Book Reviews

and as the forces of Napoleon III returned home, Alric did likewise, sailing from Vera-
cruz in April, 1867. In his final chapter he describes the return voyage and his elation
upon his return to Paris where he would serve as a parish priest until his death in 1883.
Alric's text is well annotated by Professor Nunis, who has thereby both illuminated
and expanded it. An analytical index follows the text, although a supplementary bib-
liography would have been more desirable in its place since the entire Baja California
Travels Series will be cumulatively indexed in its final volume. The quality of Alric's
Sketches is, of course, in keeping with the high standards set for the series by Glen
Dawson and Edwin Carpenter, its general editors.

The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, As Told To Thomas
D. Bonner. Introduction, notes, and epilogue by Delmont R. Oswald.
(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972. Illustrations. 649 pp. $9.75.)

Reviewed by Richard H. Dillon, head librarian of the Sutro Branch,
California State Library, San Francisco.

This excellent edition of a classic of Western Americana has appeared at an oppor-
tune time—virtually coincidentally with Elinor Wilson's biography of Beckwourth
(or Beckwith) for the University of Oklahoma Press. Used together, the volumes
should constitute at long last a definitive biography of the mulatto mountain man.

Beckwourth was the natural son of a Virginia planter and a Negro slave girl. 
Emancipated by his father and encouraged to seek his fortune in the West, he did just
that in the face of great odds. (Only one other black, Ed Rose, became a major figure
in the Rocky Mountain fur trade.) From the time that he served in General Ashley's
1824 expedition until his death in 1866, he was a prominent figure in the western moun-
tains and plains. His one major absence was during Florida's Second Seminole War
in which, typically, he claimed to have served as a captain of scouts but was, more
likely, a muleteer, packer, or something of that sort.

For years, Beckwourth's reminiscences have, understandably, been heavily dis-
counted by historians, because the man was such a liar and braggart. When he was not
rescuing General Ashley three times over from death, he was telling-off or bluffing-
down the likes of Tom ("Broken Hand") Fitzpatrick. Had shrinks or trick-cyclists
been the vogue a hundred and forty years ago, they would have had a field day with
Jim. It was as if Beckwourth's ego, suffering from a psychological tape worm, needed
constant stuffing.

Early on, however, scholars like Charles Camp and Dale Morgan realized that there
was about as much truth as fiction in Beckwourth's accounts. He was imaginative, but
he was not a novelist. And, above all, he was there. Now we have a detailed going-over
of the incidents of his career which makes the Life much more useful to those of us
concerned with the facts of history, as opposed to folklore and legend. Oswald might
have been even tougher on Jim, but he probably became too fond of his subject to be
as ruthless in his third-degree as he might have been.

Life is substantially more important to historians of the Rocky Mountain West
than to those interested in the Pacific littoral. Beckwourth's role inland was larger. He
was a "chief" (subchief, probably) of the Crows, not the Modocs or Mojaves. Not
until page 503 of some 535 pages of narrative does he arrive in California, alas. And,
for a blowhard, he is close-mouthed indeed about his role as horse rustler on the coast
with Pegleg Smith and the Ute renegade, Walkara. Although Oswald supplies an
epilogue which carries forth Beckwourth's career from the time he dictated the book
to T. D. Bonner in Indian Bar "circa 1851, it contains just the bare bones of the dozen and more years remaining of his career.

An undependable book can become a classic of Western Americana, vide James Ohio Pattie's narrative. This is the case with Beckwourth's Life. Jim ignored time, geography, and cast of characters if he could make a good story better. And he could not abide being on the sidelines in any incident; he had to hog the limelight—even if he was not there. And, finally, he had an expansive way with figures. If he led fifty Crow warriors on a raid, the number inuperishable print had to become 500. Yet he was a great character in the heyday of beaver trapping, and his account is a great source of information when used with care. He met and knew practically every important member of that "reckless breed of men" who pioneered fur trading (and horse stealing) in the West. While not the gospel truth, the memoir seldom contains incidents which Beckwourth and editor, co-author, or ghost Bonner scissored out of whole cloth. As literature, the endless raids and counter-raids of the bloody Crow v. Blackfeet campaigns become a bore. But as history, even flawed history, this is a book of great importance to an understanding of the mountain, plains, and Great Basin West.


Reviewed by GEORGE R. STEWART, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of many distinguished books on California history including Names on the Land (1945), Donner Pass and Those Who Crossed It (1960), The California Trail (1962), and Fire (1971).

If you are writing a novel about the California Gold Rush, don't have your hero say anything—in 1849 or even in the 1850's—about the Mother Lode. At least, according to Philip Ross May (and he makes a good case, in his present book) for you will thereby be committing an anachronism.

In this small volume the author considers what the Mother Lode, by different usages, has been thought to be—a rock-formation, a region, a romantic ideal. If it is any or all of these, just what formation or region or ideal?

The author devotes his main drive to the history of the name, with interesting results. He discusses the usage of Veta Madre, established in Mexico and doubtless used by early Mexican miners in California, though whether with reference to California is less certain. He demonstrates that—as a term in English, being a literal translation of Veta Madre—Mother Lode arose at a comparatively late date. To the chagrin of professional Californians, he points out that the term Comstock established itself about 1866, replacing the previously current Washoe. Shortly thereafter, in 1868, comes the appearance of the term "mother lode," soon to be granted capital letters and to remain as a riposte of California to Nevada: "Our Mother Lode is just as good as your Comstock Lode, and maybe better." Possibly, even the speculators in mining stocks had something to do with the adoption of the new and catchy term—with Mother an early example of Momism, and Lode inevitably suggesting Load.

To exercise the reviewer's inalienable right to be captious, I might point out that the author hardly (considering the detail in which he has worked) makes enough use of the Mexican-Spanish background. The term madre appears elsewhere in California, at least once in Sierra Madre, as well as in New Mexico and in Mexico itself. Some investigation of the meaning association with madre might have been illuminating.

We are thankful and honored to have, from the farther island of far New Zealand, this well-nigh-exhaustive treatise on our own Mother Lode.