The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth. By T. D. Bonner. Edited, with an Introduction, by Bernard De Voto. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. xl, 405. Price, $4.00.)

A few men have left written records of their own thrilling experiences and many have entertained readers with imaginary adventures, but it is unusual to find a man who has done both. James P. Beckwourth, or Jim Beckwith, as he was known to his contemporaries, had more than his share of adventures. His book as written by T. D. Bonner, is, however, something more than a narrative of what actually happened. It is a structure of fancy built on a foundation of fact.

In 1823 Beckwourth took employment with General William Henry Ashley, one of the promoters of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. This took him to the Green River country and surrounding territory where he trapped, explored, and traded with Indians in company with the most renowned mountain men whose names are recorded in the chronicles of that tough and hardy breed. He mentions Thomas Fitzpatrick, Robert Campbell,

Etienne Provot, William L. Sublette, Jim Bridger, Kenneth McKenzie, Johnson Gardner, and other great traders and mountain men. But little space is given to his white companions, however. Beckwourth is the hero of his own stories and he does not propose to share the stage with rivals.

About 1826 or 1827 he was adopted by the Crow Indians. He says that a fellow trapper made the Crows believe that he (Beckwourth) had been born a Crow, had been taken captive and reared by the white pople, and had now returned to live with his Indian kinsmen. At any rate Jim became a Crow warrior and his Indian parents never found cause to be ashamed of him. He became a leader and chief and (according to his own account) was finally made head-man of all the Crow tribe. No genuine Crow ever slew more Blackfeet than he. The Crows were friendly to the whites, however, and Beckwourth kept more or less in touch with the white traders during the nine or ten years he spent with the red men.

After an absence of some twelve years—he says fourteen—Beckwourth returned to St. Louis, but he soon was away in Florida carrying despatches for the army in the war against the Seminoles. The everglades were uninteresting to a man who had spent so many years in the land of the Snake, the Yellowstone and the Big Horn, and he returned to the Indian trade—this time among the Cheyennes along the Arkansas and Platte. Later he carried despatches for the United States army during the Mexican war, prospected for gold in California, and finally, in 1852, became the keeper of a hotel and trading-post in the Feather River country of California. It seems that Bonner took down Beckwourth's story at this place in the winter of 1854-'55, decorating it no doubt with heroines and love stories taken from the novels of that day. It was published in 1856.

These are the facts which the critics generally accept and which form the framework of Beckwourth's narrative. Students of the fur trade will always find it necessary to examine his book. The customs of trapper and trader, the business practices of the fur companies, and the curse of the Indian liquor trade are some of the topics he deals with in a forceful and fairly accurate way.

His personal narrative is highly flavored with fiction. Some achievements attributed to himself are obviously borrowed from

the narratives of others. To compute the total number of scalps he claims to have taken would call for an adding machine. He never admits that he made an error or suffered defeat. And yet the reader is not disgusted with his conceit and vanity, neither does one become vexed with his inaccuracy and exaggeration. Beckwourth's story does not belong in the category of "big lies." He is both the author and the subject of an epic of the West. If it were written in verse it might be called an American Song of Roland. As such it may continue to live even though its value to the historian is not great.

The introductory chapter and notes by Bernard De Voto are scholarly and add much to the historical value of the work.

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