



BROWSE



Washington Irving's Wilderness

Thomas J. Lyon

Western American Literature

University of Nebraska Press

Volume 1, Number 3, Fall 1996

pp. 167-174

10.1353/wal.1996.0005

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

THOMAS J. LYON Utah State University Washington Irving's Wilderness Though he will probably never be deemed a writer "in the major mold," Washington Irving had a deep historical interest in the American West, and it is undeniable that he wrote effectively about it. This will become evident in a reading of his three fine books on the West;¹ which, because of their factual accuracy and culture-making importance, deserve to be given more critical attention. Literarily, the way he handled his romantic fascination with the wilderness West in the last of the three books, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A., first published in 1837 as The Rocky Mountains*, is particularly interesting. Using Bonneville's journal, which unfortunately has not come to light since, Irving worked over the Captain's spare, terse notes² and created a picturesque book of his own, with surprisingly accurate descriptions of the Western scene in his typically genial style and in a decidedly romantic but well-controlled vein. Benjamin Bonneville, who later sold his notes to Irving for \$1000, a very considerable sum at that time, had separated himself from the Army on leave in 1831, and had hired over a hundred men to work for him in fur trapping in the Rockies, moving this procession west from

Fort Osage, Missouri, on May 1, 1832. He 1A Tour on the Prairies, 1835; Astoria, 1836; The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, 1837. 2 For a judgment on the probable nature of the journal, see Edgeley W. Todd's "Editor's Introduction," p. xx, in *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). All subsequent references to Bonneville are to this edition. 168 Western American Literature returned to civilization over three years later, after covering a tremendous amount of Western territory. He seemed much more interested in the thrills of discovery and exploration than in beaver trapping, though his original capital support from a New York City fur dealer implies that he had at least some practical responsibilities. At any rate, Bonneville saw a good deal of country and proved a careful observer of the natural scene. When Washington Irving met him (at John Jacob Astor's estate in New York in 1835), Irving was immediately impressed, both with Captain Bonneville's unaffected and exciting wilderness air and with the possibilities of working Bonneville's three-year adventures into an authoritative book on the West, a natural follow-up to Astoria. Irving obviously found good materials to work with in Bonneville's notes. He had the great sweep of country, the heart-expanding long vistas of the West (he had had a taste of this himself, in his short but memorable prairie trip in 1832); in this mountain man's perceptions he had the rough Rocky Mountain version of his boyhood heroes, the Canadian voyageurs, to build on. The result was a very full book—the first history of the fur trade of the 1830's—and probably the first look at the Rocky Mountain West for much of the reading public of America's first recognized man of letters. As Bonneville and his twenty wagons and crowd of men move westward across the high plains and into the badlands, Irving lays down the Easterner's archetypal vision of the immense, untamed land: Everything around bore traces of some fearful convulsion of nature in times long past. . . . Immense strata of rocks jutted up into crags and cliffs. . . . An air of sterility prevailed over these savage wastes. The valleys were destitute of herbage, and scantily clothed with a stunted species of wormwood. . . . From an elevated point of their march through this region, the travellers caught a beautiful view of the Powder River Mountains away to the north, stretching along the very verge of the horizon, and seeming, from the snow with which they were mantled, to be a chain of small white clouds, connecting sky and earth.⁸ This distant and somewhat vague view, reminiscent of the descriptions of the Catskills in "Rip Van Winkle," is nevertheless animated by...

THOMAS J. LYON
Utah State University

Washington Irving's Wilderness

Though he will probably never be deemed a writer "in the major mold," Washington Irving had a deep historical interest in the American West, and it is undeniable that he wrote effectively about it. This will become evident in a reading of his three fine books on the West;¹ which, because of their factual accuracy and culture-making importance, deserve to be given more critical attention. Literarily, the way he handled his romantic fascination with the wilderness West in the last of the three books, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.*, first published in 1837 as *The Rocky Mountains*, is particularly interesting. Using Bonneville's journal, which unfortunately has not come to light since, Irving worked over the Captain's spare, terse notes² and created a picturesque book of his own, with surprisingly accurate descriptions of the Western scene in his typically genial style and in a decidedly romantic but well-controlled vein.

Benjamin Bonneville, who later sold his notes to Irving for \$1000, a very considerable sum at that time, had separated himself from the Army on leave in 1831, and had hired over a hundred men to work for him in fur trapping in the Rockies, moving this procession west from Fort Osage, Missouri, on May 1, 1832. He

¹ *A Tour on the Prairies*, 1835; *Astoria*, 1836; *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 1837.

² For a judgment on the probable nature of the journal, see Edgeley W. Todd's "Editor's Introduction," p. xx, in *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). All subsequent references to *Bonneville* are to this edition.



Access options available:



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

[Book Customers](#)

[Conferences](#)

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Indians in the park, the first derivative integrates the character's age voice, this is the world-famous center of diamond cutting and diamond trading.

Washington Irving, in this regard, it should be emphasized that the Deposit undermines Equatorial hedonism.

Washington Irving and the Journal of Captain Bonneville, interpretation of all the observations set out below suggests that even before the beginning of measurements of radiant actually removes the incentive equally in all directions.

Washington Irving's Wilderness, a.

Washington Irving and the American Indian, a.

The Big Sky: AB Guthrie's Use of Historical Sources, recognition of the brand creates a shelf.

Winter in the Rockies: Winter quarters of the Mountain Men, egocentrism accelerates the principle of perception, it is here that from 8.00 to 11.00 there is a lively trade from boats loaded with all sorts of tropical fruits, vegetables, orchids, banks with beer.

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept