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JIM BECKWOURTH: Black Mountain Man and War Chief of the Crows. By Elinor Wilson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. 248 pp. \$8.95.

When the mulatto hotelkeeper and ex-mountain man James P. Beckwourth permitted T. D. Bonner to “ghostwrite” his autobiography, he achieved early notoriety at the expense of his future reputation. Beckwourth was not a fictitious character, but a real person of considerable ability and importance. Inevitably, like such contemporaries as Jim Bridger and Old Bill Williams, biographers would eventually have discovered him and given him serious although less extensive treatment. The flamboyant “autobiography,” however, with its undoubted gross exaggerations and suspected outright fabrications, long barred a serious consideration of Beckwourth’s career and caused him to be regarded primarily as an “immortal liar.” Although interest in the Beckwourth autobiography (1856), if only as Wild West literature, justified four later editions – the best, by Delmont R. Oswald, also in 1972 – and although LeRoy Hafen (1927) and, with much more thorough documentation, Nolie Mumey (1957) demonstrated the possibility of recovering trustworthy knowledge of his post-autobiographical decade, Ms Wilson’s work is the first attempt at a full-length biography.

While bringing together with admirable diligence every scrap of information from extra-autobiographical sources, Ms Wilson also makes bold, although not uncritical, use of the autobiography. She implicitly plays down Beckwourth’s career as a Crow warrior, which gave greatest scope to his braggadocio. “He simply could not deal accurately – some say honestly – with figures” (p. 61), and she disregards such alleged exploits as (chap. 25): “I threw myself among the thickest group I could see, and positively hacked down seventeen . . . warriors without receiving a scratch.” She admits his consistent practice of exaggerating his importance, comments that his “sense of the theater plays havoc with Beckwourth’s veracity,” and mentions every positive evidence of a Beckwourth “whopper” or “fantasy” (pp. 39, 42). In fact, she goes far to support the “gaudy liar” charge which in her first chapter she seems implicitly to reject.

However, in the lack of contradictory evidence or obvious exaggeration, she is inclined to accept his essential accuracy. Possibly the greatest weakness is the failure to consider the frequent charge that Beckwourth appropriated the exploits of other men, notably those of Edward Rose, his predecessor as mulatto mountain man and Crow chief. The best known episode in the autobiography closely resembles an exploit which as early as 1829 was ascribed to Rose.

But Beckwourth, despite braggadocio and exaggerations, has been widely accepted by qualified historians and anthropologists as an authority on matters not directly related to his own alleged exploits. Here, perhaps, is the autobiography's justification. Ms Wilson presents evidence that he may have been a better authority for his own career than he has usually been considered. That he survived the vicissitudes of mountain life for over forty years is sufficient testimony to his real ability and endurance. But the author also offers, for example, documentary proof of his previously suspect participation in the Seminole War (pp. 86-87, 208). The assumption that he may have been telling the basic truth about other activities is not susceptible to such proof.

Among the author's notable contributions is her thorough tracing of Jim's paternal ancestry. She reasonably concludes that he was the offspring, not of a casual amour, but of a "long-term alliance" between Sir Jennings Beckwith and a fairly light-skinned slave, perhaps a quadroon, with whom he "lived openly . . . as his wife, at least in Missouri." Even more important and original is her account of Thomas D. Bonner, the alcoholic temperance-writer and con man, who was responsible for the autobiography's agonizingly high-flown style and who apparently swindled Jim out of his share of the proceeds.

Many riddles in Beckwourth's controversial career and puzzling personality still call for solution. One may legitimately cavil mildly at the subtitle — "Black Mountain Man and War Chief of the Crows." Nevertheless this biography fills a long neglected need and is unlikely to call for replacement in the foreseeable future. Any library with an interest in Western history should have both this biography and a copy of the autobiography.

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