

*King Crockett:
Nature and Civility
on the American Frontier*

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IN THE WILDS of Oregon, sometime in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, Davy Crockett and others heard rumors of mammoth buffaloes. One man asked Crockett for some assistance, as Crockett himself related: 'One great nobleman offered to have me baptized a nobleman if I would only take him nigh enough to 'em [the buffaloes] to take thar likenesses without danger o' gettin used all to pieces, but I told him that nobility war nobody to me, an that I, or any other true gritted Republican was the noblest thing in all creation, an that I'd brave it by catchin the two four legged screamers, and bringin 'em to him for nothin.'¹ Another time, when Crockett found himself in Haiti at an interview with its emperor, he refused to kneel before the prince. 'I am Col. Davy Crockett, one of the sovereign people of *Uncle Sam,*' he said, 'that never kneels to any individual on this side of sunshine.'²

The Crockett who figured in both of these incidents never

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¹ *Crockett's Almanac, 1846* (Boston: James Fischer), p. 16. (Page numbers are not given in most of the Crockett almanacs, but they have been supplied here independently as necessary.)

² *Crockett Almanac, 1856* (Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Baltimore: Fisher & Brother), p. 28.

lived. He was a fictional character created by anonymous writers who, from 1835 to 1856, in various cities of the United States, wrote the stories that gave the Davy Crockett Almanacs their name. Yet the royal claims of this Crockett seem outrageous more by virtue of their context than their content, for any patriotic nineteenth-century American probably would have agreed that republicans were the most noble of God's creatures and that in the United States the people were sovereign and should bow before no one.

Indeed, if the thirteen colonies had rejected a monarch in the eighteenth century, by the nineteenth, the myth of democracy was teaching their heirs the final reason. When, in 1815, Andrew Jackson and the American forces defeated a far superior British army at New Orleans, the kingdom of the common man had begun to arrive. Already in 1813, Jackson had shown that he towered above the law, disobeying orders to disband his troops in Natchez and instead returning with them to Tennessee. Later, he took the law into his hands in the Seminole affair, seizing Spanish forts and 'executing' two British subjects in Florida. As president, he defied the Supreme Court by refusing to defend lands in Georgia and the eastern financial establishment by removing government deposits from the Bank of the United States. In showing that the force of his will was stronger than the force of law, Jackson had carried the logic of the supremacy of the common man to its farthest term.³ He had established himself as ruler of lesser forces; and, as the embodiment of all that common and ordinary Americans represented, his rulership implied that every self-made republican was also king.

Seen in this light, the fiction of the new King David in the Davy Crockett Almanacs was telling the truth about Ameri-

³ This interpretation of the meaning of Andrew Jackson has been shaped especially by the now-classic study by John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955). See, for example, pp. 54-63, 153-65.

cans, or at least part of the truth about them.⁴ And because these almanacs revealed part of the truth about Americans, they are useful records for historical investigation. A study of their contents can provide insights into the awareness that many Americans, who read and enjoyed them, had of themselves, their identities and projects, their deeply held values and beliefs. Moreover, a comparison of the most fantastic exploits of Crockett in the almanacs and the most factual of other writings attributed to him (his autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett*) yields especially illuminating results.

Such a comparison discloses a comic hero who had become exceedingly popular well before 1840. Like Andrew Jackson, the historical Crockett had become the focus for an American process of collective representation, but in Crockett's case the means was mostly literary. Autobiography and almanacs were items in a series of Crockett writings. Among them, in 1833, there had been the anonymous *Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett* (actually written by James Strange French), and then in 1834, the relatively sober *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* appeared. This little book, which Crockett, then alive, offered as 'a plain, honest, homespun account of [his] state in life,' seemed to be the historical Crockett's way of capitalizing on the legend he was fast becoming.⁵ His death at the Alamo in 1836 only added to the phenomenon, and another publication, *Col. Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas*

⁴ It is significant here that the historical David Crockett figured in Whig politics as that party's 'answer' to Andrew Jackson. For a discussion, see Walter Blair, 'Six Davy Crocketts,' in Leonard F. Dean, ed., *Perspectives* (New York: Harcourt, 1954), pp. 233-45. The twentieth-century revival of King David in 1955, with its popular film, television series, and ballad to the 'king of the wild frontier,' may be an interesting case of cultural continuity, but it may also reflect the particular frustrations of Americans at the height of the Eisenhower era. See Daniel G. Hoffman, 'Deaths and Three Resurrections of Davy Crockett,' *Antioch Review* 21 (Spring 1961):5-13.

⁵ David Crockett, *A Narrative of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee*, ann. and introd. James A. Shackford and Stanley J. Folmsbee (facsimile ed.; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), p. 6. For a discussion of the autobiography germane to this study, see Catherine L. Albanese, 'Citizen Crockett: Myth, History, and Nature Religion,' *Soundings* 71 (Spring 1978):87-104.

(1836), claimed to be Crockett's diary in order to exploit the turn of events.

