

THE ADVENTURE NARRATIVE AS HISTORY

Alexander Ross & The Fur Hunters of the Far West

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Travel narratives are notorious for blending fact with fiction. Percy G. Adams, author of *Travelers and Travel Liars, 1660-1800*, heads one of his chapters with this epigraph: "Seek the reasons that writers may have for deceiving themselves, for deceiving you. Be critical: Otherwise it will come to pass that people will give to the truth and to the lie the same degree of authority."

While Adams concerned himself with 18th-century travel writers, his warning could properly be extended to many 19th-century writers as well. For example, in my work on the North West Company's activities in the Columbia River basin between 1808 and 1821, I have found it necessary at times to rely on fur trader Alexander Ross's *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*; and the more I read, the more evident it becomes that Ross is no exception to Adams's caveat.

Scottish-born Alexander Ross immigrated to British North America in 1804 and found employment as a schoolmaster, first in lower Canada and later in its upper reaches. Prospects for economic gain were meager; after six years Ross signed a contract as clerk for the New York-based Pacific Fur Company to serve in the distant Columbia River country. He later found employment in the same capacity for both the North West and Hudson's Bay companies. His entire 15-year fur-trading career was spent in the Columbia valley, and during that time he never rose above the rank of clerk. He did not prosper and retired to the Red River Settlement (present-day Winnipeg) in 1825. Subsequently, he wrote two books about his experiences. Better known as author of the earlier book, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River, 1810-1813*, Ross published *Fur Hunters* in London in 1855, some 30 years after the last of the events it describes. The editor of that issue revised Ross's manuscript to conform to the literary and political standards of the day. An American reprint of the original two-volume edition appeared in 1924, retaining the original editor's emendations. In 1956 the University of Oklahoma Press released a modern edition of *Fur Hunters* under the editorship of Kenneth A. Spaulding. Spaulding consulted the original manuscript and purportedly reinserted the original language so that this latest publication reflects Ross's intent more so than do those preceding it. However, the University of Oklahoma edition omits three chapters of Ross's original second volume because "they contrast sharply both in subject matter and interest from the rest of the manuscript." Spaulding's edition is the one I have consulted for my remarks here.

Alexander Ross knew that if his material was to sell it must catch the reader's eye, and to do so it must be dramatic. But, as historian Jennifer Brown has observed,

For countless fur traders over countless months and years, not much happened. They stayed largely in one place, or they sloggged around on local trips through snow or swamp, mud and mosquitoes. They got sick or drunk, lost or drowned or injured, and often they got bored or

bushed. It takes a highly selective perception and presentation to set forth the fur trade as high drama.

Out of his field notes, journals, and other personal memoranda, Ross had to select the most dramatic events for inclusion in his narrative, and to those events he would have to add himself as the primary actor. In his "selective perception and presentation," Ross infused his own sense of context, sequence, and personal involvement. A liberal dose of selective imagination went into creating a book so craftily designed as to leave out the constant ennui that characterized the lot of the ordinary fur trader at remote posts in the Columbia interior. The heavy dose of selective imagination found in Alexander Ross's *Fur Hunters* is the focus of this paper.

That *Fur Hunters* is not always a reliable source of the historical events it purports to describe should surprise few. Yet, in studying the North West Company's "Adventure to the Columbia" (as they styled it in their ledgers) I find an uncritical acceptance taken by those who would rely on Ross's book as authoritative history. Few writers have much to say about the period after the Astorians settled near the mouth of the Columbia River and before the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company ten years later. For those who do mention the Nor'Westers' Columbia trade during this decade, it serves only as background to their main focus. The source commonly relied on to write this background is Ross's *Fur Hunters*. As I pointed out earlier, travel narratives are notorious for blending fact with fiction, and those of Alexander Ross are no exception. Despite recognizing this, historian Elizabeth Vibert excuses her contemporaries for relying heavily on such fur trade narratives as Ross's when writing about the Columbia interior prior to 1821 because of the paucity of other documentary sources. However, if the scope of inquiry is expanded to include the lower Columbia, then a number of documents exist that can throw light not only on the coastal trade but on arrangements in the interior and overall business arrangements as well. These sources can be used as a check against the historical reliability of Ross's narrative.

At this point I would like to develop a conceptual framework in which to couch a discussion of the inaccuracies in Ross's *Fur Hunters*. In his book, *Travelers and Travel Liars*, Percy Adams discusses three factors—what he calls "motives"—that mischievously alter the historical reliability of even the most scrupulously unembellished narrative. These Adams calls vanity, cupidity, and prejudice. English novelist Henry Fielding believed that "vanity of knowing more than other men" is the primary cause for distortion in travel literature. When Alexander Ross, for example, places himself at the center of action or in making decisions unlikely of a mere clerk newly employed by the North West Company, there is reason to suspect it is his vanity at work. Vanity is at work, too, in his incessant criticisms of the North West Company's management; in these harangues he assumes a greater business acumen than that displayed by the proprietors of the company.

