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THE ART OF MEMORY: THE ADVENTURES OF ALEXANDER HENRY

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EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN  
DECEMBER 2006

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## ABSTRACT

How good is one person's word in the world of historical analysis? This question is posed whenever historians examine travel narrative. Colonial travelogues and diaries form much of what we know about American Indians and cultural interaction in 18<sup>th</sup> century North America. Alexander Henry wrote about his experiences as a Great Lakes fur trader between the years of 1760 and 1776, and though he published his writings as a memoir the line between reality and fiction is anything but clear. Henry's book has been used by countless historians for its rich and detailed information on American Indians, yet many questions exist regarding the truthfulness and accuracy of these observations. As a figure of regional interest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Henry's publication has been the source of myth and tourist fodder for generations. This research on fur trade narratives will hopefully shed new light on the processes of imperial encounter and colonization in the broader historical context, as well as explore long term effects travel literature has had on perception of history.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past century, there has been a great deal of scholarly literature on the Great Lakes fur trade. This interest is with good reason; the fur trade was an incredibly valuable facet of colonial trade in North America, and to the European continent beyond. On the surface, it appears that there has been no stone left unturned by historians when it comes to fur trade analysis. Historians have looked at fur trade economy, ecology, and culture just to name a few.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that many areas of research have been exhausted, one of the most important vehicles of fur trade information has been ignored as an important topic of analysis in itself: the fur trader's narrative.

Travel writing has had an essential place in popular European and American literature for at least three hundred years. As more and more printing presses sprang up in North America in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, many of the narratives and journals of fur traders were being published for popular consumption and helped to shape the ideas and opinions of an increasingly westward-looking young nation.<sup>2</sup> Those traders who chose to publish accounts of their adventures did so for many reasons. It is just as important to analyze the narratives written by 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Lakes fur traders in the context of popular adventure writing and travel narratives of the time as to analyze them for content.

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed discussions on economy, ecology, and culture of the fur trade, there are three particularly useful works. Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the lands Southwest of the Hudson Bay* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Gregory H. Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1997), 15.

These accounts were a significant factor in the development of popular European and American concepts about the world

### CULTURAL AND LITERARY DYNAMICS

A literary-historical treatment of narrative has benefited many areas of historical intercultural research.<sup>3</sup> But examining fur trade narrative has received little attention from the history community. Perhaps this seeming snub is because so many of the fur trade era texts fit neatly into other literary historical genres, such as European exploration accounts and Indian captivity narratives. Yet examining fur trade writings as unique examples of colonial writing provides much needed insight on this socio-economic sphere. This sphere cast a heavy shadow over concepts of both European exploration and cultural conflict, yet its narratives are often perceived as mere by-products of the era, not a dynamic force that actually helped shape it.<sup>4</sup>

One example of what can be done by examining fur trade narrative is “Creating the Distance of Print: The Memoir of Peter Pond, Fur Trader,” by Bruce Greenfield. In this article Greenfield examines the literary and cultural phenomenon of memoirs and diaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and looks critically at one particular example dealing with Peter Pond. The author cites Pond’s account as one example of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of adventure writing popularized by European educated middle class society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A more global examination of the implications of travel literature can be found in Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge), 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Greenfield, “Creating the Distance of Print, *Early American Literature*, 415, 416.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Greenfield, “Creating the Distance of Print: The Memoir of Peter Pond, Fur Trader,” *Early American Literature* 37, no. 3 (2002): 415.

Greenfield examines Pond's motives for writing about what he did, and in the manner in which he describes his experiences.

This new analysis is excellent for looking more critically at first hand accounts. Awareness of the potential cultural implications and impetus behind Pond's narrative and the writings of other interior traders are very important for analyzing primary sources for fur trade research. This article is an intriguing example of the combination of literature and history, and proves that the fur trade deserves to have a greater examination of the nature of its travel narratives. Peter Pond's narrative, like Alexander Henry's, has helped guide the course of historical perception toward the fur trade and therefore should be analyzed as a cultural force in their own right.

Like fur trade history, travel literature is a vast and far reaching topic much too large to examine in its entirety. That is why this paper examines one particular narrative, that of Alexander Henry, who in 1809 published his account entitled *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories, 1760-1776*. The frequent and undoubting way scholars use his words to describe many aspects of the trade, especially Indian-white relations, are intriguing and deserve critical analysis. Henry is particularly ripe for analysis because his book represents a genre of colonial literature that capitalized on exciting or exotic experiences as entertainment, a distinction that does not always imply an investment in the truth.