During the same period, a host of works, admittedly written by others, also made Crockett their subject or their inspiration. In the early 1830s, the New York *Sun* tried to increase its circulation by publishing anecdotes about Crockett, and in 1831, John Tomlin was already writing a poem that compared him to the classical Prometheus, Hannibal, and Socrates. An anonymous dime novel, *Davy Crockett Beaten: A Spur to Youth*, appeared in 1834, and, around the same time, an anonymous poem, 'Davy Crockett: or, the Nimrod of the West.' A series of other plays and novels were either more or less clearly modelled on Crockett, among them James K. Paulding's popular *Lion of the West* (1830), a performance of which the actual Crockett attended, exchanging bows with the actor who played Col. Nimrod Wildfire.⁶

In general, an examination of the Crockett autobiography and the almanacs suggests that they differed in degree more than in kind and that, in their disclosure of American consciousness, the almanacs—which revealed more—show more clearly the underlying structures of meaning in the autobiography. In other words, the fiction was truer than the 'facts' of the *Narrative* and indeed held up a light to the facts—although both almanacs and autobiography told truths of similar import about Americans, and both did so by means of exaggeration and embroidery of what might, in even the most historical instances, have occurred.⁷

⁶ See Stuart A. Stiffler, 'Davy Crockett: The Genesis of Heroic Myth,' *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 16(1957):134-35; James A. Shackford, *David Crockett, the Man and the Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p. 264; Joseph Arpad, 'David Crockett, an Original Legendary Eccentricity and Early American Character' (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1968), pp. 37-43. For a discussion of the relationship between *Lion of the West* and David Crockett, see Shackford, *David Crockett*, pp. 253-64. Following the usage of previous scholars, the historical and fictional Crocketts are distinguished by referring to the former as 'David' and the latter as 'Davy.'

⁷ This understanding of the truth of fiction has been informed by views of myth developed by Mircea Eliade and other historians of religions. Eliade and his students

In the case of the *Narrative*, there is evidence that Thomas Chilton actually wrote this 'autobiography,' but David Crockett stood behind it; and, in the style of the twentieth century, it might have been titled *The Life of David Crockett, as Told to Thomas Chilton*.⁸ Moreover, it was relatively faithful to the actual course of Crockett's life. Deeds of hunting prowess abounded, but, unlike the character in the almanacs, Crockett seemed more at home with a rifle than with his teeth as a method of slaughter and, in general, he avoided the most extreme kinds of language and behavior. Thus, the *Narrative* opened with an account of Crockett's boyhood and then recounted his involvement in the Creek War, his political career in Congress, and finally his backwoods exploits.

The publication history of the autobiography suggests that it was, at the time, quite popular. In fact, Joseph Arpad writes that it 'quickly became a "best-seller."' Inside of a month, he reports, the first printing had sold out; by the end of the year, it was in its seventh edition; by the end of the following year (1835), in its twelfth.⁹ Crockett had not been bashful about encouraging sales and had gone on a promotional tour of the northern and New England states before the second printing was completed. Still, he apparently did not have to try very hard to persuade his fellow citizens to buy his book, and the success of his *Narrative* argues for the representativeness, at

see myth as a story that is true in that it discloses the underlying structure of reality—who a people think they are, where they think they have come from and are going, how they think they should get there. For a discussion by Eliade with particular reference to the modern world, see his *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1968), pp. 181–93.

⁸ The annotated facsimile edition of the *Narrative* by James A. Shackford and Stanley J. Folmsbee concludes that the autobiography was 'ghostwritten by Thomas Chilton' but that, 'although the language of the *Narrative* is largely Chilton's, the information was supplied by Crockett, primarily by interviews but possibly also by a few notes which he may have written down.' See Shackford and Folmsbee, eds., *Narrative*, pp. xv–xvi. Joseph J. Arpad, however, has minimized the assistance Chilton gave to Crockett, calling it 'mainly secretarial.' See David Crockett, *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett*, ed. Joseph J. Arpad (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1972), pp. 26–27.

⁹ Arpad, ed., *Narrative*, p. 31.

some level, of his unusual career. His story struck a responsive chord for the thousands who enjoyed his adventures, for Crockett embodied their secret dreams, their necessary fantasies about themselves.

The Crockett almanacs seemed not less successful. They appeared in Nashville first and then in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore. There was evidence that the western (Nashville) series had actually been produced in Boston, and so it was obvious that these almanacs had an eastern audience.¹⁰ But from the thrust of the evidence, they no doubt had a western audience as well. The Nashville series must have been sold in Nashville: there was at least one bookseller's advertisement in a Nashville newspaper. The eastern almanacs in many cases printed postage rates, including rates for distances over 400 miles, on their inside front covers. They contained explicit astronomical information for points throughout the United States and its territories. A number of the almanacs appeared in several imprints, and if Charles Ellms of Boston was fairly typical, almanac publishers routinely tried to push their products as far away as the 'Southern' market, in Charleston and New Orleans.¹¹ Dixon Wecter thought the almanacs were 'mostly addressed to farmers,' and the communications network of the period would certainly support his contention. At the same time, the almanacs printed even more in the way of fillers and anecdotes directed to a rising urban middle class.¹² Farmers, at

¹⁰ Franklin J. Meine wrote in 1955 that the woodcuts in the Nashville imprints from 1839 to 1841 'were signed by Croome, Manning, and Hartwell, who, according to Dr. Clarence S. Brigham, were artists and engravers in Boston.' See Meine, ed., *The Crockett Almanacs, Nashville Series, 1835-38* (Chicago: Caxton Club, 1955), p. xviii.

¹¹ Charles Ellms to Mr. [Sidney] Babcock, Boston, Aug. 24, 1833, and Charles Ellms to Mr. [Sidney] Babcock, Boston, Aug. 28, 1833, Business Records, Ellms Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

¹² Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (1941; reprint ed., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1966), p. 192. A number of the eastern almanacs included household hints for cleaning and beautifying furniture and goods. Some printed short jokes about 'gentlemen' in business whose fortunes seemed fairly precarious. For examples, see *Crockett's Comic Almanack*, '40 (Albany: A Skinflint

this time, were of course becoming bound to city folk by closer economic and emotional ties, and it is fair to say that the Crockett almanacs, with their stereotyped mass printing techniques, aimed to appeal to as wide a readership as possible—adults and juveniles, farmers and businessmen, rural and urban dwellers.¹³

More than that, there seemed to be a hidden political agenda behind the innocence of Crockett's outrageous deeds in the almanacs. While Constance Rourke argued that 'few traces of a political bias appear in these small paper volumes' and Walter Blair thought that the Crockett of the almanacs 'had little or no political value and the happenings in his comic career jumped from the green earth into a backwoods fairyland,'¹⁴ the anecdotes in the almanacs were filled with expansionist rhetoric and were quite specific in applying that rhetoric to Texas and Mexico, to Oregon, and to California. This is hardly surprising since Turner and Fisher, who published most of the Crockett almanacs, were probably active Whigs. In and close to election years they published almanacs, often in several imprints, celebrating the party candidates—William Henry Harrison in 1840, Henry Clay and Theodore Frelinghuysen in 1844, Zachary Taylor in 1848. In the Crockett almanacs as in the *Narrative*, politics was essential to the substantive content of the themes that emerged.

