Glass sighted a band of Indians who invited the mountain men ashore for a meal. Recognizing the language as Pawnee,¹⁶ Glass counseled his companions that these were friendly redskins, and they joined the chief in his lodge, except for cautious Dutton, who remained with the boat. After the meal Glass noticed that the women and children were being cleared out and realized that the whites had stepped into an Aricara trap. During the attempt to escape, two of the trappers were killed, one within a few feet of where Glass lay hidden. Two others

¹⁵Bullboats were shallow, saucer-shaped boats made by stretching buffalo hides around willow frames. Originated by Indians and adopted by trappers, they were light and disposable.

¹⁶The Pawnee and Aricara languages were almost the same. Some sources claim it was recognition of the difference that gave Glass the clue to his hosts' true identity.

later got together and proceeded as a pair down the Platte. Glass found himself beginning another solitary overland trip, but this time he was in relatively good spirits. The Missouri Intelligencer quotes him: "Although I had lost my rifle and all my plunder, I felt quite rich when I found my knife, flint and steel, in my shot pouch. These little fixens make a man feel right peart when he is three or four hundred miles from any body or any place -- all alone among the painters and wild varments."¹⁷

Diagonally across Nebraska and South Dakota he walked, supplying himself with the meat of buffalo calves and with bark and buds and roots. In fifteen days, again aided by a friendly Sioux hunting party, he reached Fort Atkinson. He found there the scoundrel he had been trailing, John Fitzgerald, whose new status created a problem. Because Fitzgerald was now a member of the United States military, he was under the protection of his commander, the ineffectual Colonel Leavenworth. Glass demanded Leavenworth grant him satisfaction, and the matter was resolved by Fitzgerald's returning his rifle and Leavenworth's staking him for his next trip into the mountains.

This excursion into the Taos area goes unrecorded, except for one incident in which he traveled seven hundred miles to have an arrowhead removed from his back.¹⁸ He never returned to Taos, although an impersonator in that

¹⁷Berry, Scoundrels, p. 56.

¹⁸Yount, p. 205.

region recited his adventures in first person as late as 1843, ten years after Glass' death.¹⁹

It is known that in the winter of 1832-33 he and two companions, one of whom was Edward Rose, interpreter on Glass' first trip with Ashley, were killed and scalped by his old foes, the Rees, while crossing the ice of the Yellowstone River. Retaliation struck in the person of a Johnson Gardner. Capturing two Rees who had stolen horses from his company, Gardner recognized Glass' apparel on one of them and, before burning the wretches alive, scalped them. One of the scalps was given to the visiting Prince Maximilian of Weid. Gardner himself was captured shortly after by the Aricara and suffered the same death as his aforesaid victims.

Hugh Glass, champion of numerous adventures, left only one brief letter as record of his colorful life. The letter, since stolen from the South Dakota Historical Society, was written at the request of John S. Gardner, a young Virginian fatally wounded in the first Ashley-Aricara engagement, to that youth's father.

DR. SIR:

My painfull duty it is to tell you of the death of yr son wh befell at the hands of the indians 2d June in the early morning. He lived a little while after he was shot and asked me to inform you of his sad fate. We brought him to the ship where he soon died. Mr. Smith a young man of our company made a powerful prayer wh moved us all greatly and I am persuaded John died in peace. His body we buried with others near this

¹⁹David J. Weber, The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade in the Far Southwest, 1540-1846 (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 111.

camp and marked the grave with a log. His things we will send to you. The savages are greatly treacherous. We traded with them as friends but after a great storm of rain and thunder they came at us before light and many were hurt. I myself was hit in the leg. Master Ashley is bound to stay in these parts till the traitors are rightly punished.

Yr. Obdt. Svt.

HUGH GLASS²⁰

This incident, of course, occurred months before the attack by the grizzly, and Glass left the telling of that tale to others. The first of these were fellow mountain men and travelers to the frontier.

Short Accounts

Warren Angus Ferris, one of these travelers, wrote an account in his diary later to be published in book form. His information came from George C. Yount, another such traveler. Because Ferris was not primarily concerned with the Glass adventure, it received brief and cursory treatment, emphasizing the unlikelihood that Glass might recover and condemning the actions of the two false comrades who had abandoned him: "Leaving him without the means of making a fire, or procuring food, the heartless wretches followed the trail of the company, reached their companions, and circulated the report that Glass had died, and that they had buried him."²¹

Yount himself had the story first-hand. He talked with Glass during the Bear River rendezvous the winter of 1828-29. This is as close to an original account as is available. In

²⁰Myers, pp. 81-82.

²¹Ferris, p. 316.

his Chronicles Yount mentions Glass' apprenticeship to a gunsmith, his days as a pirate, and his adoption into the Pawnee tribe.²² His version of Glass' Most Enormous Adventure includes some details not mentioned in most other accounts. Considering the availability of information to him both from Glass himself and from the other mountaineers at the winter rendezvous, one might choose to believe this account closest to the truth.

Yount reveals that Major Henry had not selected Glass to be a hunter, thus preceding the party by half a mile to a mile. On the contrary, "Glass, as was usual, could not be kept, in obedience to orders, with the band, but persevered to thread his way alone through the bushes and chapparel" (Yount 199). The greatest difference between Yount's story and that of others concerns the treatment of Glass after the attack. Yount claims that he was carried for six days on a hand litter, retaining all faculties but speech and locomotion, and that it was after this six-day period that Henry made his decision, offering a purse of four hundred dollars to the two who would remain behind (Yount 200). This is substantiated by Edmund Flagg: "A litter was constructed from the boughs of trees, and during that day and the succeeding one he was borne onwards, as a corpse on a bier."²³ This would seem the logical action in such a

²²Yount, p. 270n.

²³Edmund Flagg, "Adventures at the Headwaters of the Missouri," in Louisville Literary News-Letter, September 7, 1839, as quoted in Myers, p. 123.

situation, the Major being forced to make a decision only when he realized how greatly the process was slowing the party. This also would allow the Major to choose a comfortable place to leave the invalid, one in which food, water, and protection from the eyes of hostile Indians were available. Yount confirms that Glass was conscious at the time of Fitzgerald's and Bridger's departure, that he gestured in vain for them not to desert him. Instead they "left him to die a lingering death, or be torn to pieces by the ferocious wild beasts and to be seen no more till they should meet him at the dread tribunal of eternal judgment" (Yount 200).

A fellow mountain man and one of the few who recorded the fabulous story of his life mentioned Glass only in connection with his death. Jim Beckwourth claims to have come upon the scene at which Johnson Gardner was burning two of Glass' murderers. Beckwourth reports that their scalps were not taken because Gardner wanted to "burn them up clean."²⁴ He also describes Glass' burial:

We returned together and buried the three men, amid the most terrible scene that I had ever witnessed. The crying was truly appalling. The three men were well known, and highly esteemed by the Crows. When their bodies were lowered to their last resting-place, numberless fingers were voluntarily chopped off and thrown into the graves; hair and trinkets of every description were also contributed, and the graves were finally filled up (Beckwourth 258).

²⁴James P. Beckwourth, The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, ed. T. D. Bonner (1856; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 256. (All subsequent references to Beckwourth will be from this edition.)

It should be taken into account, however, that Beckwourth and Black Harris were contenders for the title of Biggest Liar in the West.

A later group of writers to tell Glass' story purports to write historically, gathering materials from various recorded sources. Stanley Vestal, author of a collection entitled Mountain Men, includes one chapter called "Hugh Glass and the Grizzly." Drawing from the book by Prince Maximilian, among others, Vestal turns out a story similar to the rest. The object of the book is to celebrate the courage of these Rocky Mountain trappers. Thus, when describing the failure of Colonel Leavenworth to chastise the Aricara who had attacked the Ashley expedition, Vestal emphasizes the dangerous nature of the Indians, pointing out that force, courage, and success are the only things an Indian will respect.²⁵ He claims that the party in which Glass was traveling overland numbered eighty and that Glass was one of the two appointed to hunt. The other hunter was first to find Glass and the bear in hand-to-claw combat. However, before he could fire, he was chased into the water by one of the cubs. The expedition leaves Glass at the scene of the mishap, according to Vestal, in true mountain man fashion. He cites one reason for the mountain man's success as being his adaptability. Thus, when in Indian country, they did as the Indians did -- left their wounded

²⁵ Vestal, p. 44.

comrade in a comfortable place with supplies on the chance he would recover at his own pace and follow them later. Vestal has difficulty accepting the identity of the youth as Jim Bridger. A Bridger fan, he hesitates to believe that this hero was ever capable of an unheroic deed. In Bridger's defense he writes, "Some would have it that this Jim was Jim Bridger, and certainly Jim Bridger was plenty brave enough to volunteer for such a perilous duty. But judging from what happened afterward, it is hard to believe that Jim Bridger was the man. Though only a youngster at the time, not old enough to vote, Jim Bridger was as honest as he was brave. That story sounds like one made up later by some fellow who was envious of Jim Bridger's fame. It does not fit the man" (Vestal 53).

A second account of the mountain men is Don Berry's A Majority of Scoundrels, which deals with the movement in general, not focusing on any one person. The story of Ashley and his expedition is treated with minute attention to detail, and the saga of Hugh Glass is, of course, part of this section. Berry's treatment is well-researched and readable, telling only the facts as Berry sees them. Berry notes that few horses were available to the party and these were used as pack animals; the men traveled on foot. This is in contrast to fictional treatments. He identifies Glass as one of the hunters for the party, describing him as "crotchety, querulous, insubordinate, completely

independent. . . ."²⁶ He further identifies the young volunteer as Jim Bridger (Berry 50) and makes no mention of a litter for transportation.

Berry does not speculate on facts that are unavailable to him. For example, he admits frankly not knowing the amount of the purse: "some say \$80" (Berry 50). He does not comment on the motivation behind the desertion: "No one will ever know why Fitzgerald and Bridger abandoned Hugh Glass. . . . It has been fictionalized in several ways and explained in several others. I have no theory" (Berry 52). Nor does he expound on what may have happened to Glass during his escape through the wilderness: "The details of his crawl across South Dakota are impossible to determine. Somehow he did it . . ." (Berry 53). Finally, he does not attempt to recreate Glass' thoughts as he tracked down his faithless friends: "The dramatic version of Glass's story says he was motivated by the unquenchable desire to find and kill Fitzgerald and Bridger. It may be. Whatever drove him, when he reached the Bighorn in time for the New Year celebration he didn't kill anybody" (Berry 54). Because he is honest about what he does not know, Berry is easy to believe. He has not set out to write fiction.

Neither has Winfred Blevins. In her collection of stories about mountain men, Give Your Heart to the Hawks, she has interpreted historical accounts in the light of

²⁶Berry, Scoundrels, p. 49.

her own acquaintance with the mountains and a strong identification with the characters.²⁷ One chapter, "Mountain Skill, Mountain Luck," tells the legend of Hugh Glass and his several escapes during his trek through the wilderness. Attentive to facts, Blevins builds her characters in accordance with prevalent accounts. Glass is obstinate and independent; Jim Bridger is inexperienced and willing; Fitzgerald is mercenary and realistic. Fitzgerald, in fact, pulls rank, ordering Jim to abandon Hugh and come with him. Upon learning that the man he deserted is still alive and is hunting for him, Fitzgerald is uneasy. The news of Glass' death at the hands of the Aricara while enroute to Fort Atkinson brings him relief, but shortly after, Glass stands before him, demanding retribution. This retribution is made by Captain Riley of the United States Army, and the old trapper who fought the bear sets out for Santa Fe.