This research is done in hopes of a better understanding of travel narrative as both a genre of literature as well as primary historical source material. This kind of analysis has been applied to narratives written about other places of colonization, such as Africa and South America in Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

*Transculturation*. However, with the exception of Bruce Greenfield's article, few scholars have examined the writings of American Great Lakes fur traders and the Native American groups with whom they interacted on an intensive level. This research on fur trade narratives will hopefully shed new light on the processes of imperial encounter and colonization in the broader historical context, as well as explore long terms effects travel literature has had on perception of history.

### ALEXANDER HENRY

Accounts such as Henry's are an invaluable link historians have into the 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Lakes fur trade. But more often than not narratives are only used to support or refute a particular argument or piece of evidence. Contrary to their typical usage, narratives are much more than simple receptacles of facts, opinions, and accounts. The purpose of this paper is not to use Henry as historians so often use him, as simply another historical person who left behind some useful observations about a military fort or the fur trader's credit system. Rather, this paper is an analysis of Henry as both a spectator of history and a creator of it through a literary medium, the memoir.

Alexander Henry published his book in 1809, though the events contained within it are those that occurred thirty to forty years prior. The time period which he is writing about is one of turbulent international politics set during an era of unprecedented exploration and conquest, though you would barely have an inkling of these grand machinations from his accounts alone. Henry dedicates much of his text to descriptions of



himself hunting, fishing, and roving the countryside via canoe and snowshoe. Throughout the memoir, he is completely focused on this microcosmic world.

Perhaps because of his relative isolation from the colonies, or because he did not find them relevant to his story, Henry left most politics out of his book and did not philosophize about his place in world events. Certainly he had time to ruminate on them in the forty years between his career as a fur trader and the time he published his book, but he left documenting the larger scope of history to others. Therefore many of the larger historical events relevant to Henry's life must be pieced together from his and other sources to get an idea of what drove Henry to take up the fur trade, and what events helped guide his experiences in the Great Lakes region.

In the world both inside and outside of the Great Lakes, events were playing out that were shaping the course of world history. The beginning of Henry's narrative is set in the midst of the French and Indian War, in which France and England wrestled for control of North America. This war was a manifestation of an even greater fight for global dominance between the two nations on the European continent and throughout their respective colonial claims. Barely twenty years old, Henry's briefly fought for the British under General Amherst; participating in the siege of Quebec.<sup>6</sup> It is right after this event that Henry's narrative begins.

When Quebec, France's colonial stronghold in North America, fell to the British in September of 1759 it was as much an economic victory as a military one for Henry.<sup>7</sup> France's hold over the North American fur trade had prevented colonial Englishmen from

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<sup>6</sup> David A. Armour, "Alexander Henry," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* [Encyclopedia On-line], (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000, accessed 20 October 2006); available from <http://www.biographi.ca/>.

<sup>7</sup> William M. Fowler Jr., *Empires at War: The French and Indian War and the Struggle for North America, 1754-1763*, (New York: Walker and Company, 2005), 273-275.

profiting from that wealthy enterprise, and it was not long before ambitious colonists like Henry set out for the interior. As the British government took over control of the trade, Henry quickly realized the potential gain of Britain's territorial victory, as well as its pitfalls. It was these risks, and their dangerous consequences, that form the base of Henry's narrative.

Henry had one of the first sets of English eyes to see much of the western Great Lakes, including what are now the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Lake Superior. Previous to 1760, the only European presence in the region was French, though their numbers in the region had always been small and scattered at best. Henry's fellow colonists on the east coast had little idea what these lands, or their people, were like. As a young man, Henry sat on an information gold mine that could have made him famous as an explorer had he published his accounts immediately following his disengagement in the region.

But Henry did not publish his memoir. Instead he traveled to England and France, meeting with British dignitaries and the court of Marie Antoinette. He settled in Montreal, married and had children.<sup>8</sup> By the time Henry thought to publish his memoirs, many others had already done so. The three decade gap between his career and his publication begs some very important questions about the nature his travel narrative. Why did Henry choose 1809 to publish his memoir; and perhaps more importantly, why did he choose to publish it at all? Posing these questions about Henry's motivations for publishing will give great insight into the way he wrote about his experiences, and clarify Henry's reliability as witness to the fur trade.

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<sup>8</sup> David Amour, "Alexander Henry," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 2000.