Despite his pretensions, Alexander Ross was no businessman. He revealed little knowledge of the broader business strategies employed by the North West Company on the Columbia, and his narrative is silent regarding the details of how business was conducted at Fort George (now Astoria). In his brief mention of the brig *Colonel Allan*, Ross reflected no awareness of the unusual arrangements concerning its cargo, completely confused its activities while on the coast, and provided the wrong destination, all in a single paragraph. Not once did he mention the coastal trade carried on by the brig *Columbia* between 1816 and 1818. Ross had little idea of the extent of the annual returns in the Columbia Department or what they sold for in Canton and seemed not to understand the relationship between supply and demand. As a senior clerk, at one time stationed at Fort George, Ross was in a position to know these things, yet he

revealed no such knowledge. Despite the impression he gives in *Fur Hunters*, Alexander Ross was not the man to criticize the business practices of others.

Percy Adams also found cupidity influential in coloring the language in travel accounts. Like other authors, writers of travel narratives want to be paid for their labor, and Alexander Ross was no exception. When the Hudson's Bay and North West companies merged in 1821, Ross claimed a loss of £1,400, which he said he had placed in the hands of the Nor'Westers' Montreal agents, leaving him "almost penniless." This lost fortune, Ross would have us believe, was amassed by a mere clerk earning £75 per annum. Subsequently, his salary as a clerk for the Hudson's Bay Company amounted to only £120 per year, and the various means of employment he found at Red River did not substantially increase his income. There is little doubt his financial situation benefited from an augmentation of profits from his books.

To sell well, books must entertain as well as instruct, as Ross and his editor were doubtless aware. Canadian scholar I. S. Maclaren observed that because explorers, sojourners, and travelers are often incapable of meeting both these conditions, "reading...journals for the press will necessarily involve [*editorial*] alteration." In his study of travel narratives, Maclaren found they frequently reflect the persona of their respective editors as much as or more than of their presumed authors—all in the name of marketability. Not surprisingly, Ross's editor found Ross's writing style not quite correct and his expressions sometimes a bit distasteful, and so he changed them. The expression, "bent on making a spoon or spoiling a horn," for example, was apparently too indelicate for the Victorian reader, and so it was omitted in the earlier edition. Although editor Spaulding assures his readers, "The words of Ross have been carefully retained, and in their original order," he, like his predecessor, subtly altered the author's meaning when he let stand Ross's description of an American party at Flathead House as "shrewd men." American historian William Goetzmann, while consulting the original manuscript, found "shrewd, well-meaning men" a phrase the original English editor apparently felt too flattering in describing Yankees. Editors of published narratives, then, can exert a corrupting influence on the content of an author's manuscript. While the intent is often to merely enhance the skill of expression with the aim of rendering it more salable, editors can and have taken greater license in modifying content. As Canadian historian Elizabeth Vibert has pointed out, "The writer's [and one might add, the editor's] awareness of potential readers conditions the writing in important ways."

A third motive that distorts travel narratives, Percy Adams mentions, is the proclivity of authors to give expression to their prejudices and pet peeves. Alexander Ross echoed the standard racial and ethnic biases of his day, and the prudent reader will take this into account when assessing his commentary on such subjects. While Ross manifested more than the usual interest in the manners and customs of Native Americans, he nevertheless carried with him what Vibert calls a European "habitus"—that is, commonly shared assumptions about such social categories as class, status, gender, ethnicity, and race. For example, while Ross seemed to delight in deriding the North West Company's style of living, table etiquette, and imperious sense of subordination, his mannerisms were not much different.

One needs only to read through Ross's description of the several classes within fur trade society to detect his own "imperious sense of subordination." Métis "are as fair as the generality of European ladies, the mixture of blood being so many degrees removed from the savage as hardly to leave any trace." Freeman "may be considered a kind of enlightened Indian, with all the imperfections but none of the good qualities of their countrymen." Sandwich Islanders "are

not made to lead but to follow, and are useful only to stand as sentinels to eye the natives or go through the drudgery of an establishment." Iroquois are "sullen, indolent, fickle, cowardly, and treacherous." Half-breeds are "indolent, thoughtless, and improvident." Alexander Ross shared far more of the nefarious traits he ascribed to the Nor'Westers than he ever admitted.