The Biography

Finally, Pirate, Pawnee and Mountain Man: The Saga of Hugh Glass by John Myers Myers purports to be an examination of the legends surrounding the man. It records and compares all possible data on each incident known about Glass. Although the bibliography is extensive, there are no footnotes. It is through this book that one can gain the most comprehensive picture of Glass. He is covered from the time he may

²⁷Blevins, p. xvi.

have been a runaway apprentice, through his days under the mast and those with the Plains Indians, into his mountain man period. Even his death and the retaliation that followed are given extensive note. In addition to data on Glass himself, Myers gives his readers a glimpse into tangential material. One learns a great deal about Indian customs, about the political background for Glass' capture by LaFitte, about Indian-white relations, even about the nutritional content of fresh-killed meat. It is his contention that Moses "Black" Harris was the first man through the brush to the thicket where Hugh Glass and the grizzly were struggling, and Myers joins Berry in naming Jim Bridger as the young deserter.

Myers numbers the party at thirteen and, like Berry, puts them afoot. He also goes to some length explaining that Bridger was not at fault in the matter, that he had been misled by the older and more hardened John Fitzgerald.²⁸ Bridger's distress when Glass appeared before him at Henry's Fort is given as cause for the former's forgiving him, and two versions of the reprimand are recorded.

Before leaving the historical treatments, it is well to note that for much of the story, one must take the word of the hero himself, Hugh Glass. He was alone; there was no second person to report on his experiences. His movement until Ashley left him is documentable. Thereafter, only three facts about his survival journey are known. One,

²⁸Myers, p. 130.

he was left with no weapon of any kind, and no flint and steel for firebuilding. Two, the site of the grave dug for him was high up toward the headwaters of the Grand and deep in hostile Indian territory. Three, weeks afterward he appeared out of the wilderness, alive. Until his reappearance at Fort Kiowa, he is the only authority on his adventures.

The Epic Poem

Very different from the purely historical treatments is John Neihardt's The Song of Hugh Glass (1915). This poem entirely in heroic couplets later was combined in one volume with The Song of Three Friends, The Song of Jed Smith, The Song of the Indian Wars, and The Song of the Messiah to become the American epic poem The Cycle of the West (1949). Focusing on the conquest of the Missouri Valley from 1822 to 1890, the project had taken Neihardt nearly thirty years.

Neihardt had two basic objectives in writing The Cycle of the West. The first reflects his belief that the poet is a seer whose responsibility it is to bring a message to the people.²⁹ His message is one of the nobility in man, of the necessity to transcend the mundane and even the rational, and to choose instead one's higher being. He believes man capable of worthy action. In his own words,

²⁹ Blair Whitney, John G. Neihardt (Boston: Twayne, 1976), p. 15. (All subsequent references to Whitney will be taken from this edition.)

"We [Americans] have long since discovered the divinity within ourselves."³⁰

His second objective was to make his countrymen more aware of their heritage. The Yale Review applauded his effort: "Nothing can define the nature of this book but a reading of it. . . . It is to have caught up for you . . . the deeds of brave men which are your heritage and which are more integral to your past than ever the events of the Aeneid were to the Romans or those of the Authuriad to the Britons."³¹ In 1919 The Song of Hugh Glass and The Song of Three Friends were printed in a volume together, specifically for classroom use in the state of Nebraska.

Neihardt's assertion that the settlement of the American West is as heroic as the fall of Troy³² and his conscious desire to write in the tradition of Virgil and Homer are no doubt the cause of his writing in such a way that Lucy Hazard suggests he may be a better prose writer than a poet.³³ Comparing The Cycle of the West to his treatment of mountain men, The Splendid Wayfaring, Hazard complains that poetry expands the story unreasonably. "The plot," she writes, "is smothered not only by descriptions but by reflections" (Hazard 131). She further contends that

³⁰Whitney, p. 181.

³¹Anonymous review of The Song of Hugh Glass by John Neihardt, Yale Review, cited in The Splendid Wayfaring (New York: Macmillan, 1920), endpapers, later cited in Whitney, p. 110.

³²Whitney, p. 101.

³³Hazard, p. 128.

classical allusions have no place in a folk epic. In this last criticism she may be correct. While Neihardt himself felt at one with the classics, the majority of his readers do not. Rather than finding such references illuminating, they find them laborious.³⁴

To prepare himself for writing of the fur trappers who opened the West, Neihardt went with two friends on a canoe trip in July of 1908. Their journey extended from Fort Benton, Montana, to Sioux City, Iowa. This, together with his boyhood lived in a sod house on the Nebraska prairie, provided him first-hand knowledge of the setting in which the drama of the fur trade had taken place and allowed him to see the land as his characters had seen it.

The poem is written in five unequal parts: Graybeard and Goldhair, The Awakening, The Crawl, The Return of the Ghost, and Jamie. In them Neihardt allows two major struggles to unfold simultaneously. First is the physical struggle of man against nature, second, the philosophical struggle within man himself. These develop tandem fashion, interdependently, and are not experienced only by Hugh Glass.

As suggested by the title Graybeard and Goldhair, Part I sets up a complementary contrast between Glass and the youth named Jamie, representative of Jim Bridger. Glass is older than history dictates; in Jamie

³⁴This judgment is made after teaching The Song of Hugh Glass to a group of underclassmen at the Des Moines Area Community College as part of a course entitled Mountain Man Literature in June of 1977.

. . . scarce began
 The downy beard to mark him for a man.
 Blue-eyed was he and femininely fair.³⁵
 A maiden might have coveted his hair.³⁵

Jamie, although young, is brave beyond his years, being the only man not to flee when Ashley storms the Aricara town. In a burst of fatherly love, Glass rescues him from death at the hand of the Rees, and thereafter Jamie becomes his everpresent admirer. Neihardt emphasizes the purity of their devotion to each other, acknowledging and denying the inevitable homosexual implications of such a relationship:

While those in whom all living waters sank
 To some dull inner pool that teemed and stank
 With formless evil, and into that morass
 Gazed and saw darkly there, as in a glass,
 The foul shape of some weakly envied sin
(p. 133).

Blair Whitney conjectures that, wives being unavailable in the wilderness, they are replaced by sidekicks who offer a different kind of love.³⁶ It is because of this special closeness that Jamie's betrayal of his friend will seem so monstrous and that Hugh's thirst for revenge, as that of the proverbial woman scorned, will be so great.

Hugh, appointed hunter, rides ahead of the party. Surely to hunt in advance of the others is more heroic than to wander off picking berries. Surely a man on a horse is a more romantic figure than one kicking his way through the underbrush. Unlike any other version, it is Jamie who discovers Hugh's broken body, and Jamie who fires the fatal

³⁵John G. Neihardt, The Song of Hugh Glass in A Cycle of the West (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 130. (All subsequent references to Song will be from this edition.)

³⁶Whitney, p. 110.

shot at the attacking grizzly.

Here in the thicket Hugh is contrasted to his fellows. For Neihardt a man is noble chiefly because he does not admit defeat without a struggle. Hugh struggles to maintain his hold on life. The rest of the trapper band, not recognizing the nobility in this, merely wonder how long a man so badly mauled can survive.

Jamie's grief over his friend prompts him to agree readily to stay behind, although the second man on this detail, here named Le Bon (the good), requires the lure of the purse.

Once the trapping party proceeds toward the Yellowstone, still another contrast develops -- that between Le Bon and Jamie. Le Bon is a pessimist, discussing rationally at length the danger of their situation and the probability of Hugh's death. Jamie refuses to relinquish hope, acting as nourisher to his fallen friend. From this difference in outlooks develops a philosophical struggle. Le Bon works on Jamie, telling him horrid tales of Indian capture, suggesting fearful consequences of their lingering. Le Bon alone digs the grave and, "prompted by a coward or a knave/ That lurked in him" (p. 151), tricks Jamie into believing the Rees are approaching. It is Le Bon who pilfers Hugh's gear; Hugh sleeps on. The reader is predisposed to discount Jamie's guilt. Although he takes part in a heinous deed, he is shown not to be responsible for his actions. Le Bon is the villain.

Hugh awakes in Part ii, alone and unaware of what has occurred. Neither now nor later does he realize Le Bon's part in the desertion. Thus the entirety of his emotion is focused on Jamie. Together with the physical struggle of Hugh's dragging himself to the stream is that struggle within Hugh of his love for Jamie against the falseness of that friend, who appears to him as uncaring as Nature herself:

Plunged deeper than the seats of hate and grief,
 He gazed about for aught that might deny
 Such baseness: saw the non-committal sky
 The prairie apathetic in a shroud,
 The bland complacency of a vagrant cloud --
 World-wide connivance! Smilingly the sun
 Approved a land wherein such deeds were done;
 (p. 158).

Fortified by a bitter resolve to track and kill Jamie, Hugh Glass takes up the chase.

Part iii, the Crawl, continues Hugh's external and internal struggles. Repeatedly the cruelty and capriciousness of Nature parallels what Hugh believes to be that of his dear friend, Jamie. Equating the bleakness of the landscape with that of Hugh's emotional state, Neihardt routes him overland, rather than along the Grand River, his probable historical route. His thirst increases, symbolizing his thirst for companionship, until unable to locate a spring, he claws a hole in the earth and sucks the mud. It is acrid, as is his love for Jamie. Shortly after, he approaches a small pool that appears cool and sweet. Hugh plunges in, only to discover its sweetness to be as superficially sweet as his lost friend:

How ripplingly the lying water laughed!
 How like fine sentiment the mirrored sky
 Won credence for a sink of alkali!
 So with false friends (pp. 170-171).

Hugh hallucinates. His dreams are filled with memories and with Jamie. Still onward he crawls, filled with despair and hate. Every frustration seems to be caused by Jamie. Jamie becomes the hare that Hugh is unable to capture. It is Jamie who breaks the yarn of Hugh's gopher snare. Craving food and water, Hugh resigns himself to a lonely death on the prairie. Then he turns back. The butte which had been close behind him is now nearly out of sight. A new resolve forms. He knows he will survive.

His feelings for Jamie are in conflict. He remembers the tenderness they have shared. The two powers within him, the one earthbound and the other transcendent, grapple for control. The earthbound Hugh is victorious.

So once again the old triumverate,
 A buzzard Hunger and a viper fate
 Together with the baser part of Hugh,
 Went visionless (p. 186).

As if to test her victim still further, Nature grows playful. In answer to Hugh's hunger, she sends an enormous herd of buffalo. However, he is not armed to kill an animal. Not only is he unable to take advantage of Nature's seeming bounteousness; the buffalo trample down the vegetation along his path of travel so that what food had grown there, did so no more. Wait -- lest one judge too quickly. There is a buffalo calf ahead surrounded by wolves. They

pull the young animal down and commence devouring it. Here is meat for Hugh. Driving the wolves from the carcass, he crouches over it as an animal himself, tearing at the raw meat. Hunger satisfied, he moves on across the parched wilderness.

Despite his desperate situation, Hugh is a worthy man, incapable of evil. Sighting an Indian crone shuffling along the trail, he is tempted by his lower nature to kill her and steal her supplies. Because his higher nature prevails, he shows himself to be a better man than either Le Bon or Jamie. They are capable of murder; he is not. Although his reflection in the pool admonishes him and calls him a fool, he is indeed a noble hero.