In 1809 the Great Lakes region was no longer the unexplored wilderness it had been in Henry's youth. The land had been mapped; the plants and animals had been catalogued. The native inhabitants had also already been well documented by others, though stories about them and their strange ways were still eagerly sought after. Henry was old and many others had succeeded him in the region, though he was still keenly aware of the economic potential of the west. If Henry wanted his career to be remembered (and take advantage of any profit a successful book potentially held), it would have to be his exploits, not his discoveries that would be his key to success. Therefore, Henry understood the appeal of his many youthful adventures, and manipulated his past experiences to create a piece of popular literature as well as a memoir.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE

## THE READING PUBLIC

What exactly did it mean to write popular literature in Henry's lifetime? 18<sup>th</sup> century literature abounded in adventure accounts, both fiction and non-fiction. Both were popular, and as Mary Louise Pratt and Bruce Greenfield argue, both contributed to the so-called "planetary consciousness" that was growing in the Euro-American mind.<sup>9</sup> It was during this time that Europe was attempting global domination not just politically or militarily, but scientifically as well. It was this desire for empirical knowledge of the world that sparked travel writing's popularity.<sup>10</sup> Henry was a product of imperial expansion as well as empirical science, and it the combination of these two things that ultimately drove Henry and others to travel to the frontier and later write about it.

Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, novels gained enormous popularity in both Europe and America. These books were typically sentimental morality tales geared toward middle class women—though action adventure stories, especially ones about the uncharted world, became popular reading for educated men as well.<sup>11</sup> Fiction books like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* were well known when Henry was alive, and no doubt he was at least aware of these books by the time he began writing his.

Initially travel narrative had been directed at those with a specific interest in the topic, and they were read as scientific or economic guides that detailed the potential the

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<sup>9</sup> Greenfield, "The Distance of Print", *Early American Literature*, 419.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge), 1992, 38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture*, 56.

lands held for others. This qualification can be attributed to books like *Jonathon Carver's Travels Through America, 1766-1768*, which attempted to scientifically chart the natural world of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Carver, who was a contemporary of Henry, wrote dispassionate descriptions of geography, plants, animals, and Indians. This style, highly regarded by European intellectuals, won him great praise as an intrepid and worldly traveler when it was published in 1778.<sup>12</sup> But toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, an increasingly literate, non-intellectual population that was “not readily distinguishable from those who bought novels,” began to read nonfiction travel narratives as well.<sup>13</sup> This shift opened up a reading public for Henry that earlier in his life was not there. It certainly would have influenced his decision to write a book that emphasized action and excitement over detached scientific observations, especially since his colleague Carver had already successfully catalogued the wilderness thirty years prior.

Henry did not just write about what he saw, as Carver claimed to do. He invited the audience to become part of the action he was describing. At one point, Henry becomes hopelessly lost while hunting one winter day. He writes, “In the night it rained hard. I awoke cold and wet; and as soon as light appeared I recommenced my journey, sometimes walking and sometimes running, unknowing where to go, bewildered, and like a madman.”<sup>14</sup> Henry is not just making observations about what he sees, he wants the reader to see what he sees, and feel what he feels as if he were a protagonist in a novel.

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathon Carver, *The Journals of Jonathon Carver and Related Documents, 1766-1700*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press), 1976, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Greenfield, “The Distance of Print”, *Early American Literature*, 415.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Henry, *Massacre at Mackinac: Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1764*, (Mackinac Island: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1966), 85.

Henry knew that his audience was larger than fellow traders or intellectuals, and he adjusted his narrative style to reflect the interests of his readers.

Another possible inspiration for Henry may have been captivity narratives. Captivity narratives were popular throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and remained so at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many scholars point out that the popularity of these stories indicates a society with a deep fascination for the wilderness and its “savage” inhabitants, and as Gregory Nobles in *American Frontiers* observes, “If nothing else, captivity narratives offered and alluring, at times even lurid, alternatives to the long list of sermons, advice manuals, and other sorts of prescriptive literature available to early American readers.”<sup>15</sup>

Captivity narratives created a contrast image of civilized society, a concept known today as the “other.” Eve Kornfeld states in *Creating an American Culture: 1775-1800* that early American society “found it impossible to think and write about American identity without also thinking and writing about its negative image, or everything that it was not.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the main focus of Henry’s adventures is his interactions with Indians, who are usually the cause of both his downfalls and his redemptions. One of the most popular and eternally appealing parts of Henry’s book occurs when Henry is captured by angry Indians after the infamous Michilimackinac massacre and eventually released into the custody of an Indian friend, Wawatam, whom he stays with for several months. In this scenario, Indians constitute both the enemy and the ally of Henry, a common theme in colonial literature.

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<sup>15</sup> Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 148-149.

<sup>16</sup> Eve Kornfeld, *Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Document* (Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2001), 66.

