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## The Big Sky: A.B. Guthrie's Use of Historical Sources

Richard H. Cracroft

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

RICHARD H. CRACROFT Brigham Young University The Big Sky: A.B. Guthrie's Use of Historical Sources\* In that penultimate fourth section of A. B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, where in the idyllic yet ephemeral reality of Boone Caudill's West grinds towards its destiny at the hands of a rapacious civilization, there is a starkly powerful scene in which the grievously wounded Jim Deakins, who is starving with his snow-bound companions following an Indian encounter in the rugged Marias Pass, feebly whispers to Boone, his leather-tough but caring sidekick: "Look Boone, I ain't got long. When my mind's right I can see that much. I'll be under come tomorrow or next day. Ain't no use to say I'll make it. Ain't no use to try. Hear? Me and you never et dead meat, but meat fair-killed is meat to eat. There's a swaller or two on my old ribs. Take your knife, Boone. Get it out. I ain't got long, nohow. Goddam your old skin, you hear? Boone? 1 These words, together with Boone's ensuing revulsion at the idea of such a suggestion and his actions in saving Jim's life, summon

to mind George Frederick Ruxton's exciting *Life in the Far West*, that veritable handbook of Mountain Man life first serialized in *Blackwood's* in 1848. Ruxton's La Bonte and Killbuck, (counterparts to Boone and Jim) are halted in a similar mountain pass by Killbuck's serious illness. After four days of suffering from pain and hunger, Killbuck whispers to his longtime sidekick: "Boy [ , ] . . . This old hoss feels like goin' under, and that afore long. You're stout yet, and if thar was meat handy, you'd come round slick. Now, boy, I'll be under, as I said, afore many hours, and if you don't raise meat, you'll be in the same fix. I never eat dead meat myself, and wouldn't ask no one to do it neither; but meat fair killed is meat anyway; so, boy, put your knife in this old niggur's lights, and help yourself. It's 'poor bull' I know, but maybe my old hump ribs has picking on 'em." "You're a good old hos," answered LaBont<sup>^</sup>, "but this child ain't turned niggur yet."<sup>2</sup> This paper was read on October 7, 1970, before the Western Literature Association at Sun Valley, Idaho. <sup>1</sup>(Boston: Houghton-Mifflin: Sentry Edition, 1965), p. 308. sEd. by Leroy R. Hafen (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), p. 127.

164 Western American Literature The frequent recurrence of this kind of borrowing in *The Big Sky* reminds the scholar of Western American literature that Guthrie, in his desire to create in Boone Caudill what Wallace Stegner has called "both mountain man and myth, both individual and archetype,"<sup>3</sup> has drawn heavily and specifically upon accounts recorded by the men who savored the rugged mountain life prior to and during the years 1830 to 1843. Guthrie's use of such his torical materials to authenticate his nostalgic and impassioned hymn to the passing of an era goes far toward explaining at least part of the success of a book which is at once realistic and romantic, viscerally graphic yet almost gently poetic. Sometime in 1938, Guthrie, a successful newspaperman in Kentucky, and author of a less than excellent western novel, *Murders at Moon Dance*, determined to write a novel about the Mountain Man, a novel which would express not only Guthrie's love affair with his native region in general and the mountains and streams of Montana in particular, but one which would capture as much as possible the virile reality of the trapper's life. Rejecting Stewart Edward White's so-called "Sunday-school representation" of the generally amoral Mountain Men, Guthrie determined that his projected work would be authentic in tone and fact, a story of the . . . fur-hunters who followed hard on the heels of Lewis...

RICHARD H. CRACROFT  
*Brigham Young University*

## *The Big Sky*: A.B. Guthrie's Use of Historical Sources\*

In that penultimate fourth section of A. B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, wherein the idyllic yet ephemeral reality of Boone Caudill's West grinds towards its destiny at the hands of a rapacious civilization, there is a starkly powerful scene in which the grievously wounded Jim Deakins, who is starving with his snow-bound companions following an Indian encounter in the rugged Marias Pass, feebly whispers to Boone, his leather-tough but caring sidekick:

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These words, together with Boone's ensuing revulsion at the idea of such a suggestion and his actions in saving Jim's life, summon to mind George Frederick Ruxton's exciting *Life in the Far West*, that veritable handbook of Mountain Man life first serialized in *Blackwood's* in 1848. Ruxton's La Bonté and Killbuck, (counterparts to Boone and Jim) are halted in a similar mountain pass by Killbuck's serious illness. After four days of suffering from pain and hunger, Killbuck whispers to his longtime sidekick:

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



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