These themes, both in the almanacs and in the *Narrative*, were rich in their complexity. At first glance, there was the myth of the conquest and control of nature by human resourcefulness. Yet closer scrutiny reveals that nature was conquered

[Elton]) and *Fisher's Crockett Almanac, 1843* (New York: Turner & Fisher). The Albany almanac was probably published in New York.

¹³ Turner & Fisher, which published most of the eastern almanacs after 1837, was a Philadelphia-based firm with operations in Boston, New York, and later Baltimore. Advertisements of the period indicate that it carried a large and varied assortment of 'juvenile works' and 'toy books.' It also published 'Valentines,' a repertoire of almanacs to suit varied tastes, and other miscellany.

¹⁴ Constance Rourke, *Davy Crockett* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934); Walter Blair, *Horse Sense in American Humor from Benjamin Franklin to Ogden Nash* (1942; reprint ed., New York: Russell & Russell, [1962]), p. 48.

and controlled when heroic humans such as Crockett lost all semblance of *self*-control in an ecstasy of violence.¹⁵ Drinking in power from the blood of wild life, man conquered the chaos of the natural world by immersing himself totally in it. Yet curiously the control gone out of control led inevitably to still greater control. Crockett, as both fictional character and historical man, was preeminently political, constantly boasting of his status as congressman, continually urging either, in the case of the almanacs, the 'manifest destiny' of the 1840s and 1850s or, in that of the *Narrative*, the errors of President Andrew Jackson and the imminent destiny that would make Crockett instead the future president of the United States. Moreover, on the more mundane level, control—'civilization'—was often expressed as 'civility,' i.e., the manners and mores that should accompany the gentleman of the forest and those he rendered genteel. Finally, the humor of both almanac and autobiographical adventures provided a mold in which the myth could be cast. And since, like myth itself, humor is often a way of revealing cognitive and emotional ambivalence, the Crockett texts employed their humor of tall talk and act as a way to write large the meanings they were trying to express. Humor, like politics, became part of the substance and not simply the style of the Crockett mythology.

In the almanacs, the fullness of the myth was present from the first. The earliest Crockett almanac, which appeared in Nashville for the year 1835, self-consciously proclaimed its continuity with the highly successful autobiography. The almanac had been entered by one Davy (not David) Crockett in the 'Clerk's Office of the District Court of Tennessee,' and the first anecdote it contained had been lifted in large part from the

¹⁵ This interpretation has been influenced by the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss (see, for example, 'The Story of Asdiwal,' in Edmund Leach, ed., *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* [London: Tavistock Publications, 1967], pp. 1-47) and, in the discussion of politics, by Richard Slotkin's treatment of politics as a hunt (*Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973]).

Narrative and simply paraphrased. However, this account of Crockett's 'early days, severe courtship and marriage' broke consistently with the *Narrative* in at least one respect. While the autobiography strained credulity as far as it possibly could, it stopped before the tallest talk and behavior. But it was this kind of talk and behavior that the almanac began to explore, thus laying bare the truth of a different order, the truth of the myth. Hence, in telling of his encounter with a rival in his courtship, the Crockett of the *Narrative* boasted that he 'looked at him [the other suitor] every once in a while as fierce as a wild-cat.' Not content with that description, the fictional Crockett continued: 'And in an extacy of joy I slapped my arms, and crowed like a cock. . . . I jumped up a rod, he did the same, and when we lit he was uppermost. . . . He got a turn in my hair, and his thumb in my eye, and gave the ball such a start from the socket, that it has squinted ever since. By a desperate jump I regained my feet, and with one kick sent him clear into a gourd-patch, where he laid kicking like a tortoise turned belly up.'¹⁶

On the other hand, even the Crockett of the *Narrative* had been seized by the mythic power that propelled the almanacs. In his preface, he pondered what it all might mean: 'I know, that obscure as I am, my name is making considerable deal of fuss in the world. I can't tell why it is, nor in what it is to end. Go where I will, everybody seems anxious to get a peep at me. . . . There must therefore be something in me, or about me, that attracts attention, which is even mysterious to myself.'¹⁷ That mysteriousness led Crockett to a version of his story that shaped the facts to the requirements of the myth. Joseph Arpad, for instance, has questioned Crockett's account of events in his life ranging from his participation in the Creek War to his ac-

¹⁶ *Davy Crockett's Almanack, of Wild Sports of the West, and Life in the Backwoods* (Nashville: Snag & Sawyer, 1835), pp. 6, 8. Snag & Sawyer is a pseudonym, and the publisher is uncertain (although the issue was legally copyrighted by 'Davy' Crockett).