In addition to his class, gender, and ethnic biases, Ross's peevishness contributed to distortions and factual errors as well. Ross's memory of dates and circumstances had faded some by the time *Fur Hunters* came to press, but his bitterness had not receded a bit. Sarcasms throughout the book directed at the Nor'Westers and their policies reflect the vindictiveness of a clerk who failed to receive the recognition and promotion he felt he deserved. In describing one travel writer, Percy Adams said that he "set out with the spleen and the jaundice, and every object he passed by was discolored and distorted." The same can be said of Alexander Ross.

The point is not so much that Ross's narrative is distorted because of the skewing motives identified by Adams or because of the unconscious habitus characteristic of all travel writers, as attributed by Vibert. What is of concern, however, are scholars who continue to accept what Ross has written as factual without taking Adams's or Vibert's caveats into account—that is, without exercising due caution regarding Ross's reliability as a reporter of historic events. A few examples may serve to illustrate this uncritical acceptance of *Fur Hunters*.

In his forward to Ross's *Adventures of the First Settlers*, American historian James Ronda asserts that criticisms of Ross's narratives based on their long delayed publication or because they reflect the "embroidered, hazy recollections of an aging and sometimes bitter trader," are inaccurate because Ross did not depend on frail memory but upon a now lost diary. One of his former associates mentioned in an 1827 letter Ross's attempt to "prepare a formal manuscript from the diary entries." This was only two years after his retirement from the fur trade, but he must have then given up the effort for over 20 years. By the time *Fur Hunters* reached print, 72-year-old Alexander Ross had wizened into an "old age [that] had starved his memories and fed his imagination." If Ross did indeed use a diary, it did not help him much with details such as dates. In one instance he has a fellow clerk on the Columbia a year before he arrived, and in another he alludes to an event that occurred over two years after his retirement.

Ross's peevishness is one thing, but when contemporary scholars adopt as their own his prejudices toward the North West Company, the narrative becomes a source of historical distortion rather than enlightenment. In one such instance William Goetzmann, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Exploration and Empire*, accepted Ross's attitude as his own, and the result is that not one of the 11 pages he devoted to Donald McKenzie is free from either hyperbole or factual error or both. North West Company leadership fell into "ridiculously inept hands," opines Goetzmann. Expeditions into the interior suffered from "absurd shortsightedness." The company pushed on in its own "inept way."

Prejudices can be positive as well as negative. For Ross, Donald McKenzie was a hero, and so he became one for Goetzmann as well. Whatever McKenzie told Alexander Ross around the fireplace at Fort Nez Percés, Ross accepted as the unvarnished truth, and so has Goetzmann. One such instance is Ross's version of the "keg of powder" fable. According to Ross, McKenzie and three other men were able to hold off a hostile band of Bannocks in the Snake River country by standing over a keg of gunpowder with a lighted match and threatening to blow everyone to smithereens. This Goetzmann offers as a historical anecdote in the adventures of Donald McKenzie. The only history is the fable itself. Anthropologist Bruce White has documented at least six different versions of this example of what he calls "occupational folklore," the first of

which was recorded in 1751. White concluded, "These historical accounts are less important for any factual content than they are as remnants of folk tales that fur traders once told each other, stories that reveal a great deal about the nature of Indian-trader economic and social relationships."

Other scholars continue this uncritical reliance on *Fur Hunters*: historical geographer James Gibson in *The Lifeline of the Oregon Country*; Canadian historian Richard Mackie in his book, *Trading Beyond the Mountains*; American historian James Ronda in his book, *Astoria and Empire*; and Canadian historian Elizabeth Vibert in *Traders' Tales*. All give credibility to Ross's exaggerations, embellishments, distortions, and factual errors. While most of this reliance on *Fur Hunters* involves relatively insignificant details, the cumulative effect results in a historically inaccurate understanding of the North West Company's "Adventure to the Columbia." The impression gathered from Alexander Ross notwithstanding, the Nor'Westers did not fail because of internal bickering or lack of initiative or incompetent leadership. The factors contributing to the company's difficulties on the Columbia were beyond the ability of local leadership to control, and Alexander Ross did not understand this.

I do not suggest that Alexander Ross was an outright fabricator, nor do I think he intentionally misconstrued the facts or mislead his readers. Ross, I believe, was sincere in his desire to relate an authentic account of his experiences in both his narratives. There are, however, a number of historical inaccuracies and distortions that have crept in, despite any intentions he may have had to the contrary. These have resulted from faulty memory, peevishness, egocentricity, and possibly an embellishing editor. The diary James Ronda claims Alexander Ross used was not an adequate jog to his memory. It did not prevent him from misstating dates, blending events, or exaggerating circumstances. Everywhere possible it must be compared with other existing documents as a check to its historical reliability. Otherwise, "it will come to pass that people will give to the truth and to the lie the same degree of authority."

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