## LITERATURE AND WESTWARD EXPANSION

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, North American literature was heavily influenced by isolation and fear of the savage world beyond the ragged edges of colonial cities and towns. This revulsion extended not just to the native inhabitants, but the white “half-savage” settlers who had pushed into the wilderness. The image most Americans had of actual frontier settlers was that of low, dirty, vulgar, and most of all, lazy people rejected from society in the east.<sup>17</sup> It was not until Thomas Jefferson assumed the presidency in 1801 that the stereotype of the frontier settler began to change. Jefferson’s enthusiasm about the potential of America’s frontiersmen began to change cultural notions about western settlers.<sup>18</sup>

Henry’s book went to press in 1809; the North American ideological landscape was dramatically different than it had been when he set off for the interior forty years earlier. Both England and France had retreated to Europe and a new nation, the United States of America was attempting to decide what to do with its new found territorial acquisitions. Just three years earlier the highly celebrated journey of Lewis and Clark to the Pacific had been successfully completed, and the government was debating how best to utilize the newly charted western lands.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century began, literature itself began to veer away from a mentality of fear and started to develop a strong sense of confidence and superiority toward the frontier. This shift in perception created a change in the way settlers were imagined in

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<sup>17</sup> Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 104-105.

<sup>18</sup> Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 115.

literature. When John Filson tacked on *The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon* to the end of his enthusiastically written book, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* in 1784, he inadvertently created the first frontier legend.<sup>19</sup> Over the next few decades the story gained popularity, and it was the combination of Boone's exciting (if implausible) adventures and his resourceful, independent spirit that Americans connected inextricably with the frontier. Frontier settlers were no longer seen as the dregs of society unfit for habitation in the civilized east, but rather the forward thinking masters of their own destiny.

The archetypical European explorer was being replaced by the American frontiersman in the popular imagination, and literature was changing apace with this new national dynamic.<sup>20</sup> It is this new concept of the west that created a new market for memoirs like Alexander Henry's, which combine both the imperialistic notions of Euro-Americans in previous narratives and the entrepreneurial zeal of the frontiersmen.

#### A GOOD READ

Travel narrative helped shape the Euro-American imagination, and when examining a text such as Henry's, it isn't difficult to see why. His accounts are thrilling to read. Nearly two hundred years after they were first published, his adventure accounts quicken the pulse as easily as the day they were first put to paper. On top of that, Henry comes across as an extremely likable, intelligent fellow who wrote naturally and with

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<sup>19</sup> Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 149.



humor. For instance, when told of a rumor that he is likely to be killed and boiled for broth, he dryly states that the “intelligence was not of the most agreeable kind.”<sup>21</sup>

Henry’s book is packaged like it was meant for popular consumption. In fact, it has a little bit for all reading tastes. For those desiring action and adventure, he includes an extended description of the Michilimackinac massacre rife with violence, blood, gore, and terror along with several other close shaves. For those obsessed with the exotic, he obliges them with ample descriptions of Indian encounters. These passages will later be the scholarly crux of his book, widely regarded as an amateur ethnography describing his numerous interactions with the Indians groups inhabiting the upper Great Lakes. These accounts are complete with rich details of their various food and clothing preferences, hunting habits and physical attributes. And of course, no travelogue would be complete without recounting the fascinating frontier world. Henry is skilled at painting the landscape with words; creating an appealing back drop of woods and water, hills and ice.

Henry appears to have been a born writer; he was adept in his descriptions of people and events, as well as skilled at placing himself in the hero-adventurer role (tempered by a large dose of well placed detachment and modesty). Still describing how he was lost in the forest, he captivates his audiences with his humble confessions:

I was in a strange country, and knew not how far I had to go. I had been three days without food; I was not without the means of procuring myself either food or fire. Despair had almost overpowered me: but I soon resigned myself into the hands of the Providence whose arm had so often saved me, and returned on my track in search of what I had lost. My search was in vain, and I resumed by course, wet, cold, and hungry, and almost without clothing.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), 157.

<sup>22</sup> Henry, *Massacre at Mackinac*, 86.

Eventually Henry finds his way back to camp, attributing his success to “the lessons which I had received from my Indian friend.”<sup>23</sup>

Unlike a journal filled with daily minutia and brief summery, Henry had the leisure to invest perhaps years in crafting his narrative, as well as the careful polishing of professional editors. He implies in his introduction that he had been piecing together his narrative for possibly decades, stating “the details, from time to time committed to paper, form the subject matter of the present volume.”<sup>24</sup>

Certainly Henry did not intend to write a memoir to give an accurate account of his entire life in the region, but rather only of the moments of his choosing. Henry devotes over half his text to just the first three years of his career as an interior trader. The majority of that is focused on 1763, the year of the Michilimackinac massacre with Henry’s subsequent adoption into an Ojibwe family. This chronological emphasis is quite significant considering the entire book (in two parts) spans fifteen years total.