¹⁷ Shackford and Folmsbee, eds., *Narrative*, p. 3.

tivities in the legislature. That Crockett killed 105 bears in less than a year is probably the most notorious of his fictions, but there were many others, all of them contributing to a portrait of Crockett as a rugged, fiery, and unlearned backwoodsman.¹⁸

The autobiography, like the later almanacs, was tapping a source of power that was antecedent to and larger than the intentions of its author. Even in 1832, a widely reprinted news story announced: 'APPOINTMENT BY THE PRESIDENT. David Crockett, of Tennessee, to stand on the Allegheny Mountains and catch the Comet, on its approach to the earth, and wring off its tail, to keep it from burning up the world!' And in 1833, the Boston *Daily Evening Transcript* confided to its readers a story about Crockett that had taken place, significantly, in the nation's capital. Here, as Crockett himself explained in the anecdote, he had attended an exhibition of wild animals which included two wild cats. 'Some acquaintance asked me, "if they were like the wild cats in the backwoods," and as I was looking at them, one turned over and died. The keeper ran up and threw some water on it. Said I, "stranger, you are wasting time. My look kills them things—and you had better hire me to go out here, or I will kill every varmint you've got."'¹⁹

Both news accounts suggested the future trajectory of the Crockett myth. For in the almanacs, Davy Crockett ruled nature by manipulating it with demiurgic force. Now no longer from Tennessee as in real life, but instead a 'feller of true Kentucky grit,' Crockett could grab a streak of lightning and ride on it to avoid a tornado. He tamed bears and alligators, the bears usually as hunting companions and the alligators as useful means of transport. Once he succeeded in magnetizing a bear out of the hollow of a tree, and on another occasion his

¹⁸ For a good discussion, see Arpad, ed., *Narrative*, pp. 8–15.

¹⁹ Blair, 'Six Davy Crocketts,' p. 245; *Daily Evening Transcript*, June 21, 1833, quoted by C. Grant Loomis in 'Davy Crockett Visits Boston,' *New England Quarterly* 20(Sept. 1947):397.

laugh made the trees shed their leaves. While still a youngster, diving for pearls off the coast of Japan, he had remained under water for nearly twelve hours, and later, when he fell in love, because he was already a married man, he virtuously swallowed a thunderbolt to cure himself.²⁰

Proving himself king of nature as master of the sun, however, was Crockett's ultimate feat. Already, in an almanac in 1842, he had after a fight 'sot to work to bottle up sunrise.' Twelve years later, the experience served him in good stead. The earth had frozen on its axis, and the sun had been jammed between two cakes of ice. Crockett came to the rescue with a twenty-pound bear that he had killed.

I . . . beat the animal agin the ice till the hot ile began to walk out on him at all sides. I then took an' held him over the airth's axes, an' squeezed him till I thaw'd 'em loose, poured about a ton on it over the sun's face, give the airth's cog-wheel one kick backward, till I got the sun loose . . . an' in about fifteen seconds the airth gin a grunt, and begun movin'—the sun walked up beautiful—saluten me with sich a wind o' gratitude, that it made sneeze. I lit my pipe by the blaze o' his top-knot, shouldered my bear, an' walked home, introduc'in' the people to fresh daylight with a piece of sunrise in my pocket.²¹

Two points need to be made about power such as this, as it is presented in the almanacs. The first is that the Crockett who wielded this awesome might had purchased it by a self-transformation in which, imitating the 'savages' he saw in New World forests, he lost control of himself in orgiastic encounters with wilderness forces. The second is that there was a direct

²⁰ *Ben Hardin's Crockett Almanac, 1842* (New York: Turner & Fisher), p. 9; *Crockett's Almanac, 1846*, p. 22; *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1845* (Boston: James Fisher), p. 30; *The Crockett Almanac, 1839* (Nashville: Ben Harding), p. 28; *Crockett Almanac, 1856*, p. 16; *Ben Hardin's Crockett Almanac, 1842*, p. 15. (Ben Harding was a fictional character who frequently accompanied Crockett in his adventures in the almanacs. Often, independent exploits were recorded for Harding or Hardin, a sailor with a Yankee accent and no doubt included for his appeal to easterners.)

²¹ *Ben Hardin's Crockett Almanac, 1842*, p. 9; *Crockett Almanac, 1854* (Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Baltimore: Fisher & Brother), p. 25.

analogy between Crockett's mastery of the forest universe and his high conquests in the political realm, his 'kingship.'

Crockett, in the language of Richard Slotkin, had been 're-generated through violence,' losing himself in an ecstasy of savage identity that unleashed hidden powers for him to command.²² The savages were bestial—'red niggers' who walked naked in the woods to display their animality. Yet Crockett, time after time, embodied the very qualities he deplored in these others. He repeatedly found himself in the midst of a struggle, naked like a savage, without his breeches. Indeed, on one occasion, as Crockett told it, a crocodile 'put his paw on my breast by aksident, and peeled the cloze off like I war an onion, and scraped the flesh off, most ridiculous.'²³ If he boasted of being naked as an Indian, Crockett was equally proud of being ignorant like one. He was 'half horse and half alligator' and 'crossed with the snapping turtle.' Never one to fight with a rifle when he could engage in an intimate physical contest, he tore, ripped, gouged eyeballs with sharpened two-inch fingernails, and bit through to his opponents' bones as he spilled and drank their blood. Crockett was, in Slotkin's words, a communicant in the 'savage eucharist.'²⁴ In this total form of union with wilderness forces, he drank in the strength that would serve him, ironically, to advance the cause of civilization.

Story after story illustrated the ultimate meaning of savagery. Thus, by 1844, Crockett's fight with some Indians hinted the future he would pursue: 'He fought, accordin to his own journal of the affair, exactly ten hours, scalped four of the Indians in the natral way with his teeth, picked the bones of two. . . .' Another time, he had killed three 'red niggers' and

²² For a summary, see Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, pp. 563–65.

²³ *The Crockett Almanac, 1841* (Boston: J. Fisher), p. 4.