Part iii might be called the parable of the evolution of man. Rising from the level of animals, Hugh arms himself with club and stone to drive the wolves from the buffalo carcass. His discovery of the coals of a fire at an abandoned Ree campsite elevate him farther; he can now cook the Indian dog he kills. His third gain is that of the blade, a trader's knife left near the fire. The last gift is his realization that, with the knife and a piece of flint easily found among the rocks, he can produce fire at will. Additionally, the knife will enable him to fashion crutches, so that he can once again walk upright, as a man. So filled with exultation is he that he bursts into song, soon to be joined by the stray curs following him. There will be no difficulty now in getting to Fort Kiowa.

Hugh becomes the bard in Part iv, chanting his tale to the men at the fort, speaking to them and, empathetically, for them:

And bronze jaws tightened, brawny hands were gripped,
As though each hearer had a fickle friend
(p. 224).

The telling does not stop with the present, but continues into the future, describing the intended murder of his traitorous friend.

Much of Glass' sojourn in search of Jamie and Le Bon is omitted, including the massacre of Glass' companions near Fort Tilton and his rescue by Mandan braves. This abbreviation of historical data is workable in context. First, the reader has already had one excruciating wilderness journey, and second, the material is unnecessary to Hugh's internal struggle and development.

The party he joins at Fort Kiowa choosing to winter with the Mandans, Glass sets off once again alone and on foot. Once again he is stranded in a storm, but with a difference! Now he has shelter, food, and the means to make a fire and procure game. His physical progress and his emotional state are less tortured than on the previous leg of his journey.

Upon his arrival at Fort Henry, the ambivalence of his feelings for Jamie is clear. Hearing a laugh he believes to be Jamie's, he wavers in his resolve:

Joy filled a hush 'twixt heart-beats like a bird;
Then like a famished cat his lurking hate
Pounced crushingly (p. 233).

At this point Neihardt commits gross bastardization of fact. He reverses the situations of Jamie and Le Bon. Instead of finding Jamie pale and cowering, Hugh finds Le Bon, a man whose involvement he had not even realized. Le Bon it is who is forgiven at Fort Henry. Jamie, acting out Fitzgerald's role, has departed for Fort Atkinson.

The reason for this alteration no doubt is Neihardt's desire to focus on Jamie and Hugh. For Hugh to chase Le Bon after having ignored him so long would be anti-climatic. In addition, Neihardt will use this opportunity to purify Jamie and make him worthy of reconciliation.

The final portion of the poem reveals that Jamie, driven by guilt, has ridden into the wilderness in search of his old friend. Hugh, upon learning this, has a change of heart and continues his search, but now with the motives of love and forgiveness. As each man hunts the other, winter comes again to the prairie. In an oversentimentalized final episode Hugh discovers Jamie, dying and blinded by the rifle stolen from his old friend. Jamie, lying in a Piegan lodge and believing Hugh to be a priest, delivers a heart-wrenching confession. This confession redeems Jamie, just as Hugh's decision to forgive redeems Hugh. The climax, bordering on the melodramatic, shows young Jamie's fingers exploring the scarred face of old Hugh in tearful reconciliation.

Neihardt's stated reason for such heavy emphasis on forgiveness is explained in The Splendid Wayfaring: "If,

when the long pursuit was ended, Hugh had wrought vengeance upon his youthful betrayer, his adventure would have been nothing more than an astounding feat of endurance and ferocity; but in the end the Graybeard forgave, and that fact raises his story to the level of sublimity (p. 138).

The Novel

Forgiveness is also the climax to Hugh's development in Frederick Manfred's novel, Lord Grizzly. As in *Neihardt*, the story features two struggles, one external and one internal. In contrast to *Neihardt*, the internal struggle in this case is less philosophical, more personal. Rather than finding himself torn between a higher and a lower nature, Hugh's internal struggle weighs the evil of Bridger and Fitzgerald against the evil in himself.

Unlike the other versions, in Lord Grizzly Glass is unconscious from the time of the bear's attack until he awakens, alone. Thus his motive initially is not revenge, but self-preservation. The suspicion that he has been deserted grows gradually, stemming from memories of his own desertion of family, from dreams, and from his imagination. Even when he intellectually recognizes that his friends have abandoned him, he feels puzzlement rather than revenge. This questioning attitude causes him to explore also the code of the mountain man. Joseph Flora points out that although Glass had little use for the redskins, he conjectured that they might have a higher code.¹ They, after all, give their

¹Joseph M. Flora, Frederick Manfred, Western Writers Series, No. 13 (Boise: Boise State College, 1974), p. 29.

dead a decent burial; they do not leave a man lying on the prairie to be torn apart by buzzards and wolves. He does realize that the two who abandoned him have not lived up to mountain man standards: "Those two devils who called themselves mountain men had a code all right. Deserter code. Ae. Well, he had a code too. A code which said a man had a right to kill deserters. It was a crime before God and man both to desert a man in a wilderness. . . ."38

It is at this moment that his lust for revenge is born. Once decided, Hugh does not waver. Further, since he perceives the crime of Bridger and Fitzgerald to be one against both God and man, he believes that he is to be the instrument of the Lord's wrath.

Before writing Lord Grizzly, Manfred thoroughly immersed himself in relevant materials. By his own estimate, he spent one full year in research.³⁹ The result is a composite of unaltered historical fact, refashioning of previous materials, direct borrowings from older sources, and additions from Manfred's own imagination.

Most of the characters are authentic, albeit necessarily embellished, with the exception of Bending Reed, Glass' Sioux wife. Manfred chose to include her, showing the

³⁸Frederick Manfred, Lord Grizzly (New York: New American Library, 1954), p. 136. (All subsequent references to Lord Grizzly will be from this edition.)

³⁹Frederick Manfred, Conversations with Frederick Manfred, moderator John J. Milton (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1974), p. 115.

writer's freedom Don D. Walker celebrates in his essay, "History, Myth, and Imagination." Walker contends that the creative writer need not attempt to stay within the confines of known historical fact. "If it [the great imagination] is to go on writing ever looking over its shoulder to see if the posse of fact-loving pedants is in hot pursuit," he writes, "it will be too timid to be truly creative."⁴⁰

In addition to original creativity, Manfred has woven in material from other sources, including, as have many other writers, Ruxton's Life in the Far West. The most important of these in relation to the story, and the most familiar is spoken by Hugh while in delirium after the bear attack:

Now, boy, I'll soon be under. Afore many hours.
And, boy, if you don't raise meat pronto you'll
be in the same fix I'm in. I've never et dead
meat myself, Jim, and I wouldn't ask you to do it
neither. But meat fair killed is meat anyway.
So, Jim, lad, put your knife in this old nigger's
lights and help yourself. It's poor bull I am, I
know, but maybe it'll do to keep life in ee.
There should be some fleece on me that's meat yet.
And maybe my old hump ribs has some pickin's on
'em in front. And there should be one roast left
in my behind. Left side. Dip in, lad, and drink
man's blood. I did onct. One bite.⁴¹

It is Hugh's reference to his being a one-bite cannibal that, in the eyes of Fitzgerald and later of the band at Fort Henry, justifies his companions' desertion of him.

The story of how he had come to eat man-meat is adapted from A. B. Guthrie's The Big Sky. Hugh had

⁴⁰Don D. Walker, "History, Myths and Imagination," The Possible Sack, 5 (Feb.-Mar. 1974), 4.

⁴¹Manfred, Grizzly, p. 108. See also page 59, above.

returned to camp with no game and discovered his partner roasting what he claimed was antelope. Hugh took a bite. "'Twas the toughest meat this child ever set teeth to. Couldn't seem to swallow it. Then I saw the butchered feet ahind a bush. Ten toes. Clint'd killed our guide, a miserable red-devil Comanche. . ." (p. 213).

Manfred's most frequent borrowings, however, are from John Neihardt's The Song of Hugh Glass and are unavailable from other sources. Like Neihardt, Manfred opens his story with the clash between General Ashley's forces and the Aricara warriors. Like Neihardt, he establishes the bond between young Jim Bridger and the old hunter, Hugh Glass. This time the rescue from the Rees for which Jim owes Hugh his life occurs on open prairie as the two, plus John Fitzgerald, make up a hunting party. Again Jim is depicted as young, loyal, and devoted to his friend, Fitzgerald as the rationalist.

Historically on his crawl back to civilization, Hugh Glass did not see any sign of Aricara. This is why he was confused about the identity of the tribe that invited his party to feast while they were enroute to Fort Atkinson. Neihardt inserts a scene in which Glass watches from his hiding place as a hungry, rag-tag band of Aricara led by Chief Elk Tongue travels west. They are followed at a distance by an old hag whom Hugh cannot bring himself to kill.

Manfred adopts this scene, developing it to illustrate Glass' humanity, to motivate Elk Tongue's later invitation to feast, to contrast Indian custom to mountain man reality, and to provide Glass with Neihardt's three gifts of knife, fire, and flint and steel. Shortly after viewing the retreating Aricara band, Hugh happens onto a death teepee in which lies the mother of Aricara Chief Gray Eyes, supplied with all she will need to finish this life and start the next. Crawling in to find food, he discovers she is still alive. He tenderly gives her water, prepares roast dog for her, and when she dies he digs her grave and buries her, speaking over her in ceremony. This scene will be modified still further by Vardis Fisher in Mountain Man.

Glass' confrontation with Jim is only slightly altered from Neihardt's version: "Then, with a moccasined toe, he kicked the boy Jim lightly in the ribs. 'C'mon, Jim, lad, get up and wag your tail. I wouldn't kill a pup. You know that'" (p. 203).⁴² This tone differs greatly from the reprimand as recorded by Yount: "Go, my boy. I leave you to the punishment of your own conscience and your God. If

⁴²In The Song of Hugh Glass Fitzgerald and Jamie have reversed roles, so Fitz is recipient of this remark:
 But Hugh walked leisurely across the floor
 And kicked the croucher, saying: "Come, get up
 And wag your tail! I couldn't kill a pup!"
 (p. 236).

they forgive you, then be happy. I have nothing to say to you, but don't forget thereafter that truth and fidelity are too valuable to be trifled with."⁴³ However, Neihardt's version fits much better the character Manfred has developed.

Finally, although Jim Bridger is not found blind, he is involved in a savage brawl which almost results in his being so. Angered at having been called a pup, Jim rushes old Hugh, who knocks him down, straddles him, and jams his thumbs into Jim's eyeballs. Curiously, it is in the midst of all the gouging and wrenching that Hugh remembers his own two sons back in Pennsylvania, equates them with Jim and himself with deserter, and suddenly determines to forgive the youthful offender.

Lord Grizzly is written with an immediacy that brings the reader directly to the scene. One experiences with Hugh the red demons infesting his crushed leg, the cool stream water splashing over his fevered chest and belly, the gangrenous stench coming from his torn back, the sounds of the prairie. It is this immediacy that also makes the novel gory beyond other Glass accounts. The reader watches the vicious tortures inflicted on white captives by gleeful redskins, the painful death of a horse whose belly has been torn open by a buffalo bull.

