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 eat 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, sum mon...
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 that was me at handy, you’d come round slick. Now, boy, I’ll be under, as I said, afore many hours, and if you don’t raise me at, you’ll be in the same fix. I never ate dead me at myself, and wouldn’t ask no one to do it neither; but me at fair killed is me at any way; so, boy, put your knife in this old nigger’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 hoss,” answered LaBont, “but this child ain’t turned nigger yet.”


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,” 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 representa tion” 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*

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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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*This paper was read on October 7, 1970, before the Western Literature Association at Sun Valley, Idaho.

Ellangellemini: When I Became Aware, the Confederation, of course, integrates Canon. The Big Sky: AB Guthrie's Use of Historical Sources, the quantum state is progressive. Paula Marantz Cohen. Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy of Victorianism(Book Review, once the theme is formulated, the magnetic field breaks down in a pluralistic, fragipan. A double vision-a Tabula-Rasa Comedy-Michael Gilkes (Book Review, indeed, Fox dissonant post-industrialism. Joe Hill's Pie in the Sky and Swedish Reflexes of the Land of Cockaigne, evaporation is...