²⁴ Richard Slotkin has used this term to describe the cannibalism that lurked in the twin darkneses of the New World forest and the Euro-American unconscious. See *Regeneration through Violence*, pp. 48, 124–25, 518–50, and *passim*. While, from his own viewpoint Crockett was never a cannibal because he considered the Indians he ate to be animals, in the context of the present discussion, the distinction seems overly precious.

was cutting off the head of a fourth for his pet bear's supper when Ben Harding arrived to join Crockett in a game of football with one of the other heads. When his pet bear was suffering from a 'bowel complaint,' Crockett solicitously killed and boiled an Indian 'and the bare got well directly.' Then, in a Boston almanac in 1849, Crockett walked in Oregon and met up with two Indian chiefs. Until 'about an hour an a half, arter feeden time,' the three 'tore, spit, rolled, an tugged about, made the earth sweat spring water all around us.' Crockett finished the story: 'I . . . soaked my left foot about a yard into the victuals settlement o' number two, in such beautiful style, that he war jist goin to un stomach himself when I poked the taster of a skull cutter at him, an split him up about as slick as a chesnut rail, smashed number one into injun gravy with my foot, an spread it over number two, an made a dinner for me an my dog. It war superlicious.'²⁵

In an expression of the unchanging law of the hunt, Crockett had won out, but he had done so by becoming like what he hunted. Pursuing savages had transformed him into a savage: he had become the enemy he sought to subdue, and in condemning 'red niggers,' Crockett had brought on his own vilification. Yet the ecstasy of slaughter and the blood of his victims invigorated him with the fullness of nature's power, precisely because Indians were the wildest denizens of the forests and, unlike bears and alligators, beyond domestication. It was this animal power that Crockett carried to such awesome proportions in his feats of savage mastery in the wilderness. However, the mysticism of savage identity and eucharist also energized Crockett for a hunt that took place in a different kind of forest. Crockett the king of the wilderness was also Crockett the master politician.

²⁵ *Crockett's Taller Flower Almanac, for '36* (Snagsville: Boon Crockett, and Squire Downing [New York: Elton]), p. 9; *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1844* (New York: Turner & Fisher), p. 18; *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1845*, p. 18; *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1847* (New York and Philadelphia: Turner & Fisher), p. 18; *ibid.*, p. 25; *Crockett Almanac, 1849* (Boston: James Fisher), p. 9.

Some insight into what this meant is offered by a Nashville almanac from 1837. In a celebrated speech to the Congress of the United States printed there, Crockett, as legislator, summed up his merits: 'I can walk like an ox: run like a fox, swim like an eel, yell like an Indian, fight like a devil, and spout like an earthquake, make love like a mad bull, and swallow a nigger whole without choking if you butter his head and pin his ears back.'²⁶ Before he could address the Congress, however, Crockett had had to get himself elected, and in one of his campaigns he caught an alligator, got on its back, and 'rid up to Bear Cleering, whar thar whar a whole heap of fellows talking politicks.' 'It did wonders for my election,' he commented.²⁷ Another time, he fortuitously managed to fall from a tree onto an elk which rode through the forest with him astride. 'Every thing looked streaked as if the American flag war spred over all natur,' as the elk on election day ran to the polls and the crowd gave three cheers.²⁸

But politics did not begin and end with the Congress. Rather, since it sought to build up the polis, its goal was the extension of civilization. The hunt and the taming of animals, in the political realm, became the expansionist mission of the era of manifest destiny. Crockett, who ruled wild nature, knew how to rule the course of empire: 'You see, feller citizens, I'm like my salt water friend, Ben Hardin, of the rale American grit, an like him, I go in for Texas and the Oregon, clar up to the very gravel stone; for they both belong to Uncle Sam's plantation, jist as naturally as a cabbage leaf belongs to a cabbage stalk. . . . Feller citizens, I now conclude with 27 cheers for Oregon, the 27th gun of Uncle Sam.'²⁹ Crockett thought of

²⁶ *Davy Crockett's Almanack, of Wild Sports in the West, Life in the Backwoods, & Sketches of Texas* (Nashville: Heirs of Col. Crockett, 1837), p. 40. (There is no real evidence for the identity of the publisher of this almanac.)

²⁷ *Crockett's Almanac, 1860* (New York, Philadelphia, and Boston: Fisher & Brothers), p. 18.

²⁸ *The Crockett Almanac, 1841* (Nashville: Ben Harding), pp. 21-22.

²⁹ *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1845*, p. 4.

Texas 'as one o' the Stars that belonged to Uncle Sam's Striped Handkerchief,' and he swore that 'Santa Ann, or any other tyrant should never wipe his nose with it.' With his bone scythe, he proved that he meant business, making 'Mexican heads fly about as thick as horse chestnuts in a hurricane.' 'I fed five hundred flocks o' wolves on their meat, made a thousand quail traps o' their bones, wiped the sweat off with uncle Sam's striped handkerchief, and come home to Kentuck as fresh as old Niagara.'³⁰

Later, Crockett thought that the Gulf of Mexico was all that stood in the way of the annexation of Texas, so he decided to swallow it up, strip Santa Anna of his power, and then run for president. Again, the joint occupancy of Oregon with the British reminded Crockett of his joint occupancy of a tree with a panther. In Congress, he delivered a 'squatter speech' which advocated that Americans 'shall squat the face of this tarnal 'arth, from the *Hatlantic* ocean to the *Specific!!!*' As one almanac observed in 1853 with evident approval, Uncle Sam was growing so large that 'it will soon take the entire sky to make him a pair of breeches, and the whole earth to make him a pair of boots!'³¹

To return to Crockett's autobiographical *Narrative* after such excess and exuberance is to return, relatively speaking, to sobriety. Yet what is intriguing about the *Narrative* is that here, with the chastened tones of fidelity to historical 'fact,' it is possible to find faithfulness to a different kind of truth—the same inner story of Americans with which the almanacs deal. If the *Narrative* told this tale more subtly than the almanacs, still, it is clear that the *Narrative* told it. Here, as in the almanacs, Crockett mastered nature by ecstatically uniting himself with it in blood and savage identification. And the violence

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³¹ *Crockett's Almanac*, 1846, p. 33; *Davy Crockett's Almanac*, 1847, p. 32; *Crockett's Yaller Flower Almanac*, for '36, pp. 4-6; *Crockett Almanac*, 1853 (Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Baltimore: Fisher & Brother), p. 24.

of the hunt was repeated in the political ambitions and activities of Crockett, the republican conqueror, Crockett the king.

