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### The Picturesque Story of the early Fur Trappers

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# The Picturesque Story of the Early Fur Trappers

*Mr. Greenbie Finds in Their Adventures a Key to Some of Our National Characteristics*

**FURS TO FURROWS.** An Epic of Rugged Individualism. By Sydney Greenbie. Illustrated. 413 pp. Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers. \$3.50.

By R. L. DUFFUS

TO those who love our Western history for something more than its flashy surface of adventure Sydney Greenbie is known for his "Gold and Ophir" (written in collaboration with Marjorie Barstow Greenbie) and his "Frontiers and the Fur Trade." In the present book he returns to the fur trade in search of a key to some of our national characteristics. As he says in the foreword the volume "centers its interest primarily in the thirty to forty years of American history following the Louisiana Purchase."

The reader will find more profundity, perhaps a deeper sense of the values of non-economic factors and of things felt rather than seen, than he encountered in Mr. Greenbie's earlier works. The fur trade was necessarily an economic enterprise. In its later days its control was centered in hands as prosaic as those which manage great modern industries. But the fur trapper himself was not prosaic. The economic urge did not alone, or chiefly, drive him into the wilderness. If fur trading, as in Manuel Lisa's case, was a means of enrichment, fur trapping was a way of life. It did not furnish employment for multitudes—Mr. Greenbie guesses a thousand men were engaged in it during the heyday of which he writes. Yet, he thinks, it had its effect on the American character.

At this point a literal-minded reader may judge that Mr. Greenbie has strung his bow too tight. The same unimaginative person may be disturbed by the dithyrambic prose of the introductory chapters and may stub his toes on passages in which Mr. Greenbie or his publisher has introduced capitals for emphasis. Mr. Greenbie writes, for instance: "Wayward trails, like the hunch of genius, stretch here and yonder and link IS with IF through the uncertain valley called EVERYWHERE." One may fear that he is here being introduced to a morality play in which characters called Mr. Courage, Mr. Despair and Miss Temptation will appear. But the fear is groundless. There is not a worse sentence in the book, and there are some magnificent sentences. No writer has more powerfully evoked the mood of the trappers' rendezvous at Wind River, or Powder River, or Pierre's Hole than Mr. Greenbie does in this very chapter.

The trapper had his pictur-

esqueness, of which no one doubts, and his importance, which one is moved to concede as one reads these pages, which are at once history and essays about history. For Mr. Greenbie is seeing his America whole: the thrust of the French, who explored and exploited, but on a large scale did not occupy; the westward push of wilderness men, who consciously or otherwise hated the settled civilization of the East; the restlessness which was more than land hunger; the trapper showing the way hundreds of miles ahead of the farmer, unwillingly making possible the quick settlement which frustrated the European type of sectionalism; taking qualities from the land and from the Indian and indoctrinating a nation with them; handing on particularly a literally rugged individualism.

The trapper has been presented romantically. Certainly the lives of outstanding trappers, traders and explorers, as here retold, were romantic in the sense of being great stories, different in fiber from those most men then or now are living.

The Russian Rezanov, who won the love of Concepcion Marcela, daughter of the Presidio commandant at San Francisco, then departing forever; the oft-related, ever-fresh story of Sacajawea, the "Bird Woman," who guided Lewis and Clark; Lieutenant Pike, who explored Colorado and New Mexico, and who may have had a closer connection with the Burr conspiracy than Mr. Greenbie will allow; tough Manuel Lisa, who covered a four-thousand mile beat every year for eleven years and had a tongue that would soothe "five thousand angry and belligerent Indians"; Astor of the chilly mercantile mind; Colter, who found a hell in which no one would believe, now called Yellowstone Park; Ashley, who invented the extraordinary annual rendezvous, to which trappers, traders and Indians came, for hundreds and thousands of

miles, with the precise timing of railroad trains; the stalwart Bridger, the kindly, brave and pious Jedediah Smith, Milton Sublette; men who did nothing and had towns and countries named after them (who was Laramie?); men who did much and are forgotten (who remembers David Thompson, who in twenty-eight years explored 50,000 linear miles of wilderness?)—there was wonderful stuff here, and Mr. Greenbie makes the most of it.

But why did the trapper, explorer, trader go into the wilderness at all? Mr. Greenbie returns to this question again and again. Because "they loved the silence and the sense of personal dignity and responsibility." Because they were "of the wind in the forests and the flow in the rivers, and the rigor of frost on the plains." Because in the wilderness "a man's dignity and importance rested in himself, his steady eye, his simple knowledge; he needed no other to his support; he wanted none to give scope to his sense of personal power; he suffered no diminution of being, no belittlement of self." He was, and wanted to be, everything that a civilization which was mechanized even in 1839 would not let him be. He grew self-conscious toward the end, just as the cowboy did a generation later, and tried to be what the romanticists expected him to be.

But this stage was short. The great days were over by 1841, when Carson, with Old Bill Williams, Bill New, and some others, "all disgusted with profitless trapping, pulled out of the mountains and went down to Bent's Fort on the Arkansas." The beaver were growing scarce, and, besides, silk hats were replacing beaver hats. The self-sufficient Indian economy had been upset by white men bringing the red men things they hadn't known they wanted, including liquor; to get them they were killing off their fur-bearing game; the plow



Trappers' Christmas in the Wilderness.

(The Illustrations Are From "Furs to Furrows.")

was beginning to erase "the scars of neglected wagon trails," and of buffalo trails and old hunting traces; parties crossing the plains drove cows with them to furnish meat till they came up with the buffalo, and the buffalo, even before the days of the railroad and the high-powered butcher's rifle, were ranging further west.

It had been a remarkable little human world while it lasted—a little community spread out over many thousands of square miles

of virginal space. Lisa could trail Willard Price Hunt for hundreds of miles up the Missouri River valley and finally catch up with him. News ran all over the Great Plains and the Rockies. Men made arrangements to meet a year or two years ahead, and turned up, if alive, on time. They seem to have known each other like the inhabitants of a small village, though the area of the village was half a continent.

The trappers trapped on Indian lands, the traders brought goods which set the Indians to trapping for sale, the settlers followed, dropping the plows from the wagons here and there to try some sample furrows—and they plowed the Great Plains, which Pike and Irving considered unfit for agriculture or extensive settlement, a few times too often. And now, "men, mocked by the advancement of industrialization on a rampage, unable to find work, have on relief funds refurbished even such regions as the Bad Lands of the Dakotas."

Mr. Greenbie is no hankerer after what cannot be regained. He sees no imperialism in the occupation of a continent by 130,000,000 Europeans and their children, even though a million Indians and a few thousand Spanish adventurers in the Southwest were somewhat crowded in consequence. But he acknowledges the Indian heritage, transmitted through the trapper, and wonders about the ultimate influence of its—and maybe the very land's—individualism. The theme is fascinating, the writing (apart from a few flights whose wings might well be clipped) eloquent. No one could read this rich narrative without a better understanding of America.



A Fur Trader's Cabin.