

notable contribution to the history of the West and an example of what may be done in the way of bringing out of obscurity the personnel of westward expansion.

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*The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth.* Edited by T. D. Bonner. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931. xl + 405 pp. Frontispiece. \$4.00.)

With due allowance for the publisher's puff, the reader should begin with the jacket of this book rather than the title-page, for the latter is incorrect in giving Bonner as the editor instead of Bernard De Voto. In fact, to the casual reader it will be a bit confusing to find two title-pages, two prefaces, and an introduction. Analysis will show that the frontispiece, second title-page, first preface, and main text reproduce the reminiscences as told by Beckwourth in 1855 and written by Bonner; the other parts, including some thirty pages of notes grouped at the end of the volume, represent the re-editing by De Voto. The best part is the introduction (pp. xix-xl), but its reasoning will not stand analysis and is unconvincing. It is too evidently a case of special pleading for "old Jim."

The public is asked to receive the book as "a classic of the fur-trade and of the Indian frontier," the biography of the "famous mulatto," James P. Beckwith (or "Beckwourth" as he chose to style himself). If the reviewer understands the English language, this volume is not a "classic" and never will be, even with the skillful, plausible editing of De Voto. Truth endures, but not a tissue of falsehoods.

The book is not history, though it is full of allusions to historic persons and events — generally inaccurate and utterly distorted by the way in which they are related to the "hero." The portrayal of his condescending familiarity with such men as Ashley, Kearny, and a hundred others would be amusing if it were not so thoroughly disgusting.

The book is not biography, but rather the self-adoratory "yarn" of a mongrel mulatto, an Ishmael of the western frontier, who repeatedly reveals himself as an alien alike to whites, to Indians, and even to other mulattos — including his own mother (pp. xxxi, 3, 165).

Admittedly the book is not fiction; nor is the editor well advised in styling it "mythology" simply because it surpasses all yellow-backs in alleged reeking bloodshed, "hairbreadth escapes, appalling warfare and ferocity," — all of which he admits must be heavily discounted or rejected as false. De Voto asserts (p. xxii) that it is "respectable today to believe Beckwourth when he is talking about any subject but himself," but immediately adds: "A drastic limitation! — since Jim discusses

other subjects only through inadvertence." In one note alone, in less than seven lines, he bluntly gives Beckwourth the lie eleven times (note 16).

De Voto's final plea is that the book is "the best social history of the old West" (p. xxviii). But literature will not so accept such a mass of distorted reminiscences and prevarications. The editor goes too far when he uses Beckwourth as a brush with which to tar all frontiersmen: "The pioneer, the mountain man, sank promptly below the level of his enemy. . . . He was, this mountain man, an altogether deplorable person . . . Life in the mountains . . . quite dehumanized him . . ." (p. xxx). The characterization is fair enough of frontiersmen of the brutish type, but it is a gratuitous insult to such mountain men as Kit Carson.

Finally, the reviewer cannot agree with De Voto that "here is reading for anyone, a book vital enough to justify reprinting in 1931" (p. xxix). Such a shoddy, offensive tale might far better have been left in its edition of 1856 which can easily be picked up in the market by the few who may want it.