So why did Henry choose to focus on the first three years instead of giving equal descriptive weight to his entire career? The answer is that those three years contain the majority of Henry’s most exciting exploits. The nature of an account is all in the telling, and Henry chose to tell an adventure, selecting those incidences that best supported that kind of narrative. The result is a story more like a novel except that his experiences were, he claimed, real.

Although Henry certainly capitalized on his adventures, he did claim the desire write about his experiences in a detached way. He says as much in his preface, stating in the third person “he has by no means undertaken to write the general history of the

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<sup>23</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 132

<sup>24</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, V.

American Indians, nor any theory of their morals, or merits.”<sup>25</sup> He doesn’t blatantly editorialize or directly share his personal opinions with the reader. But as we will see, though Henry does not make many personal remarks in his work, he is by no means detached in his observations. Indeed, his whole narrative hinges on the blood-pumping, nausea-inducing, and otherwise totally sensational experiences of a man caught up in the heat of the moment—not the careful and unemotional observations of an amateur scientist.

Taking his introduction at face value, Henry was determined to give an honest portrayal of his interactions with Indians. In many respects, it appears he did make a good faith effort to do so. He uses terms like “savages” infrequently, favoring instead to call them by their tribal names (as they were known to Europeans), or simply Indians. This would appear to be deliberate on Henry’s part, because though words like “savage” were yet to attain the unacceptably pejorative nature we associate with it today, the word still had a heavily negative connotation.<sup>26</sup>

Even when relating his blood soaked account of the Michilimackinac massacre, that in all other respects casts the Indian attackers in the worst possible light, he demurs from using derogatory language.<sup>27</sup> The only exception in this case is Henry’s use of the term “barbarian conquerors,” which he uses once while describing the gruesome massacre scene he observed from his garret spy-hole (though perhaps this term is not so much a generalization of all Indians as it is a pointed reference to those involved in the attack). Conversely, the times Henry does use the word “savage” also seem deliberate, often appearing to indicate a situation Henry can not reconcile within his own cultural

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<sup>25</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, VI.

<sup>26</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 77-93.

framework. For example, Henry pointedly refers to his Indian companions as savages only once during the long winter after the massacre, after months of isolation from anything resembling his own native culture.<sup>28</sup>

But just because Henry is not blatantly racist in his narrative (or at least doesn't succumb to stereotypical labeling of them) does not mean he gives an even-handed account of his experiences with Indians. As was said previously, the nature of a narrative is all in the telling. Henry not only wanted to tell an adventure, he wanted to show off his intimate knowledge of Indians while being sure to distance himself from their actions. Henry made sure to capitalize on both the "noble" and the "savage" Indian concepts popular with Euro-Americans. It is in these passages that his manipulation of events is most obvious and effective.

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<sup>28</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 132.

## CHAPTER THREE: HENRY'S METHODS

### THE DELIGHTS OF VIOLENCE

Henry gives plenty of examples of native encounter, and while many of these are benign observations, like his description of Ojibwe medical traditions and the practice of maple sugaring, the real focus of his narrative is on those Indians directly related to getting him into or out of dangerous situations. It is in these passages that Henry as the consummate storyteller is actualized. Because Indians were so integral to the plot of his adventures, they are often the victims of Henry's sensationalized prose.

Henry does not deny himself any graphically descriptive language when telling the more thrilling tales in his narrative, specifically the Michilmackinac massacre. The massacre resulted from a ruse concocted by a small army of Ojibwa influenced by Pontiac's Rebellion, and Henry does not spare anyone's delicate sensibilities when he writes:

The dead were scalped and mangled; the dying were writhing and shrieking under the unsatiated [sic] knife and tomahawk; and, from the bodies of some ripped open, their butchers were drinking the blood, scooped up in the hollow of joined hands, and quaffed amid shouts of rage and victory.<sup>29</sup>

Pontiac was an Ottawa man who, like many Great Lakes Indians, was not happy with the outcome of the French and Indian War. After over one hundred years of trade with the French; which had resulted in many familial, as well as economic bonds, the installation of the British in the area was not a welcome site for many who had come to

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<sup>29</sup> Alexander Henry, *Massacre at Mackinac*, 49.

expect a certain method of trade and transaction that the British all but ignored.<sup>30</sup>

Determined to overthrow the British and reinstate the French, many Great Lakes Indians heeded Pontiac's call to arms, including the Ojibwe that inhabited the region of modern day upper Michigan.