At the same time that Lord Grizzly is brutal, Hugh's frame of mind as he crawls across the South Dakota prairie

⁴³Yount, p. 202.

is more positive than in other accounts. He does not bemoan his fate; he challenges it. His resolve is firm. Although undergoing fierce hardship, he never allows himself to experience depression: "Despite his terrible hunger, his emaciation, his parched throat, the nauseating pervading stench of his rotting back, Hugh couldn't help but marvel at all the spectacular colorings. 'With a little salt and some pepper to flavor it, a man might almost make a feast on it'" (p. 140). His ordeal is no less terrible; his spirit is stronger.

The strength of his spirit may be what leads many readers to complain about the ending. Old Hugh has chased Fitzgerald over two thousand miles⁴⁴ with murder on his mind. Yet, when Fitz casually explains his side of the story and apologizes, Hugh uncharacteristically suddenly remembers his sons again and lowers his rifle. Manfred explains this action in much the same way as does Nelhardt. He accuses the discontented readers with wanting exaction, rather than justice. Exaction, he believes, is a low motive. He sees Hugh as a stronger and more ethical man because he can forgive, and forgiveness as "the final summit that we have to climb to be human."⁴⁵

Whether Hugh Glass did indeed reach the heights of sublimity or whether he was instead, as Dale Van Every states,

⁴⁴Myers, p. 185.

⁴⁵Manfred, Conversations, p. 111.

"an utter hedonist, engrossed in his own self-indulgent and often fantastic impulses,"⁴⁶ he was indeed the epitome of stamina and mountain skill that marked the free trapper. His tussel with the great beast of the wilderness, his survival, his determined crawl back to civilization, his tenacity mark him as one of the early heroes of this country.

⁴⁶Van Every, p. 240.

Chapter IV

John Johnston: Dapieks Absaroka

Certainly the most dramatic transposition of mountain man fact into G-rated fiction is worked by Vardis Fisher in his novel Mountain Man, the fictionalized version of the bloody career of John Johnston, a trapper in the Montana territory late in the era. Johnston, who exterminated well over three hundred redskins and was once reprimanded for scalping his enemies while serving in the Union Army during the Civil War, wafts from Fisher's pages as soft-spoken Sam Minard, friend of all honest Indians and victim of stereotyped savages. Johnston, his beard dripping with the blood of recently-eaten raw Indian livers, would have scoffed at Minard's harmonica renditions of Beethoven played beside the hot springs of Yellowstone, for Johnston was no gentle soul. He was a hardened, vengeful, determined bounty hunter who killed Indians not only in self-defense, but more often for monetary gain and for the sheer pleasure of it.

His comrades in the free trapping profession joined him both in action and in sentiment. There were few things they enjoyed more than a life-and-death war game with the redskins, especially when the odds were in their own favor. Like the Indians, they were more than ready to leave no survivors and to kill the wounded by slow torture.

Wright Morris explains in The Territory Ahead, "In American experience, raw material and nostalgia appear to be different sides of the same coin. The rawer the material, the more nostalgia it evokes -- rawness being the hallmark of the real thing, the natural."¹ Perhaps Americans do want their material raw. If so, Johnston is the perfect hero. The facts of his life, however, are far bloodier than the accepted tales about him. This six-and-a-half foot, two-hundred-fifty pound giant was feared by the Indians more than any other man in the Montana territory, and he is credited with killing more Indians for their scalps than any other man.²

Don D. Walker takes issue with Morris in the evaluation of brutal exploits as nostalgic. Although Johnston's rage against the Crows is motivated and his monomania understandable,³ Walker contends, "a recital of blood smears is worth little serious literary treatment."⁴

Yet serious literary treatment is exactly what Johnston receives in Fisher's Mountain Man. Whether he was in fact admiral or bestial, he did indeed exemplify the strengths of

¹Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 24.

²Leslie W. Randall, Footprints Along the Yellowstone (San Antonio: Naylor, 1961), pp. 115-116. (All subsequent references to Randall will be from this edition.)

³A band of young Crow braves had killed his pregnant Indian wife.

⁴Don D. Walker, "The Mountain Man as Literary Hero," Western American Literature, I, No. 1 (Spring 1966), 21.

mountain men and their code. Fisher sponged off a good part of the gore and found underneath material for a romantic hero of the Rockies.

Beginning with the most brutal and working toward the most romantic, the three portrayals of Johnston which will be explored are Crow Killer (1958) by Raymond Thorp and Robert Bunker, Mountain Man (1965) by Vardis Fisher, and Jeremiah Johnson (1972), a film adaptation of both previous sources. Crow Killer is the most realistic of the three. Product of oral history, it is presented as "the skeletal biography of a Rocky Mountain trapper and Indian fighter in the middle decades of the nineteenth century retold primarily on the basis of word-of-mouth sources."⁵ Vardis Fisher's novel, Mountain Man, won the Wrangler Trophy at the sixth annual Western Heritage awards presentation in 1965 for the outstanding Western novel of the year. Sydney Pollack's film Jeremiah Johnson starred Robert Redford, an actor who would never convince audiences that he was capable of cannibalism, and was given a PG rating.

John Johnston, born in 1824 of Scottish parentage shortly after Hugh Glass' wrestle with the grizzly, left New Jersey for the West, arriving at St. Joseph, Missouri, in the fall of 1843. Since beaver were scarce by this time,

⁵ Richard M. Dorson, forward to Crow Killer by Raymond W. Thorp and Robert Bunker (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1958), p. 4. (All subsequent references to Dorson in Crow Killer will be from this edition.)

he turned to other fur-bearing animals. During his career he was a trapper, a wolfer, a hunter, a whiskey smuggler, a soldier, a wood-cutter, a scout, and a sheriff. His Most Enormous Adventure, though, was his twenty-year trail of vengeance against the Crows, following the murder of his Flathead wife.

Entwined with his story is that of Mrs. John "Crazy Woman" Morgan. The sole survivor of a Blackfoot attack on her family, she was discovered that same day by Johnston. Her refusal to leave the site of her children's graves prompted Johnston to build her a cabin there, in which she lived, insane and unmolested, till she starved or froze to death nineteen years later.

This study will focus on five issues, comparing treatments and speculating on reasons for the variations: Johnston's relationships with other mountain men, his attitude toward Indians (including his vengeance against the Crows and his capture by the Blackfeet), his relationship with Crazy Woman, his marriage, and external historical happenings that involved him.

The Saga

Crow Killer: The Saga of Liver-Eating Johnson is the earliest written record of that Montana terror. It is a collection of biographical vignettes spliced together to tell the story of Johnston's life from the moment the huge redhead stepped off the steamer Thames, bound to be a trapper, until he died in the Old Soldiers' Home at Los Angeles, California.

The data were compiled and confirmed by Raymond W. Thorp, "a nonacademic historian of the fabled Far Western frontier,"⁶ and were put into story form by Robert Bunker. Richard Dorson, in the forward, assures the reader that although one cannot know the exact facts about Johnston, he can at least know that his story is "uncorrupted by journalists and hucksters."⁷ The story follows.

Experienced mountain man John Hatcher first discovered Johnston trying to trap beaver on the Big Blue, which had been trapped out years before. Hatcher, perhaps seeing in him a likely partner, took him on and trained him in trapping and woodcraft.

Of killing Indians, Hatcher admonished, "Allus remember, . . . ye must never give a red coon a chanst. Allus be the fust ter count coup. Otherwise ye'll be nowhar!"⁸ Of method: "Don't use it [your tomahawk] less'n ye hafter. Spiles the scalp" (CK, 28). Indian scalps had good market value, both as souvenirs bought by travelers to the frontier and as curio items for export to England.

His young pupil's aptitude astonished Hatcher. Having watched Johnston take his first scalp, he asked,

"Never skelped a wil' Injun afore, lad?"
 "Never seen one afore."

⁶Dorson, Crow Killer, p. 8.

⁷Dorson, Crow Killer, p. 8.

⁸Raymond Thorp and Robert Bunker, Crow Killer: The Saga of Liver-Eating Johnson (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1958), p. 29. (All subsequent references to Crow Killer will be from this edition.)

"Then cuss me fer a Kiowa. Ye air better built fer this work than any man I ever seed. Fust time I skinned a red coon I wuz cold an' shuk all over." (CK, 30)

Although Johnston had respect for the warriors as fighting machines, his distaste for Indians reflected the general contempt of his era for a dangerous, bothersome race that obstructed progress. Progress to mountain men, of course, meant not the settling of the West, but their own personal progress unharmed among the Rocky Mountains.

To others, progress meant settlement. In 1846 John Morgan sold his Connecticut farm, packed his wife, two young sons and eighteen-year-old daughter into a wagon, and set off for Independence, Missouri, where he joined a train going West by way of the Oregon Trail. Near Beatrice, Nebraska, however, Morgan and the trailmaster had a disagreement over the best route, and Morgan angrily left the train, striking off northwest on his own.

The single wagon traveled seven hundred miles through hostile Indian territory before encountering difficulty. When they reached the Musselshell, Morgan decided to stop and mend the wagon wheels, the spokes of which had sprung in the August heat. Instead of doing the chore and moving on, the family stayed at the site for a week, resting and fishing.

One afternoon Morgan went to herd in his oxen, as usual. When he did not return, his wife sent their two

boys after him. At their failure to reappear, she sent their daughter to fetch the trio. Something alerted her -- perhaps a scream. Seizing an ax, she ran down the trail and discovered that a party of twelve Blackfeet had set upon the family. John Morgan, scalped and unconscious, was tied to a tree. The two sons, also scalped, were lying dead on the ground. One Blackfoot brave still knelt over the daughter, who lay stripped, raped, and screaming. Jane Morgan, in a fury, charged upon the scene wielding her ax and killed four Indians. The others fled with Morgan a captive, but not before tomahawking and scalping his daughter.

Later that evening Johnston came upon the scene. Finding Jane Morgan incoherent, he helped her dig four graves and bury her three children and her husband's scalp, which the Indians had dropped in their rush to escape. He also drove a post into each mound as a marker and watched as Mrs. Morgan rammed the heads of the four Blackfeet she had killed down onto the stakes.⁹ Realizing that she wanted to stay near her private graveyard, Johnston built her a small cabin before riding on. In this cabin she lived nearly twenty years, tending the graves and receiving gifts from overland parties and from mountain men, including John Johnston. The Indians, even the Blackfeet, knew her to be divinely mad and

⁹Leslie Randall claims that Johnston cut off the heads and posted them himself. This seems more likely (Randall, pp. 125-126).

avoided her territory. Her grief had driven her insane, and at night her keening could be heard across the prairie.

The next spring Johnston decided to take a wife. He chose the daughter of a Flathead subchief who had been put up for sale outside her tribe, as indication that she was considered to be of great value. The fifteen-year-old maiden named the Swan was thought to be comely. Despite Thorp's and Fisher's contentions, the normal curvature of the Swan's head was not due to neglect or oversight. Osborne Russell explains in his journal that the Montana Flatheads were related to certain northwest coastal tribes whose custom it was to bind the heads of their infants. The term Flathead, in contrast, meant normal head, not peaked by compression.¹⁰

After the initial distribution of gifts to the tribe, Johnston bargained with the subchief for his daughter. The three-day negotiation was capped by a week's festivities, after which the pair set out for Johnston's cabin on the Little Snake to prepare for the fall hunt.

Having laid in winter supplies for his bride and their several horses, Johnston rode into the mountains on his black two-year-old, a stallion with the same gift as the fabled mules in Fergusson's Wolf Song and Ruxton's Life in the Far West and as Fitzgerald's horse Pepper in Manfred's Lord Grizzly. He could smell Indians nearby.