Crockett, who 'always delighted to be in the very thickest of the danger,' was king, first of all, of the hunt. The 105 bears he brought down in the course of less than one year were an impressive instance, but, in the *Narrative*, his feats seemed more astounding than the bare recital of the number can convey. Crockett orchestrated his success in a series of descriptions of encounter after encounter with bear or other wild beast. Thus, on one occasion, he 'saw in and about the biggest bear that ever was seen in America.' He had been prepared for something extraordinary because the night before he had had an auspicious dream 'of having a hard fight with a big black nigger, . . . a sign that I was to have a battle with a bear; for in a bear country, I never know'd such a dream to fail.' In the incident that followed, with tomahawk and butcher knife in hand, Crockett got as close as four or five paces from his adversary who, he recounted, 'fixed his eyes on me.' It was only after this that he hastily loaded his gun and shot the bear.³²

Adventures such as this were only heightened in their drama by the natural crises that often accompanied them. Hunts went forward during earthquake and flood, snow and sleet. After one expedition in which seven bears had already been killed, 'there came a most terrible earthquake, which shook the earth so, that we were rocked about like we had been in a cradle.' Undaunted, Crockett and his companions killed three more before they returned to camp. Earlier, when he had pursued a bear that brought him to the crevices left by other earthquakes, he got down into the crack where the bear lay, butcher knife in hand, to wrestle with it. 'Placing my hand on his rump, [I] felt for his shoulder, just behind which I intended to stick him. I made a lounge with my long knife, and fortunately stuck him right through the heart; at which he just sank down, and I crawled out in a hurry.'³³

³² Shackford and Folmsbee, eds., *Narrative*, pp. 161-64.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-93, 189-90.

It was the same when other catastrophes occurred, and Crockett made it clear that he could outstrip any backwoods prodigy near his clearing. Whether bears, wolves, or turkey 'gobblers,' the prey was always 'of the biggest sort' and in the largest quantity, always obtained in the face of formidable obstacles, always such as left no question that Crockett was unchallenged master of nature. After a spell of inactivity, he 'couldn't stand it any longer without another hunt,' and, again and again, the possibility of the hunt was tied to living on the far edge of civilization. Continually, Crockett confessed that he 'cut out for some new country.'³⁴

But the secret of Crockett's success in conquering the denizens of the wilderness lay, as in the almanacs, in his identification with the powers of wildness, in his becoming like the prey he hunted. He had boasted that when he settled at Shoal Creek, 'no order had been established there.' 'We remained here for some two or three years, without any law at all.' Without law, without civilization, Crockett imitated the savagery he sought to master. In childhood, when he fought another schoolboy, Crockett recalled that he 'set on him like a wild cat,' while in later life he could brag about feeling 'wolfish all over.'³⁵

Again, as in the almanacs, the epitome of wilderness savagery, for Crockett, was the Indian. If Indians ran naked, 'as they were born,' Crockett had his own anecdote to tell about how, when he tried to float some staves down the Mississippi, he had an accident and was rescued without any clothes on, 'skin'd like a rabbit.' If Indians were ignorant, Crockett could tell about his own hostility toward book learning. He had warned, in his preface, that spelling and grammar were not his line, and in his later accounts of political office-seeking, he was pleased to continue to remind his readers of his ignorance.³⁶ It seemed, in fact, to be one of the major reasons why voters should elect him.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34, 30, 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 198, 8, 139-41, 172.

Like the Indians, Crockett kept and used a tomahawk in incident after incident. Like them, he could scalp his prey, as once when he told about scalping squirrels after a hunt. In one episode, when some friendly Choctaws had encountered two Creeks, the Choctaws cut off both of their heads. Then, 'each of those Indians with us would walk up to one of the heads, and taking his war club would strike on it. This was done by every one of them; and when they had got done, I [Crockett] took one of their clubs, and walked up as they had done, and struck it on the head also. At this they all gathered round me, and patting me on the shoulder would call me "Warrior—warrior."' ³⁷

There was even a veiled hint of the Indian eucharist. Crockett told his readers about returning during the Creek War to a town in which the carcasses of dead Indians were strewn, of 'a very terrible appearance, at least what remained of them.' 'It was,' he continued, 'somehow or other found out that the house had a potatoe cellar under it, and an immediate examination was made, for we were all as hungry as wolves.' 'We found a fine chance of potatoes in it, and hunger compelled us to eat them, though I had a little rather not, if I could have helped it, for the oil of the Indians we had burned up on the day before had run down on them, and they looked like they had been stewed with fat meat.' ³⁸ Crockett did not disclose whether or not he changed his mind and found the meal 'superlicious,' but the point is clear. Autobiography and almanacs were telling the same tale. Humor in the almanacs came from the blatant way in which the secrets of mainstream American identity were revealed. Humor in the autobiography was more muted as befitted a 'factual' account, but it sprang from similar sources. People were laughing, after all, at themselves: the joke was the blush and embarrassment of self-revelation, couched in the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 109–110.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90. Despite the ambiguity of the *Narrative* concerning Indians, the historical David Crockett opposed Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Bill of 1830 and introduced legislation for the aid of poor Indians in his home district in Tennessee.

active irony of painting the world savage (and evil) and then exceeding it in wildness (and, hence, villainy).