Henry does an interesting thing by describing the actual massacre from his perspective before he describes how and why it happened. Because the reader is given no preface for what is about to occur, it gives an element of surprise that greatly adds to its effect. On June 4 1763 (which was also, not coincidentally, the King of England's birthday), a seemingly friendly Ojibwe lacrosse match, or what Henry describes as *bag'gat'iway*, was played in front of Fort Michilimackinac as oblivious merchants and soldiers watched from the open and undefended gates. After the teams had thrown their ball into the fort seemingly as an accident, the game quickly turned into a well executed bloody coup against the newly ensconced British forces there.<sup>31</sup> Henry was apparently inside a house with no view of the attack, and only became aware of danger when the screams reach his door. Henry typically references himself in a congratulatory manner, but he certainly doesn't groom his ego when he describes his terrified flight to a neighbor's house (the French Canadians inhabiting the fort remained untouched during the raid) after seeing no hope in defending himself or others:

I addressed myself to M. Langlade, begging that he would put me in some place of safety, until the heat of the affair should be over; an act of charity by which he might preserve me from the general massacre.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Sleeper Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 77, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 79,80.

In the end it is not Langlade who saves Henry, himself a prominent French businessman and soldier unsympathetic to the British takeover, but their Indian slave who hides him in their attic after Langlade refuses to help. Henry helplessly listens to the violent commotion below, sweating in fear. Eventually he is discovered, and is taken prisoner by a man named Wenniway. According to Henry, he then spent several days dodging would be assassins and shivering in his underclothes.

Henry does not end the repugnant descriptions after he is taken prisoner. Though Henry's tone remains ostensibly solemn during this tale, there is a detectable amount of delight he takes in titillating his audience, like when he describes being fed bread which had been cut with knives still covered in blood from the massacre.<sup>33</sup> Though Henry claims his narrative is a straightforward description of his experiences, it is clear the he is most enthusiastic and expressive when relating the bloodiest and most gruesome tales.

#### DRINKING AND THE LIES OF LITERARY DETACHMENT

The massacre is not the only time Henry uses the actions of Indians to emphasize violence, or to highlight his own impeccable innocence. He recounts the marathon drinking bouts of his native counterparts and the inevitable violence that accompanies them, but always from a safe narrative distance. Other trader's narratives, like Peter Pond's, also recall tales of wild debauchery while making sure to distance them from any culpability, as Greenfield observes in his article. Pond's description of a Wisconsin Indian funerary rite, which was later accompanied by a great deal of nocturnal drinking

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<sup>33</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventure*, 99.

and sex, is done from a carefully detached perspective.<sup>34</sup> Greenfield argues that this was an intentional device of narration to imply both physical and philosophical distance from the activities, yet Pond remains quite placid and perhaps a little amused by what he is describing.<sup>35</sup>

Alexander Henry also stresses his detachment from various vices, but Henry is much more severe in his descriptions than Pond. Several times in his text he reiterates the unsavory actions of the Indians while intoxicated. Within the first few days of his first trip, Henry claims he was nearly killed by an Indian assailant after that man had generously sampled the keg of rum Henry's guide had previously opened.<sup>36</sup> For Henry, this first encounter with native drinking was representative of all instances where Native Americans and alcohol mixed.

In another tale of alcoholic excess occurs after Henry is rescued by his friend Wawatam and spirited away to nearby Mackinac Island, where he is led up to a small cave to hide. The reason for this, according to Wawatam, is to protect Henry from his brethren who had already begun to drink the large quantity of stolen liquor from the fort. His friend left to join in the celebration while Henry languished in the cave for two days with only some decidedly sober ancient bones and skulls scattered about the ground for companionship.<sup>37</sup> Henry plays up his damp, sad conditions in the cave to the hilt, making himself a figure of temperate strength amongst the weak-willed natives.

Though Henry did not witness the post-massacre bender, the obvious implication was that he would have been killed in the rowdy drunken haze of victory. This is case, it

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<sup>34</sup> Greenfield, "The Distance of Print", *Early American Literature*, 428.

<sup>35</sup> Greenfield, "The Distance of Print", *Early American Literature*, 428.

<sup>36</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 110-113.



may be quite true. And yet, after all the rum had been drunk and Henry was led back down the hill to the encampment, no one is even the least bit rude to him. Apparently, the band's violent dislike of Henry was as fleeting as its supply of alcohol.

This story, along with several others Henry mentions from time to time, creates an obvious undercurrent of paternalistic philosophy despite Henry's so-called detachment. In fact, it is precisely Henry's attempts to distance himself that reveal his contemptuous opinions about Native Americans that he otherwise carefully conceals. Certainly his Indian companions were not the only ones partaking in raucous bouts of drinking. Yet Henry never mentions himself or other white men of his standing as ever having taken a sip of liquor. Considering Henry was in his early twenties during these incidences, and likely to have drunk alcohol as a regular part of his meals and social interactions (probably on daily basis while living at the fort), it becomes apparent Henry deliberately censored himself to create both a more negative image of Indians and a more positive image of himself.