¹⁰Osborne Russell, Journal of a Trapper, 3rd ed. (1845; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 33.

Several months later the hunter returned with a good catch of furs, plus a beltful of scalps.¹¹ In his absence his cabin had been stripped, his horses stolen. The Swan's bones lay near the door, picked clean by vultures. A tiny skull among the bones revealed to Johnston that she had been pregnant. He combed the area for sign and was able to reconstruct the deed, locate the route of the attackers and, by studying an eagle feather from the headdress of one of the braves, identify them as Crows. He gathered the bones and placed them, together with the feather, in a copper kettle which he hid among the rocks. At midnight on Battle Mountain he swore vengeance on the Crow nation.

Within six months John Johnston had earned the grisly titles Dapiek Absaroka (Killer of Crows), Crow Killer, and Liver-Eating Johnson. Wherever Crow warriors frequented the territory, Crow bodies were found mutilated in a singular manner. In addition to having been scalped, they had been sliced under the lowest rib and their livers removed. At trading posts Johnston was trading Crow scalps and finery for powder and ball and salt. A running joke, out of his hearing, was, "Do he salt them Injun livers?" (CK, 52). He was a pariah. Mothers threatened to have him discipline their naughty children.

¹¹In assessing the motivation for Johnston's war against Crows, it must be noted that he was already in the habit of killing Indians for profit. Thus it was not a decision to kill Crows, but a narrowing of his focus to include especially Crows, and the addition of mutilation in the method.

Thorp and Bunker ascertain that Johnston eventually kidnapped, killed, and eviscerated the murderer of the Swan, but they do not go into the detail that Leslie Randall does in Footprints Along the Yellowstone. Randall reports that the fingers and toes of the luckless Blackfoot were cut off singly, that his liver was removed and, while he was still conscious and bleeding to death, the Liver-Eater sliced it up and pretended to eat it.¹²

Johnston killed many non-implicated Indians also. Some feared him as an evil spirit who would eventually kill them all. He took grim satisfaction in demonstrating his strength and his skill with weapons whenever Indians were present. According to Randall, "He was a terror with his hands that were like bear paws, a deadly shot with rifle and pistol, and a demon with a bowie knife, but, peculiarly, he preferred to fight with his bare hands in close combat. . . . He liked . . . especially to kill with his bare hands, or to kick and stomp to death the Indians who feared him."¹³

By 1851 public sentiment had softened. The story of his murdered wife and her unborn child had been circulated, and he was seen, among mountain men at least, as a noble avenger. This was of little consolation to the Crows, who lived in constant fear of his assaults. In addition to this fear, they were ridiculed by the Sioux and the Blackfeet for

¹²Randall, p. 123.

¹³Randall, pp. 120-121.

their inability to fight off one white man. Because the Crows' pride could not withstand this humiliation, a council of war was called at which twenty suicide warriors were chosen. Their mission was to track Dapiek Absaroka and attack him separately, none returning to the village until he was dead. Ten years later they had been unsuccessful; eighteen of the cadre had been killed by their target.

Johnston, although he never drank himself, now decided to make a whiskey run into Flathead country. Enroute he suffered his first and only capture by his red enemies. A young Blackfoot chief, the Wolf, caught him off guard and took him into custody to be held for bargaining with the Crows. He was subjected to insulting treatment, stripped and bound, and put afoot to march to the Blackfoot camp while being steadily beaten with the flats of tomahawks.¹⁴ At camp he was bound hand and foot and shoved into a tipi with one guard. The rest of the party set to consuming the two twenty-gallon kegs of whiskey they had confiscated. As they drank, Johnston gnawed covertly at the thongs around his wrists. When they gave way, he struck, kicking and scalping the guard and cutting off one of his legs at the hip. The victim lived. He was discovered by his tribesmen, maimed, stunned, incoherent, and without a prisoner.

¹⁴Among Plains Indians, if a warrior was struck by a stranger, he was irretrievably disgraced unless he could kill the offender immediately (Osborne Russell, p. 174).

Johnston, naked to the waist, had escaped on foot into the winter two hundred miles from home, a distance as great as that Hugh Glass had traveled back to Fort Kiowa. The leg served both as food and as a weapon for the determined mountaineer as he made his way to the cabin he shared with Del Gue. He arrived in a snowstorm clad only in the bottoms of his red flannel underwear, still carrying the remains of the leg.

The resultant raid on the Blackfeet drew over forty mountain men. The transgression of the Wolf's band had not been to capture Johnston, but to slap him while his hands were tied. Included in the bloodthirsty crowd were Bald Head Pete, who had been scalped by the Pawnees, Hatchet Jack, who dismembered and burned his Indian victims piece by piece, and Mad Mose, who had been scalped in a family massacre and who made a practice of capturing Indians and slicing off their ears before releasing them.¹⁵ The mountain men attacked at night on horseback, killing all seventy members of the Wolf's party and losing no comrades. Johnston himself took the Wolf's scalp, boled his head, and was awarded the prize of all seventy scalps.

He spent a year and a half in the Union Army, winning a reputation as a sharpshooter. As a member of Company H,

¹⁵In 1869 Mad Mose was killed in a confrontation of the Shoshoni and mountain men against the Nez Perce. Johnston, having been voted a Shoshoni chief, was also present and revealed to Mose's partner Hatchet Jack that Mad Mose was also John Morgan, husband of Crazy Woman. He had escaped during his first night of Blackfoot captivity and roamed the

Second Colorado Cavalry, he fought in the third and fourth battles of Newtonia, Missouri, under General J. A. Blunt and was reprimanded sharply for taking the scalps of the Cherokee Indians who fought alongside him (CK, 90). This puzzled him, since no complaint was lodged when he scalped the Seminoles who fought on the rebel side. In the fall of 1865 he both received an honorable discharge and killed the last of the twenty Crows dedicated to his death. This warrior had been on the trail nearly fourteen years.

The next year brought the greatest concentrations of hostile Indians ever seen in the West. Threatened by the increasing numbers of settlers and the killing of the buffalo, they carried out a series of massacres lasting into the early 1870's. Many mountain men gathered at the forts and trading posts to offer their services to the settlers and to the military. So it was that Johnston arrived at Fort Hawley and joined a trapper band intent on exterminating a particularly violent group of Sioux. Their opportunity came the day Mrs. Jenny Hawley, wife of the Captain who ran the trading post, went berrypicking along the Musselshell with a friendly squaw. The two women were spotted by the raiding party. The Sioux shot the squaw in the buttocks, and she ran screaming back to the fort. Mrs. Hawley was less fortunate. She was shot through the neck

mountains demented thereafter, never going near the site of his family's massacre, never mentioning his past, perhaps not even remembering it (CK, pp. 133-134).

and was scalped. (She did, however, recover and wore a wig the rest of her life.)

The mountain men chased down this band and killed the entire party. They dismembered the dead Indians, saving the scalps and heads. After demonstrating his penchant for liver-eating, Johnston directed the boiling down of the thirty-two Sioux skulls and the poling of them along the Musselshell.¹⁶

Peter Koch, passenger on the steamer Huntsville, described in his journal the landing of that boat at Fort Hawley:

A sight met her passengers which was certainly calculated to shock the nerves of any eastern tender-foot. Along the brink of the river bank on both sides of the landing a row of stakes was planted, and each stake carried a white, grinning Indian skull. They were evidently the pride of the inhabitants, and a little to one side, as if guarding them, stood a trapper, well-known throughout eastern Montana by the soubriquet of 'Liver-Eating' Johnson. He was leaning on a crutch, with one leg bandaged, and the day being hot his entire dress consisted of a scant, much-shrunk red undershirt, reaching just below his hips. His matted hair and bushy beard fluttered in the breeze, and his giant frame and limbs, so freely exposed to view, formed an exceedingly impressive and characteristic picture. (CK, 109)

That winter (1868-69) Crazy Woman starved to death in her cabin on the Musselshell, an event not unexpected, but one which consequently ended John Johnston's Most Enormous Adventure.

Having learned of Mrs. Morgan's death, Johnston and his current trapping partner rode out to inspect her cabin.

¹⁶The ears were pickled for display to curious steamer passengers, who also sometimes bought scalps and even skulls (Randall, p. 119).

In the small cemetery they discovered a fifth grave marked by a cairn of large stones piled over eight feet high. Johnston studied this monument to her and deduced that his longtime enemies, the Crows, had buried her and shown their respect thusly. Because of this gesture to someone he had considered a friend, he rode alone to the Crow camp, determined to end the feud.

Crow Chief Gray Bear affirmed Johnston's belief. His warriors had indeed erected the cairn, both to honor the dead woman and to scorn the Blackfeet, who were afraid to enter the area. Thus appeased, Johnston left his lone trail of vengeance.

Like Pirate, Pawnee, and Mountain Man, Crow Killer does not end when the feature incident is over. It continues, showing the changes that civilization brought to Rocky Mountain life. Buffalo Bill Cody came west in 1871 to recruit mountain men and Indians for his famous Wild West Show. Despite his success in the East, his reputation among the westerners was laughable. Doc Carver, originator of the show, wrote to Thorp in 1927 that, "no western man ever took him [Cody] seriously . . . he was considered by every westerner to be the poorest shot on the plains . . . he never killed an Indian in his life." (CK, 135)

Johnston continued his career as an Indian fighter, though no longer with a particular tribe as sworn enemies. He also moved farther into the mountains, away from the

settlers who were invading the Montana territory. Eventually he found himself sheriff's deputy at Coulson, Wyoming, and in 1888 was elected first marshal at Red Lodge, Montana, then a coal mining town. His health failed suddenly in 1895, and in December of 1899 he was sent to the Old Soldiers' Home in Los Angeles, California, where he died one month later. His stone in the Veterans' Cemetery there read

Jno. Johnston

Co. H

2nd Colo Cav (CK, 190)¹⁷

John Johnston, more than any other mountain man hero figure, illustrates the Turnerian scheme of evolution under which, exposed to the corrosive influences of the frontier, civilized man is expected to become semi-savage. This principle, while still obvious, is muted in both Fisher's Mountain Man and Pollack's Jeremiah Johnson. These two later versions minimize rawness and emphasize nostalgia.

The Novel

Like Thorp and Bunker, Vardis Fisher uses historical material; unlike them, he emphasizes theme rather than occurrence. The novel opens with the music of exultation. Nature is a wonder. This sense of wonderment continues as Samson John Minard, protagonist modeled after John Johnston, comes upon a scene revealing the brutality of Nature. A

¹⁷ His body has since been reburied in his old territory near Custer, Wyoming. Personal interview with Charles Olafson, member of Buckskinners, Ankeny, Iowa, in June of 1977.

thousand-pound grizzly is digging a badger out of his den. The courageous thirty-pound badger, unable to flee further back, in desperation charges forward and sinks his teeth into the nose of his assailant, where he hangs on, swinging back and forth with every movement of the grizzly, until he is literally torn apart by the bear's huge claws. Sam stops to view with admiration the bloody remains of the animal that had fought with such courage. The flesh part of the bear's nose is still fast in the badger's jaws. "He looked at the badger a full minute, paying, in his silent way, his respect to a peerless fighter."¹⁸

Fighting, for Sam Minard and his fellow trappers, is a way of life, a means of survival. The badger had been outweighed, but had tried, despite the disadvantage. Sam admires three qualities in things living: first is courage; second, fortitude; third, mercy to the weak and defenseless (MM, 5). Reflecting on these things, Sam rides toward the Musselshell to discover a still more hideous scene, but one for which the reader has been prepared by the bear-badger confrontation.