If the *Narrative* introduced the 'savage eucharist' mostly by innuendo, it could hardly be called subtle in the case of politics. Crockett paraded his political interests and intents throughout his story which, in fact, may have been written as campaign propaganda.³⁹ He wanted the world to know his 'true history' and how he 'worked along to rise from a cane-brake to [his] present station in life.' With his 'go ahead' motto to urge him on, he became a candidate for office. He didn't know what to say to gain votes but decided to leave it to chance, and throughout the *Narrative* it was clear that 'chance' must have inspired heavy-handed forays against Andrew Jackson, his party, and his policies in any speech of Crockett's. Usually though, his electioneering was less noted for the content of his addresses than for their style. With hunting shirt and whiskey as props, he spoke as the embodiment of the rugged backwoodsman and renowned hunter. 'I found the people began to talk very much about the bear hunter, the man from the cane,' he observed. To heighten their appreciation, Crockett supplied whiskey to his audiences, and once, when he borrowed money to finance his election, he used it 'to buy a little of "*the creature*," to put my friends in a good humor, as well as the other gentlemen.'⁴⁰

But the imperialism of King Crockett would not leave him content with simply running for the legislature. He had announced, 'I have just crept out of the cane, to see what discoveries I could make among the white folks.' He must have liked what he found, however, for one of Crockett's regular

³⁹ James A. Shackford has argued that Crockett wrote his autobiography as campaign literature to help him win reelection to the United States Congress in 1835. If so, it was unsuccessful, since Crockett was defeated in the election of 1835, thus precipitating his move to Texas and death at the Alamo. (See Shackford, *David Crockett*, pp. 269-72, and introd. in Shackford and Folmsbee, eds., *Narrative*, p. xv.) A different explanation has been supplied for the autobiography, however, by Joseph Arpad, who thinks it was written for financial reasons. (See Arpad, ed., *Narrative*, pp. 26-27.)

⁴⁰ Shackford and Folmsbee, eds., *Narrative*, pp. 172, 141, 142, 169, 167, 201-202.

preoccupations in his *Narrative* was the likelihood of his presidency of the United States. He thought that he might be 'forced to take the "white house," ' but, recounting his participation in the Creek War 'in the defence of the country,' he explained that 'if it should make me president, why I can't help it; such things will sometimes happen.' If it did occur, he was determined to return to the Bank of the United States the deposits that Jackson had removed. Becoming president, in his opinion, would be 'good history; and every one will look on it as important.'⁴¹ Crockett, thus, put his premium on making history. The same impulse, which in the almanacs was translated into sweeping demands for territory for the growing United States, here became the expansionism of personal ambition. The message seemed to be that to live meaningfully one must live as master, gaining ascendancy, whether over land or people, so that one might rule. Republican 'kingship,' in another irony, had led the Crockett who espoused the democratic ideal to an implicit embrace of the hierarchical principle: democracy was the best government on earth so long as Crockett could preside over it.

This mission of mastery would place him at the center of the civil order, an order that meant at once both civilization, the opposite of savagery, and civility, the cultivation of the manners and the mores that were the body language of the civil and civilized. The play on the meaning of civilization, curiously, formed a continuing theme in the Crockett mythology. In the autobiography, Crockett had announced, 'I asked a bear no favours, no way, further than civility,' and in the almanacs, he

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 131, 71, 124, 131. In a letter of Jan. 8, 1835, which James Shackford has reprinted, Crockett referred to the 'Convention of Mississippi' and acknowledged, 'I was asked by the Same State to run for the Presidency.' (See Shackford, *David Crockett*, p. 176, and for a positive interpretation, pp. 32, 143-44.) No date, however, was given for Mississippi's invitation in the letter, and the *Narrative* had been published in February or March 1834. Thus, it is unclear whether or not more than Crockett's imagination was involved in these allusions to the presidency, and, in fact, Joseph Arpad has argued that the convention occurred in late 1834 (Arpad, 'David Crockett,' p. 183). Still, the point of the argument here is not so much the sequence of external events but the inner history of Crockett's ambitions.

told one bear whom he encountered, 'I'm a civil man, Mr. Bear, saving your presence.'⁴² In Crockett's view, as expressed here, civility, with notable qualifications, was characteristic of the savage and natural state. Animals, in general, were more 'civil' than Yankee or congressional types, but 'red niggers' and black niggers (who were animals beyond civility for Crockett) did not count in the classification.

The almanacs especially took up this concern, which was mostly hinted at in the autobiography, so that, once again, they wrote large what in the *Narrative* was written between the lines. Crockett emphasized to his readers: 'I war teeched per-liteness when I war a boy; and when I did an imperlite action I war licked with a crockodile's tal, or a young saplin, till I greed to pollygize.' Evidently, he remembered the lessons well. As an adult, he frequently juxtaposed the polite and the political, always making it clear that true politeness arose in the forest and that the civility of the Congress was inferior. So he named a sow after the president's wife 'to show my respects for the lady.' When two congressmen were about to duel with pistols, he stepped between them and warned them that 'Col. Crockett's a gentleman accordin to natur, an won't tolerate any unnatural civilities between nobody, coon killer or Congressmen.' Once Crockett decided to take his pet alligator and his pet bear, Death Hug, to the Congress and taught them to polka by way of preparation. He was, he said, 'teetotally detarmined that my two civilized quadrupeds shall beat anything on earth but me, an when I do get 'em as completely complished in all the screamin graces, won't they be fine companions for me when I visit the English court, and little Queen Vic on my embassy on Oregon?'⁴³

The reference to Oregon clarified the final meaning of what

⁴² Shackford and Folmsbee, eds., *Narrative*, p. 175.