### CAPTIVE IDENTITY

Although Henry enjoys using negative images of Indians to spice up his narrative, it does not serve his purposes in all cases. As was previously mentioned, Indians were both the enemy and ally of Henry, and at least in one case the "noble savage" of colonial literature is important in Henry's story. It is soon after the bloody bread incident that Henry is rescued by his old friend Wawatam. After hearing of Henry's capture, Wawatam delivers an eloquent speech and convinces an Ojibwa council to release Henry

to him. For his safety, Wawatam decides to take Henry with him on his winter trapping lines until tensions at Michilimackinac subside.

Henry's story has often been included in captivity narrative anthologies, yet Henry was only briefly held against his will after the massacre at Mackinac, the so-called "captivity" in truth was the rescue operation orchestrated by Wawatam. Henry himself expressed gratitude for his friend's intervention, and the winter he spent as a "captive" with Wawatam's family seems to be little different than his normal life of hunting and fishing as an interior trader. His stories revolve around the daily hunt and the occasional migratory movements around the territory with some interesting anecdotes about his adopted family.

Yet despite Henry's seeming easiness amongst the family, he longed to return to a more familiar life. It was not the lifestyle (which he claims he excelled at) or his treatment, but a vague sense of cultural disconnection that kept Henry from truly embracing the Indian way of life. He admits that "had it not been for the idea of which I could not divest from my mind, that I was living among savages ... I could have enjoyed as much happiness in this, as in any other situation."<sup>38</sup>

At the end of the long winter Henry is eager to return to Michilimackinac and his professional trade. After a long, sentimental parting, he leaves the family hitching a ride in a passing canoe. After a brief stint in the British army mustering support for the English presence in the region, he returns to his cultural comfort zone as a trader. Henry never again mentions Wawatam, or the family he claims to have grown so attached to during that long winter.

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<sup>38</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 132.

It is perhaps telling that Henry does not mention his dear friend again in his narrative. Henry was telling a story, and Wawatam was only as useful a character in the story as he was useful to Henry as a protector. It is now clear just how Henry created his narrative, and what kind of literature inspired his account. But what were his motives? He had many possible reasons for writing an action adventure, and his motives and methods have created conflicting images of who Henry was, and how reliable he is as a historical witness.

## CHAPTER FOUR: MOTIVES AND MYTH-MAKING

## THE AGING ADVENTURER

Looking back on the time of his travels thirty years later, Henry would admit his impulsive foray into fur trading was a youthfully “premature attempt.” His 1760 venture was indeed ill-planned, because just as young Henry was carting his hastily acquired trade goods to the frontier, the region was beset by a freezing Canadian winter.<sup>39</sup> Henry was forced to spend several months at Fort de Levi south of Montreal, completely cut off from the trade network of the upper country. Despite this initial disappointment and embarrassment, it becomes clear the “situations of some danger and singularity” this attempt eventually resulted in are Henry’s single greatest pride.<sup>40</sup>

Certainly Henry’s pride in his youthful escapades contributed greatly to his reasons for writing his book, though little interpretation has been given to Henry’s literary motivations. David A. Armour, a Mackinac region historian who wrote the introduction to the 1966 edition of Henry’s book, has said that Alexander Henry wanted to recapture his faded youth and show the younger generation that he and his counterparts were the real pioneers of the fur trade.<sup>41</sup>

In 1809, many of Henry’s old friends and trading partners were dead or dying, and Henry himself was suffering the effects of old age. Despite the fact he had spent the second half of his life promoting westward expansion and trade, Henry was discouraged by, or perhaps jealous of, the new wave of young men enterprising in the new west. He

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<sup>39</sup> Henry, *Massacre at Mackinac*, 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, V.

<sup>41</sup> Armour, “Alexander Henry,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 2000.

wrote to an old friend, “all the new North westwards are a parcel of Boys and upstarts, who were not born in our time, and supposes they know much more of the Indian trade than any before them.”<sup>42</sup> To prove his contribution to the new west, and to reinvigorate his own sense of accomplishment, Henry decided to publish his memoir.

This explanation certainly provides a sense of finality to the story of his life, yet it seems that Henry wrote the memoir for more reasons than accolade. His work is not the summation of an illustrious career, nor does he claim to have secret knowledge of the region that more recent traders have failed to notice. His account is clearly an adventure tale geared at popular consumption. Surely he wanted to look good compared to those “Boys and upstarts,” and his thrilling tale would certainly put him in a favorable light. But telling such a carefully woven story may have been for a larger concern than simple ego stroking.