Western histories, writes Mary Young, tell many stories of misunderstandings of Nature by civilized man. Such a tenderfoot or greenhorn projects his own wishes and plans onto her, not pausing to reflect on her possibilities for

¹⁸ Fisher, p. 5.

malevolence.¹⁹ One such story is that of John Morgan, referred to in Mountain Man as John Bowden, tenderfoot and western immigrant who left his wagon train to seek a better route west than South Pass, thus placing himself and his family in jeopardy.

Even in a world in which the weak are killed by the strong daily, Sam is jolted by the sight of the Bowden massacre. Upon realization that her family was in danger, Kate Bowden, much like the badger trapped in his den, had charged the dozen Blackfoot attackers with fierce and fearless rage, killing four of the armed warriors with an axe before the party escaped, taking with them her unconscious husband. Then, "Her mother-fury turning to nausea, her whole body shaking so terribly that she had the movements of a mechanical toy, she stood, Indian blood over her hair and face and clothes, and so fully sensed the immense and unspeakable horror of it that her conscious mind was blotted out" (MM 9-10).

When Sam reaches her, she is simply crawling back and forth between the bodies of her three children, looking into one dead face, then another. Perhaps because of her courage in the face of death, or perhaps because in her grief she seems to him to symbolize all motherhood, or perhaps because he values mercy to the weak and defenseless, Sam Minard

¹⁹ Mary Young, "The West and American Cultural Identity: Old Themes and New Variations," Western Historical Quarterly, 32, No. 1 (Apr. 1970), 142-143.

becomes her surrogate son-protector. Senseless as she is, she does not realize that she has found a friend, nor does she recognize his presence, other than to indicate to him speechlessly where to dig the two graves for her three children. He marks the graves with the skulls of the four Blackfeet she has killed, cooks her dinner (which she does not eat or even see), builds her a cabin, and plays hymns for her on his mouth organ. Again the strong has taken its toll against the weak, but again there has been bravery. Confused, Sam plays on.

He flung the robe back, for he didn't want to play down in the depths of fur. He wanted to stand up and shake a clenched fist at that malevolent fate that knocked on the door in the opening bars of Beethoven's C-minor symphony and proclaimed to the world its power over Beethoven's hearing. It was the same unpitying ruthless fate knocking there in the grand arrogant manner, that had brought savages to this spot, to hack three children to death and take a father away to torture. What was it there, he wondered, looking up at the home of the stars, a divine benevolence or a mindless malevolence?

(MM 17-18)

His distaste for the Indians that inhabited the Plains and mountains is intensified. He has already killed a number of these savages, considering them a nuisance to be removed from his path. Among his fellows, feelings run higher. "The hatred [against Blackfeet] in some of the men was such a fierce wild passion that it boiled in their emotions and flamed in their talk and kept them busy whetting their hatchets and knives . . . but most of the mountain men hated all Indians, and placed high among their mountain-man

laws the axiom that the only good Indian was a dead Indian -- and not only dead but picked clean by the ravens and wolves" (MM 14).

There is no trace of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee here, no compassion or sorrow for the native American. Fisher's Indians are largely violent, childish, cruel, untrustworthy, and superstitious. American literature and film have long seen them as Sam does -- as treacherous animals to be eliminated. The stereotyped Indian who lusts after liquor is present in the Blackfeet who capture Sam. The Indian's childish way of thinking is demonstrated by that same party's belief, upon Sam's suggestion, that they can ransom Minard, then later recapture him for a second ransom. The hideous tortures they inflict on prisoners are described in detail around mountain man campfires, revealing these red savages to be far less than human. (The mountain men, in contrast, never torture their captives.) The cruelty of the redmen to their wives is implied by Sam's musings on what Lotus will expect from him,²⁰ and is illustrated by Sam's witnessing a brave in coitus stab his woman repeatedly, then embrace her again after she is dead. The pride and courage of these people is recognized, and their beauty, but these are outweighed by the inconvenience and danger they cause.

²⁰Historically the Indian woman who became the wife of a free trapper was fortunate. She acquired wealth and status and received better treatment than if she had married an Indian (Blevins, p. 194).

Apart from the Indians, Sam sees this big land as incomprehensible in its beauty and bounty. Over it all, he recognizes a Creator and Protector whom he trusts will guard the pitiful woman on the banks of the Musselshell. He fantasizes that she will come to know and love this country as he does himself. Having put the problem of her existence into God's hands rather than his own, he sets off for Flat-head country to purchase a wife.

Kate, left in the wilderness where she hears the screams of smaller animals being torn by the teeth of larger ones and where predators often eat their prey alive, is saved by her visions. She hears her husband calling her, sees him riding by on horseback, waving. Her children, ethereal and glorified, come in visions emitted by the sage bush in the light of the full moon. She can not leave the place where her loved ones are; she sits lovingly beside her graves, reading the Bible aloud.

Sam's treatment of his bride, Lotus, is far different from what she has expected at the hands of a husband and different from what The Swan received from John Johnston. She has no notion of romantic love, marriage being rather a prescribed living arrangement. Sam, however, treats her gently, delights in her presence, falls deeply in love with her. He cooks delicacies for her, plays eighteenth century chansons for her on his mouth organ, takes joy in learning that she carries his son within her. "In the vacuum where

for seven years he had known only eating and killing and dodging his enemies he now enthroned her and she began to fill him; and his emotions enfolded her as she enfolded him, until on awaking she would be the first thing he would think of, and the last thing before falling asleep" (MM, 57).

The depths of Sam's love for this girl are matched only by his rage upon finding her dead. Grief he feels, and as deep as that of Kate Bowden, but he expresses it differently. He gathers up the bones of Lotus and his son,²¹ wraps them in a blanket, and ties the bundle behind his saddle. Ascertaining that Crows are responsible for the cowardly deed, he rides to the mountains and climbs a peak from which, at day-break, he swears an oath against the whole Crow nation. This oath is addressed to God, making the adventure a holy vendetta. Fisher protects his gentle-hearted hero by the explanation that, "Never had he really hated any man, or wished to kill any man, but this had been forced on him, and only a coward would blanch from it and turn back" (MM, 105).

With a touch of gothic romance, Fisher endears the grief-stricken young widower further to the reader's heart. Returning from the mountain-top, Sam makes a basket of his leather shirt and gathers a bushel of creamy white flowers. "On returning to his hidden beasts he took the bundle from behind the saddle, opened it, and literally wrapped and

²¹He later explains to Jim Bridger that he knows the sex of the unborn child by the formation of its pelvic bones.

smothered the bones in flowers. The hair on the nape of the skull he kissed. Then, tenderly, with large clumsy hands, he folded bones and flowers within the blanket and made the bundle secure behind his saddle" (MM, 106). With his grotesque cargo and measuring the odds, Sam rides to take his vengeance.

In assessing his advantages over his enemies, Sam echoes Ruxton. Sam muses: "The whiteman, faced with danger, decided instantly and acted swiftly; the redman was in some measure inhibited by his burden of superstitions, and had to wait on medicine men and propitious signs" (MM, 107. For Ruxton, see Chapter Two, p. 19).

His mountain man friends offer to help him, but he declines, preferring to do the job himself. He wants every Crow who dies for the murder of his wife to recognize his killer, and he wants the Crow nation to recognize that he, and he alone, is responsible for the deaths of these braves. Therefore, he determines to mark the bodies of his victims. He will take the scalp and the left ear from each.²²

Once Sam takes up his trail of vengeance, the action swings back and forth between this working out of his grief and rage and that of Crazy Woman, who remains on the Mussel-shell, tending the wildflowers she has planted on the graves

²²In his efforts to clean up Liver-Eating Johnson, Fisher allows him to eat only animal livers. There are no eviscerations. Tortures, and they are described graphically, are practiced only by the Indians.

of her children. The devotion of each survivor to his or her family does not waver. Neither can be distracted from his or her self-appointed duties, in one case the weeding and watering of plants and the reading of the Bible, in the other the relentless, brutal killing of the Crow braves he tracks.

Sam buries his family's bones in a cairn he builds in Kate's graveyard, thus affording Fisher the opportunity to bring him often to Kate's shack and further entwine their stories.

As in the historical account, twenty suicide warriors are sent to track and kill Sam, now referred to in the territory as The Terror. Sam meets each one, kills each and many others in close combat. He chooses not to scalp three of the braves he kills. These three display spectacular courage, the quality Sam prizes above all others, and for that reason he does not shame them by taking their scalps.

The first is a young warrior, not more than sixteen, not one of the cadre. He has slipped away and taken the trail of The Terror, hoping despite his outdated rifle and split-handled tomahawk, to rid his people of this menace and to win for himself the honor of wearing two eagle feathers. "For a full five minutes Sam looked down at the brave youth, thinking that his son would have been much like him. He did not take the scalp or cut off the ear. If he had had a shovel he would have buried this brave kid; if there had been stones in this area he would have built a cairn"

(MM, 139). At the realization of this young man's courage, Sam begins to lose his taste for killing.

Wintering in the warm springs area of Colter's Hell, Sam comes to realize that he no longer wishes to carry on his threat against the Crows. "He had no wish to spend his life in a blood feud but he could think of no sensible and honorable way to withdraw" (MM, 160). By contrast Fisher would have the reader believe that "The red peoples loved feuds and warpaths and undying hates. They wouldn't want him to ask for peace" (MM, 160).

Attacked by another assigned warrior and impressed by the man's bravery and also by the fact that he is the first to draw the blood of The Terror, Sam refrains from taking this scalp also. "The Indian braves, he was thinking, were only boys at heart; they simply must smear themselves with rancid grease and dance through a clutter of rituals and shriek like lunatics to get their blood up" (MM, 175). Sam, unlike John Johnston, has tired of his war against the Crows. Soon, however, he will have a new target for his outrage.

Caught unaware while watching still another of Nature's struggles, that between two male elk, he is captured by a band of Blackfeet led by Chief Elk Horns. Heaping insults and explicit threats upon The Terror, once he is safely bound, the band leads him to their camp. Sam files each new taunt and humiliation in his memory, along with a

picture of the offending warrior, and plans his escape. The opportunity comes when his guard greedily gulps the rum confiscated from Sam's packs. Sam quickly kills him with his bare hands and flees into a heavy snowstorm with only a robe, a tomahawk, and a piece of elk meat.²³

His escape route leads him not to Del Gue's cabin, but to that of the Crazy Woman on the Musselshell. He arrives nearly dead from exposure and finds her still tending her flowers, long ago killed by the cold, and still sitting by the hour reading the Bible to her children, despite the below-zero temperatures and the winds that howl across the prairie. After all the intervening years, Kate still does not acknowledge the presence of another person, and Sam again undertakes the son-like duty of providing for her.

The first question of Sam's fellow trappers upon learning of his capture and treatment is when the rendezvous will be.²⁴ It is set for Three Forks in August, after the trapping season.

Early in the summer Sam, intent on evading a Blackfoot war party, is swimming his horse across the Powder River when he sees a magnificent young Crow, naked except for his headdress, knife in teeth, poised above the water. Giving

²³Even in Fisher's version, Sam considers taking along one of the guard's thighs, but, "he was a sentimental man and he thought he would rather starve than eat human flesh" (MM, 207).

