

JIM BECKWOURTH by Elinor Wilson (U. of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1972. \$8.95); THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JAMES P. BECKWOURTH, as told to Thomas D. Bonner, introduction by Delmont R. Oswald. (U. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1972. \$9.75). Jack Burrows of San Jose City College takes a skeptical look at two books about a redoubtable western character.

As a biographical subject, mountain man Jim Beckwourth would appear to have everything going for him; he was part white, part black, and he went West and became an Indian chief. In this day of ideological uncertainty, he touches all racial — (and commercial) — bases. What he does not have going for him, one assumes from the latest biography, *Jim Beckwourth*, by Elinor Wilson, is sufficient raw material, the stuff from which a character is rounded out, given form and substance, coherence and continuity. For Mrs. Wilson has padded her book mercilessly. Of the 195 pages of text, 132 are partially, or entirely, taken up with lengthy and often superfluous quotes. Beckwourth is, in fact, done in by quotes.

It would be unreasonable, of course, to expect the raunchy old contemporary of Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, Joe Meek and General Ashley to assume a fleshily tactile presence. We do not care to hear him drawing "this hoss," "this child," "this nigger is froze fer whisky," and exclaiming "waugh," or to read graphic and contrived descriptions of rutting at rendezvous. And we are grateful to Mrs. Wilson for eschewing the "cussed Injun" and "pesky redskin" syndrome that flaws Stanley Vestal's *Jim Bridger*. But she could have been more selective in her quotes and kept them shorter for immediacy. Chief of the Crows, Indian fighter, guide, trapper, concupiscent tiger of the tipis, discoverer of a Sierra Nevada pass and founder of a town hard by, both of which bear his name today, Jim Beckwourth was a remarkable man, a black man living big and proud in two different worlds. Yet tracking him through the maze of third person quotes is like trying to pick a trail through the Uintas in the dead of a blizzard night.

For all its quotes, though, there is a certain tensile strength to the book. Of particular significance is Beckwourth's candid appraisal of the Indian, who has lately been exalted into nobility by that *amende honorable* which the popular publishing market demands. But to Beckwourth, the Indian was something less than the "noble savage" living in spiritual (and Oedipal) consonance with the land: he was unpredictable, super masculine, willing to swap anything, from his wife to wickiup. Beckwourth finally left the Crows, revolted by the hideous self-

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mutilations indulged by the women upon the death of husband or son or sweetheart.

Mrs. Wilson writes exceptionally well and she makes do with a paucity of material. One reads in the security of knowing she has exhausted all available sources. The book fails as biography, though, and becomes, instead, a litany of only vaguely related anecdotes.

The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, "as told to Thomas D. Bonner," was first published in 1856. It has now been re-issued with an introduction, notes, and an epilogue by Delmont R. Oswald. The question is, why? For poor old Jim is simply drowned in rivers of some of the most nauseating prose ever to flow on the North American continent. Does he have an empty gut when hungry? Indeed not! He "experiences a vehement craving for food." An elk pops up. Does he shoot it? Well, sort of: "My rifle soon sent a leaden messenger after him."

When he wasn't making love to lissome Indian beauties till rosy-fingered dawn, he was listening to the dreadful sounds of the forest: "The screams of panthers assailed my ears." One day when he returned to camp he found "to my inconceivable horror and dismay, my comrades were not there." Once he caught up with a lost friend and found him "smoking with as much sang froid as if he had been in camp."

History is the poorer for Bonner's insufferable pedantry. He might have produced a classic of sorts had he told the story in Beckwourth's own gingery lingo. As Jim himself was supposed to have said — leaning on his rifle, no doubt, and wagging a philosophic finger — "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." Waugh!

THE MOUNTAIN STATES OF AMERICA, by Neal R. Peirce, (W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1972. \$9.95). Reviewing this study of the exploitation of the natural resources of the "mountain states" is Senator Gale McGee of Wyoming, who holds a doctorate from the University of Chicago and was a professor of history at the University of Wyoming prior to his election to the U.S. Senate.

It is with no little trepidation that I approach a book review for an academic journal after so many years out of the field. Realizing that my historiography is rusty, I can well recall the hawk-like scrutiny that we employed on the published works of our colleagues. In those days of even lower pay than now, one of the few rewards we had was the glee that came from discovering an improper citation, or, even better, finding an author's failure to consider his own published works.

While Neal Peirce's book is very sketchy and impressionistic, he nevertheless does an effective job in describing with statistics the natural resources in the Rocky Mountain states, some demographics, the tax picture, the political conditions, etc. As the