⁴³ *Fisher's Crockett Almanac, 1843* (Buffalo: Eli Hollidge [New York: Turner & Fisher]), p. 15; *ibid.*, pp. 20-21; *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1844*, p. 13; *Crockett's Almanac, 1846*, p. 12.

John Murray Cuddihy has called the 'ordeal of civility.'⁴⁴ Manners were the vaneer of republican conquerors, the external taming that accompanied their mastery of the world outside them. Crockett understood the connection very well when he told this story about Independence Day:

I called all my wild pets together that I had tamed into perfect civilization, an took 'em out under the old Liberty Tree to celebrate the Great Lord's Day of Freedom, the FOURTH OF JULY. . . . an when I begun my oration, they opened thar eyes and ears in the most teetotal attentive manner, an showed a tar-nal sight more respect and parlamentary breeding than the members o' Congress show to one another durin thar speeches; an when I concluded by liften my cap, with twenty-six cheers for Uncle Sam, and his States, with a little touch o' Texas an Oregon, an choke me, if the varmints didn't foller up in sich a shout as set all the trees shakin.⁴⁵

Crockett had shown that civility was related to savagery and that the savage state was the perfect raw material for civilization. The wilderness was new and vigorous, unlike the old age and corruption of the East. As John William Ward noticed in *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, Americans of the era thought that their government flourished best in contact with wilderness forces. In the interior of the continent, they saw themselves as furthest from the allurements of Europe, released from the dead bonds of the past, and primed for action. Hence, they thought that in the wilderness freedom and republican values could best be realized.⁴⁶ Yet the wilderness, if it was to accomplish its work of the regeneration of society, must be tamed through the explosion of human power to control it.

⁴⁴ John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1974). Cuddihy's book concerned Jewish intellectuals who, inheriting the culture of the *shtetl*, which virtually collapsed distinctions between public and private life, must now 'pass' in post-Enlightenment Europe with its demands for politeness and 'manners,' i.e., maintaining a public reserve.

⁴⁵ *Crockett's Almanac*, 1846, p. 19.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Ward, *Andrew Jackson*, pp. 76, 144.

True freedom was the freedom of the self-made who had mastered themselves through mastering their environment. Crockett the congressman who would be president spoke to Americans as Crockett the common man become king.

What finally is to be said about King Crockett and his fictions that were truer than fact? How are his preposterous language and deeds to be interpreted? Constance Rourke and Walter Blair have noted that there was much that was humorous in his attitudes and exploits. But although neither Rourke nor Blair went on to say it, as this study has already indicated, the humor was profoundly ironic. First of all, there was the irony of an 'unnatural' nature. The language of extremes, of tall talk and exaggeration, with which Crockett expressed his identification with the wilderness, was a rhetoric of *unreality*. And if Crockett's attitudes and actions were representative in some way of the inner life of many Americans of the era, if in his character we learn the 'truth' about them, the truth revealed strain and tension within the body politic. Mary Douglas, in her well-known study, *Natural Symbols*, has argued for an analogous relationship between the way people image their own bodies and the 'body' of the community to which they belong. If they are careful about what enters and leaves through body openings (food or sexual partners, for instance), they are also likely to be cautious about strange or exotic people who may try to penetrate the social body. If, on the other hand, they are free about the exchanges that occur across the boundaries of their bodies, they are probably also participants in a fairly open society.⁴⁷

Now if the bodies that stumble through the *Narrative* and the almanacs are viewed from this perspective, it is easy to make connections between the twisted, contorted bodies of the hunter and the hunted and the equally 'unnatural' postures of

⁴⁷ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), especially pp. vii-xvi, 99-106. I am indebted to Prof. Sandra S. Sizer for noticing the usefulness of Douglas's categories in an interpretation of Crockett.

the body of American society. The United States was, in the metaphor of Fred Somkin, an 'unquiet eagle' in the period from 1815 to 1860.⁴⁸ The exuberance and optimism of public life, which accompanied a stretching of social, geographical, and psychological limits beyond their normal bounds, hid a mass of anxiety and confusion beneath. The Crockett texts, in their depictions of humans and beasts, suggest a world in which things were somewhere out of joint. Nature had lost the characteristic which made it natural—a harmonious relationship between parts in the whole, an unpremeditated ecological balance.

There was a second and related irony which the life of King Crockett implied. It may be simply a restatement to discuss the curiously inhuman humanity of his character (since in the sense in which the term has just been used, humanity was part of nature). Yet the irony of portraying one's adversaries as savage and therefore vile and then exceeding them in the very qualities that have been condemned is obvious. More than that, the kind of behavior and belief system that supported the master-slave dichotomy has, at least rhetorically, been universally rejected in the language of *human* rights. In Crockett's case, the extremity of the savagery which he both repudiated and embraced, the completeness of his exercise of power, and the absence of a serious mediating element only sharpen the sense that he was acting without human regard. There was no softening feature, except perhaps the humor, and even this seems only to accentuate the harshness of his general bearing. Aesthetically and ethically, Crockett does not please.

However, like him or not, success or failure, King Crockett disclosed the abiding concerns of many Americans, seeking, as Ward argued, a middle ground in a civilization that still kept contact with nature.⁴⁹ With his dual identity as man of the woods and man of the Congress, he summed up the tension

⁴⁸ Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

⁴⁹ See Ward, *Andrew Jackson*, esp. pp. 30-45.

between the values of nature and history. Even as he embraced the newness of wilderness existence and Adamic myth, he espoused the human political project. Nature and civility, in the figure of Crockett, had been made to coexist. Yet the results were, to repeat, somehow out of joint: nature, like a national Cinderella, found herself wearing the rags and tatters of American history. If she was a little pathetic, she seemed also a quaint and even funny sight.

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