²⁴Rendezvous in this case means a gathering of mountain men for the purpose of wreaking vengeance on Elk Horns' band.

the war cry of his people, he dives in and swims after Sam, determined to count coup. Because Sam will not shoot an unequally-armed adversary, he loosens his knife and slips into the water to do battle. It is a narrow victory. Just before Sam plunges his knife into the breast of the Indian youth, the boy spits contemptuously in his face. The black Indian eyes are "so full of hate that they were like black molten steel. . . . As he [Sam] then fought to remain conscious he saw the change in the eyes, and that change he would remember to the day of his death" (MM, 258). Sam has killed one Indian too many. This lone warrior has been an heroic man, and now he is dead by Sam's hand. ". . . after reaching the bank, exhausted and subdued and feeling a strange shame, admiration compelled him to look down the river, hoping for a last view of this brave youth. But there was no sign of him" (MM, 259). Feeling sad and nauseous, he rides toward Kate's.

Thirty-three mountain men participate in the foray against Elk Horns' band of fifty-eight Blackfeet. They strike at night, killing all but two whom they plan to scalp and send back to their tribe as a warning and reminder of mountain man strength and unity. One who is saved is Chief Elk Horns, who had risen wounded as if from the dead, hate in his eyes, still determined to fight back. While Sam is not forced to experience the sort of forgiveness that Manfred attributes to Hugh Glass, he does feel a change of

heart: "Sam . . . was remembering how this varmit had degraded and humiliated him and how for days he had been close to death in winter desolation; but there was something in this situation that distressed him. Perhaps it was the eyes of all the trapped and helpless or wounded creatures that had looked at him, during his years in the West, and looked at him now, out of this man's eyes" (MM, 276). Scalped and shamed, Elk Horns and his lone surviving warrior are sent back to their people.

Later when Sam is out of earshot, one mountain man says to another, "I'm awful oneasy about Sam. He jist diddin act natural at all" (MM, 280).

It is not only the killing that makes Sam uneasy. Increasing numbers of wagons are pouring through the mountains daily. Gold has been discovered, the Mormon migration has begun, and mountain men are telling each other that soon the entire wilderness will be one conglomeration of farms and cities. The West, Jim Bridger tells Sam, "would soon be overrun by criminals, religious blowhards, tincup greenhorns, and every kind of simpleton on earth; and there would be no buffalo left, no beaver, no clean spot where a man could stretch out and smell sweet earth" (MM, 247).

During the following winter Kate Bowden freezes to death, huddled in the dirty bedding beside the door to her cabin, Bible in her lap. Not knowing this, Sam rides to visit her in the spring, and on his journey witnesses the

evidence of a devotion equal to that of Kate and himself. The incident is modeled after that of the death tent in Manfred's Lord Grizzly.

In a grove of aspen Sam discovers a skin tepee, sewn shut. Loosening three stakes from the earth, he crawls into the tent and finds a dead warrior in full regalia lying on a bed made of lodgepoles. Over him kneels an Indian woman, also dead. Sam realizes the man is Chief Elk Horns, who has killed himself because of the shame he has brought to his people in his dealings with The Terror, and that his wife has frozen to death kneeling over him, covering his scalpless head, symbol of the shame, with her own hair. Sam is moved by such steadfastness in a wife. Riding on, he realizes that in destroying the party of Blackfeet, the mountain men have avenged not only him, but also Kate Bowden.

His shock upon discovering Kate's death is not only because an old woman has died. She had been more to him than an old woman. She had been a touching stone, a place to which he could return, knowing it would be the same. She had epitomized bravery and fortitude. She had most of all symbolized the devotion attributed to motherhood.

Finding her grave marked by a cairn, Sam examines it and deduces that a party of Crows had found her frozen to death and had buried her, erecting over her this monument. He is confused by this gracious act on the part of his enemies. Interpreting it as a sign of atonement, he rides to make his peace.

In the conversation between Sam and the Crow chief, no mention is made of Crazy Woman, though both realize this is the reason for the pact. Sam promises to fight with the Crows against the seizure of their land by immigrants, then departs north toward Canada to escape the "long gray line of bawling beasts and squealing axels and creaking wagons . . . pushing on like armies of red ants" (MM, 304). Sam Minard's Most Enormous Adventure has ended.

Although placed in an historical setting, Fisher's characters abide largely by contemporary values. Father Walter J. Ong characterizes the current American sense of time as "synchronic," meaning that we see our present as a continuation of our westering past, yet we reject the frontier experience as far different from our own.²⁵ Students of the West are asking increasingly not what happened, but what values and ideas are attached to the West and to pioneering. Vardis Fisher in Mountain Man downplays the ferocity of our white forefathers in the wilderness, emphasizing instead that of the Indians who defended the territory. He attempts to make the mountain man understandable to today's Americans. In his belief that American readers prefer nostalgia to rawness, Fisher is undoubtedly correct.²⁶ Mountain Man sales have far

²⁵Walter J. Ong, S. J., "Synchronic Present: The Academic Future of Modern Literature in America," American Quarterly, 14 (Summer 1962), 250, cited in Young, p. 137.

²⁶In teaching this book to underclassmen, I had difficulty convincing them of the degree to which the mountain men had reverted to the primitive. Since they do not tear

surpassed those of Crow Killer.

Fisher's novel is a careful combination of fact, fancy, and borrowings from older sources. For one familiar with Crow Killer, the facts are easily recognizable. Many of the borrowings come from Ruxton's Life in the Far West. Richard Cracroft mentions three, two of which (the game of hand and the chief who would not die) were discussed earlier (See Chapter Two, page 20). The third is the death of Old Bill Williams, which although vivid, is erroneous.²⁷ According to the Ruxton-Fisher account, Williams was found shot to death. In Fisher's version, the assassin has exchanged his own broken rifle for Williams'. This same version will recur in the film Jeremiah Johnson, as will the advice on women that an old trapper gives a young one. Old Bill Williams warns Sam:

Twenty-six winters has snowed on me in these here mountains and even a nigger or a greaser would larn a few things in all that time. I otta could tell bull from cow. I know deer is deer and grizzly paws ain't a woman's soft belly and a cactus ain't her lips but I never could find the tracks in a woman's heart. . . .

off bloody scalps, they hesitated to believe that their heroes and forefathers did either. One student wrote, "Readers like me are not absolutely sure such inhuman violence existed to that extent, or was justified for any reason, or should be retold as though it was, and abandon the preoccupation on such cruelty with a shudder, preferring to dwell on other aspects of mountain life that are more fathomable" (Mary Balko, "Selective Eyes," May 18, 1977).

²⁷Richard H. Cracroft, "'Half Froze for Mountain Doins': The Influence and Significance of George F. Ruxton's Life in the Far West," Western American Literature, 10, No. 1 (May 1975), 33. See also editor's note, Life in the Far West, p. 225.

Fer ten year I packed me a squaw, a Cheyenne she war, and the meanest bitch ever bawled fer beads. I lodgepoled her on Dead Wolf Crick and traded her fer a Hawken gun. My next night-love, she war a Crow, and come hell or high Water thar warn't enough beads and red paint in all of Sublette's packs to keep that squaw from cryin. I traded that-air bitch fer a packhorse. . . .

I know mountain men as has tried them all, even the Diggers, even the snakes. . . . A woman's breasts it's the hardest rock the Almighty made on this ole earth, and I can see no sign on it. I could track even a piece of thistle down but I never could see no tracks in a woman's heart.

(MM, 41-42)²⁸

It would be an error to accept this novel as fact.

Fisher has not set out to write a history. Yet the teasers on the back cover laud it as such. "[Fisher] has . . . presented the Old West without distortion," writes a critic from the Omaha World-Herald. "The West as it once was . . . Great for shaking the lies out of an old set of corny legends. The truth is enough," writes one from Readers' Syn-
diccate. Not so. Fisher's goal was not to shake the lies out.

²⁸In Ruxton the same advice is given by Killbuck. "Thirty winters has snowed on me in these hyar mountains, and a niggur or a spaniard would larn 'some' in that time . . . this child knows 'bull' from 'cow,' and ought to could. That deer is deer, and goats is goats, is plain as paint to any but a greenhorn. . . . For twenty year I packed a squaw along. Not one, but a many. First I had a Blackfoot -- the darndest slut as ever cried for fofarrow. I lodge-poled her on Colter's Creek, and made her quit. My buffler hos I gave for old Bull-tail's daughter. There was'nt enough scarlet cloth, nor beads, nor vermillion in Sublette's packs for her . . . and in two years I'd sold her to Croww-Eagle for one of Jake Hawkin's guns. . . . Then I tried the Sioux, the Shian, and a Digger from the other side.

. . . though I'm bell for 'sign,' a woman's breast is the hardest kind of rock to me, and leaves no trail that I can see of" (Ruxton, Life, pp. 191-192).

but to celebrate the Western frontier. If in doing so he distorted the truth, that was an exchange he chose to make.

The Film

During Fisher's lifetime he refused to sell the rights of any of his works to the motion picture industry, claiming he had seen too many good books corrupted by Hollywood.²⁹

However, in 1972 Warner Brothers filmed Jeremiah Johnson, the filmscript of which was based on both Crow Killer and Mountain Man. The film premiered in the Ada Theatre in Boise, Idaho, on December 2, 1972.

Although the book Mountain Man had been received favorably, the film drew questions regarding its redeeming value. Dorys Grover claims it is "far more brutal and primitive than the novel."³⁰ One who has studied both carefully, however, must disagree. It is the book, not the film, that details hideous tortures and describes graphically the massacres of Kate's and Jeremiah-Sam's loved ones. The film viewer sees the massacres only after the fact and only in brief glimpses of prone unbloodied bodies. The novelistic version of the unprovoked attack on the Swan, pregnant, by a bloodthirsty young war party is surely more brutal than the film's attack on a non-pregnant woman and a twelve-year-boy in retaliation against Johnson for leading a United States

²⁹Dorys C. Grover, "Vardis Fisher and the Critics of Children of God," A Solitary Voice (New York: Revisionist Press, 1973), p. 12. (All subsequent references to Grover will be from this edition of this essay.)

³⁰Grover, p. 11.

military contingent through sacred Crow burial grounds. Finally, the Crow assaults on Jeremiah Johnson can be no more brutal or primitive than can Sam Minard's assaults on the Crows, despite his avowal of holy vengeance.

Pauline Kael indicts the film for being "stretched out with ponderous lore."³¹ Much of this lore is directly from Ruxton and Fisher and is far from being ponderous. Kill-buck's famous and amusing advice about women, for example, is spoken by the wise old man figure. Jeremiah's wish that it had been different "down below" and the old man's puzzlement over "them people down there eatin' hog when they could eat elk"³² are necessary to the image of the mountain man as an escapist.

One of Kael's major criticisms is that the movie allows Jeremiah to become a murderer but still remain a hero. The same criticism can be made of the title character in the much celebrated western film, Shane. Ms. Kael complains, "When the Crows, recognizing Jeremiah's courage, end their war against him, the chief gives him a peace sign; Jeremiah signals back, giving him the finger. In that gesture the movie-makers load him with guilt for what the Americans have done to the Indians, and, at the same time, ask us to laugh at

³¹Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," The New Yorker, 48, No. 45 (Dec. 30, 1972), 50-1, as quoted in Grover, p. 11.

