

Jim Beckwourth: Black Mountain Man and War Chief of the Crows. By ELINOR WILSON. (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1972. xvi + 248 pp. \$8.95)

James Pierson Beckwourth's life was the stuff from which tall tales are made. His mother was possibly a quadroon; his father, as "now generally acknowledged" (p. 11), was Jennings Beckwourth, F.F.V. Jim was raised in Virginia and on the dangerous War of 1812 Missouri frontier. Somehow he learned to read and write, knocked about the Mississippi Valley for a few years, and, in 1824, headed for the Rocky Mountain fur fields where he died over forty years later in an Indian village.

Harper and Brothers published Jim's memoirs in 1856—he had dictated them to T. D. Bonner, a rather mysterious con man who gathered in the entire royalty—and they have been republished at least six times. Although historians—notably Francis Parkman, H. H. Bancroft, and Hiram M. Chittenden—damned the memoirs and although some popular writers—such as Frank Triplet and Charles Christy—used them

ruthlessly to sell books, other writers, such as Henry Inman, William Connelley, and William E. Dellenbaugh, defended the accuracy of much of what Jim told Bonner. Even the late master of fur trade literature, Dale Morgan, "was tolerant of Jim" (p. 6).

Elinor Wilson, Jim's latest biographer, is a professional writer and a tenacious researcher. She has dug deeply into manuscript collections and county archives to clarify many of the controversial dates and events in Jim's life and has buttressed the walls of her book with copious footnotes, a carefully organized bibliography, clear, detailed maps, three dozen illustrations, and several appendices (on Jim's use of language, on the various editions of his memoirs, and on his California ranch). Since she presents her evidence logically and argues her conclusions judiciously, her portrait of Jim is convincing: he was an extrovert who delighted in "vivid dramatic description" (p. 187). She proves that his memoirs contain far more truth than fiction, yet her prefatory statement that Jim "contributed richly to the development of the West" (p. vii) lacks historical perspective. Certainly, however, he was an extraordinary individual, perhaps, as H. H. Bancroft has written, even an heroic figure better suited to ancient Greece or Rome than to Wyoming or California. But, although Jim was an adventurer par excellence, he was simply not a leading character in the great drama called western history.

We have accumulated many books and articles about Jim Beckwourth. Wilson's biography is the best of the shelfful; nevertheless, may we also hope that it is the last of the lot.

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