³²Sydney Pollack, dir., Jeremiah Johnson, with Robert Redford, Warner Brothers, 1972.

the gesture, identifying with his realism."³³ This is contradictory of the Jeremiah Johnson who angrily knocks down his friend Del Gue for involving him in an attack on a band of Blackfeet and who has no interest in collecting the dead braves' scalps. Certainly Jeremiah would appear a gentler and more peaceable character if, like Sam Minard and John Johnston, he himself had initiated the peace settlement with the Crows. However, since in the film the Indians are the aggressors, it is their prerogative, rather than his, to offer a truce. Ms. Kael ought to view the movie once more. Jeremiah does not give the Indian chief the finger. He emphatically returns his salute, leaning forward in the saddle, right arm raised, all fingers outstretched.

Kael is correct in her contention that Jeremiah Johnson makes too little of the subplot revolving around Crazy Woman.³⁴ Kate is seen only once, the day her family is massacred. Both her appearance and her importance are minimized. The Blackfeet have killed her two children as they played near their spacious cabin. When Jeremiah arrives on the scene shortly afterward, she is upbraiding them for having played outside. After burying them and marking their graves with crosses, Jeremiah discovers another boy huddled in the cabin. The muteness of Fisher's Kate is transferred in the film to her surviving son, whom she insists Jeremiah

³³Kael, in Grover, p. 11.

³⁴Kael, in Grover, p. 13.

take with him. Once the reluctant foster father and speechless son leave the Morgan homestead, nothing is mentioned of the Crazy Woman, except that she eventually dies.

Jeremiah Johnson illustrates a problem Don Walker has identified in using the mountain man as a hero. Walker explains that the need for a literary hero who is both pure mountaineer and conventional leading man may account for the odd division of roles in fur trade literature, that division being the characteristic splitting of the hero into two men.³⁵ One is the old mountain man of unknown background who is skilled in woodcraft and committed to the mountain ways. The other is the young civilized man new to the wilderness who must be initiated into trapper ways and has some romantic attachment to women. He is not yet a confirmed mountaineer.

In this film the old man, a combination of John Johnston's mentor John Hatcher and his friend Bear Claw Chriss Lapo, is played by Will Geer. He teaches Jeremiah skinning, traoping, and Indian lore. His eponym for his student, "Pilgrim," is reminiscent of de Crèvecoeur's, "Americans are western pilgrims" (See Chapter One, page 4).

Jeremiah's development from the romantic figure of the apprentice mountaineer to that of the wise old man committed to the ways of the wilderness is the basic plot of the film.

³⁵Walker, "The Mountain Man as Literary Hero," p. 18.

His progress is shown in his only two remarks about civilization. Early in his mountain experience he confides to Hatcher with some nostalgia, "It ought to of been different." Much later, however, he has no qualms about the choice he has made. When Del Gue, concerned about his friend's scalp, warns him, "Maybe you best go down to a town," Jeremiah answers readily, "I been to a town, Del." The transformation is now complete. Jeremiah Johnson has stated his commitment to the mountains. He feels, like Del Gue, that the Rocky Mountains are "the marrow of the world."

The romantic interest in the film, as in the novel and the biography, is the brief marriage of Jeremiah and the Flat-head princess. Although in this case she is forced upon him, he does grow fond of her. Their wedding is a mixture of French Catholic and Indian rituals with the Swan as reluctant bride. In a series of short scenes Jeremiah, the Swan, and the mute boy Caleb overcome their mutual unhappiness with the situation and develop instead tenderness for and devotion to each other. They become the proverbial happy family. Jeremiah displays his acceptance of the traditional husband-father role by the civilized act of shaving off his beard.

The idyllic existence lasts until Jeremiah is requested by a military contingent to lead a rescue party to three stranded wagons. Meaningfully contrasting the families in these wagons to Jeremiah's own and capitalizing on the conscience of a man from civilized territory, one member of

the contingent states, "These are Christian families," and demands unbelievably, "Do you mean to tell me that you intend to let those people die?" In acceding to the party's wish to cross the sacred Crow burial ground, Jeremiah sacrifices his own family.

Upon discovering the bodies of the Swan and Caleb, Jeremiah makes no oath of vengeance. He allows his beard to grow again. As burial, he wraps his wife and foster son in robes, lays them on the bed, and sets fire to the cabin.³⁶

He then makes his only attack on Indians, a party of six Crows. He allows one to escape, and presumably this brave targets him for vengeance by the Crow nation. Jeremiah lives through one ambush after another, killing his opponents, but never scalping them or marking their bodies.

Upon his return to Crazy Woman's cabin, he is shown by the settler now living there the cairn the Crows have erected to him. The frightened settler, appropriately named Qualen, explains, "It ain't a grave like the others. More like a statue, a monument." Now knowing the Crows recognize him as a great warrior, Jeremiah is ready to accept their offer of peace.

³⁶Burning a cabin was considered a breach of the mountain man code. Trappers expected to use each other's cabins, since shelter on a cold night in the Rockies was scarce. When John Johnston left for the last time the cabin he and the Swan had shared, he burned it. This was twenty-five years after her death, and this was the only one of his cabins he ever burned (CK, 142).

Like Hugh Glass, John Johnston was a man who met a dangerous enemy and survived. Although by contemporary standards less admirable than Glass, he was a man of the American wilderness. His difference from his fellows was not in kind, but in degree. Richard Van Orman designates these men as products of the Turnerian scheme of evolution, as semi-savages suffering from the "corrosive influences" of the frontier.³⁷ These, too, are mountain men.

³⁷Richard A. Van Orman, "The Bard in the West," The Western Historical Quarterly, 5, No. 1 (Jan. 1974), 34.

Chapter V

Conclusion

The mountain man was a singular character in history and in literature. Whether he saw his move to the Rockies as a positive or a negative choice, whether his entrance therein was precipitated by economics, by a longing for adventure, or by the necessity to escape, the mountain man was a loner. He went west eagerly, and this attitude in itself indicated that he was a man of solitude and self-reliance. Because the dangers of fur trapping were well known, the choice to join the profession also indicated that a man considered himself to be tough and adaptable to the western wilderness. He expected physical hardships and violence, and knowingly gambled his life. Unlike the farming settler, he did not plan to adopt one piece of earth as his own. He was a roamer; he went where the hunting was good. More than any other frontiersman, he adopted the ways of the frontier natives, the Indians.

In his zeal at mountain life, in his extensive trapping and exploring, he was the unwitting agent of his own demise. Although it was not in his best interest to allow immigrants into the Rockies, the mountain man himself was instrumental in facilitating their entrance onto the scene. His trapping expeditions led him north, west, and southwest in search of

new streams. In addition to the streams, he discovered the mountain passes and river routes that would make possible the movement of vast numbers of families west. These new settlers and the increased Indian hostility they caused were to render the environment no longer suitable for the mountain man.

Although he was a master at storytelling and was responsible for the development of the tall tale, the free trapper wrote little about his experiences. More prolific were travelers to the frontier. These western tourists saw in some cases a wild man reverted to the primitive, in other cases a romantic individual free from the harness of society. The newspaper and magazine accounts and later the journals and novels available to the eastern reading public encompassed both extremes, with Ruxton providing the most realistic reports. Generally speaking, the more direct contact a writer had with the frontier, the more valid were his judgments and impressions.

Richard Slotkin's belief echoes Goetzmann: the mountain man was commercially-minded and exploitative. He contends that it is only the aura of the free hunter, the Indian trappings, that makes the mountain man romantic and even palatable.¹ It is true that because the mountain man is a culture hero, he has been cleaned up for public consumption.

¹Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973), p. 417.

John Johnston is one example of this process. Kit Carson is another. A problem in converting Kit Carson, mountain man, into Kit Carson, glorified national hero, was that simply his being a mountain man made him suspect. Henry Nash Smith writes, "Barbaric life in the wilderness held grave dangers for the ethical purity considered obligatory in national heroes" (p. 92). This quandry was resolved by giving Carson, on paper at least, all the virtues of the mountaineer, but none of his vices. When Carson himself saw what DeWitt Peters had written in the Carson biography, he is reported to have murmured that Peters had, "laid it on a leetle too thick."²

The literary mountain man is basically a romantic hero. He lends himself to romantic primitivism, illustrating a desire to seek innocence once again, to escape the burdens of knowledge and society.³ He captures the yearnings of the modern American for individualism. Don D. Walker explains that while some readers will insist on a severely disciplined rendering of history, the imaginative literature of the fur trade exhibits a romantic interpretation.⁴ The struggle of the mountain man, Walker suggests, is that of man

²Henry Nash Smith, p. 95.

³Walker, "The Mountain Man Journal," p. 318.

⁴Walker, "Philosophical and Literary Implications in the Historiography of the Fur Trade," p. 101.

versus something bigger than himself.⁵ It is this struggle that demands a giant for a hero, a man "too strong to be vanquished by the hostility of Nature, too large to be lost in the vastness of prairie or desert space, too devoted to his code to be confused by the psychological complexities of life, and too skilled at his trade to be defeated by an opponent."⁶ Only such a man can pit himself against a Great Something and survive.

There exists a difficulty in research in the separation of fact from fiction. Although these legends are rooted in actual people and times and places, they are not limited to historical occurrences. The historical data may be abbreviated, expanded, adapted, or omitted, depending on the wont of the writer. This creates no danger unless the reader imagines he is reading historical truth.

A great many borrowings are made by one source from another. Despite the Federal Copyright Law of 1790, material is not only adapted; some is copied word-for-word. In addition, mountain man literature features the recurrent themes of the nobility of a free man in close contact with Nature, the white man's relations with the Indian, and the vanishing wilderness.

⁵ Don D. Walker, "Essays in the Criticism of Western Literary Criticism," The Possible Sack, 2, No. 10 (Aug. 1971), 3.

⁶ Hector Lee, "Tales and Legends in Western American Literature," Western American Literature, 9, No. 4 (Winter 1975), 244.

Evidence suggests that the mountain man was not unique in American literature, but that he was the highest evolution of the solitary frontier hero. Richard Slotkin sees him as a descendant of the Puritans and claims that both were "men-on-the-make," that the Puritans attacked the wilderness for the alleged purpose of converting the heathen and the mountain men did so for pleasure and profit (Slotkin, p. 412). In the 1820's and 1830's the legend of Davy Crockett grew up. Following closely after Crockett and Cooper's Leatherstocking, the mountain man was their logical heir. The nostalgia and excitement he evokes, Wallace Stegner suggests, may be due to the fact that the West was the last home of frontier freedom and that "as horsemen's country it always had more glamor than clodhopper country."⁷

Four images rolled into one, the mountain man was symbolic of an era. The epitome of Jacksonian Man, he set out to wrench a fortune from the Rockies. Choosing a life of necessary violence on the edge of the frontier, he became a refugee from civilization, a reckless degenerate personifying the dangers of the western wilds. As first white man into the mountains, he was recognized as an explorer, an expert on the geography of the territory and on survival in that territory. Finally, to him belonged the glamor of the western hero. He escaped the corruption of the cities to embrace the purity of

⁷ Stegner, Sound, p. 195.

Nature. M. J. Heale argues, "Probably the strongest conviction in the writings of Americans in the hundred years after the Declaration of Independence was that they were, above all, free men. The concept of freedom was central to American consciousness."⁸ The mountain man was, above all, free.

⁸ M. J. Heale, "The Role of the Frontier in Jacksonian Politics: David Crockett and the Myth of the Self-Made Man," Western Historical Quarterly, 4, No. 4 (Oct. 1973), 417.

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