Henry saw the economic potential of westward expansion. After ending his time as an interior trader, he had continued his career in the fur trade after 1776 as a partner in the Northwest Company. The Northwest Company was a partnership of Canadian traders hoping to protect their interests from the imposing Hudson Bay Company to the north, a company run with a royal charter from the British government.<sup>43</sup> The fierce rivalry between trading companies created a highly competitive and therefore constantly expanding region of trade as each company attempted to carve out an area of dominance within a finite land mass.

By 1809 Henry was a prominent citizen of Montreal. He had the city he adopted after his native New Jersey became part of the United States. For many years he had been

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<sup>42</sup> Armour, “Alexander Henry,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Axel Madsen, *John Jacob Astor: America’s First Millionaire*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), 25.

friends and business partners with John Jacob Astor, who Henry had used his influence to help when Astor was still a fledgling businessman several years prior.<sup>44</sup> At the time Henry's narrative was published, Astor had just founded the American Fur Company, a connection that may have influenced how and why Henry wrote his narrative. Although John Jacob Astor set up his fur trading company in 1808, when the trade in the Great Lakes was nearly exhausted, he quickly dominated what was left and rapidly began expanding his ventures westward.<sup>45</sup>

As a seasoned businessman, Henry had become interested in the potential of trade with China via the Pacific Northwest in the 1780's. In fact, it was apparently Henry who inspired John Jacob Astor to pursue the China trade, the venture which was responsible for making Astor a millionaire before the age of 60.<sup>46</sup> Difficulties with European markets made Asia a logical and appealing choice for trade. China offered enticing and extremely profitable trade goods, like silk, tea, spices, and porcelain that normally would need to be obtained through the European market first.<sup>47</sup> Given the delicate relationship between American, England, and France during this time, even receiving these goods from the Atlantic trade with any reliability was uncertain. But to fully capitalize on this market Astor needed to move west, both to tap into unexhausted fur resources as well as establish depots and ports.<sup>48</sup> Astor's success at opening up the western lands for trade in the early 1800's was one of the largest economic contributions to American expansionism.

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<sup>44</sup> Madsen, *John Jacob Astor*, 27,28, 71.

<sup>45</sup> Madsen, *John Jacob Astor*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Armour, "Alexander Henry," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 2000. Madsen, *John Jacob Astor*, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Madsen, *Astor*, 51-52.

<sup>48</sup> Madsen, *Astor*, 90.

Astor was just one of many such business leaders taking advantage of the newly opened west, but his direct ties to Alexander Henry indicate that Henry was aware that his memoir was more than opportunity to publish his tales in a world still receptive to the tales of scrappy young adventurers. His book could help drive the economic wheels of his friend's company. During his career in Montreal he had experienced many financial disappointments; most of his numerous business ventures were ultimately failures. Just a decade before Henry published his book, he had experience an extreme business failure in Ohio land speculation. The loss, estimated by Henry to be close to one million dollars, was total.<sup>49</sup> A successful book may not have just given him praise, but also profit. If Henry had wanted to write a best seller, he would have had plenty of motivation to take license with the truth.

Another, more benign theory is that Henry may simply been trying to carve out a unique literary niche when writing his narrative the way he did. Jonathon Carver had already written a memoir several decades earlier. Because the two lived and worked in the Great Lakes during the 1760's, Carver's book covered much of the same physical and cultural geography as Henry's. But Carver's narrative was scientific and matter-of-fact, and though it was full of captivating details; it was nothing like the adventure Henry was to write. Perhaps Henry, in an attempt to distance himself from Carver's seminal work, decided to emphasize the more exciting aspects of his career, and leave the more prosaic descriptions to Carver.

Whatever motivation Henry had, whether it was economic, sentimental, or egotistical, he had reason to bend the truth to his will.

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<sup>49</sup> Armour, "Alexander Henry," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 2000.

## THE MYTH WAWATAM, OR A HERO FOR THE TOURISTS

If Henry's motives for writing were complex, than the image he leaves of himself is as equally puzzling. From the twentieth century come two very different views of Alexander Henry. One is steeped in bile, the other sings Henry's praises. Both views contribute to Henry's legacy as both man and a fur trader, but do either capture the true nature of Henry's work?

In Santa Barbara, California in 1917, a man by the name of Henry Bedford-Jones privately published a pamphlet on the writings of Alexander Henry. Bedford-Jones' review of the book is a scathing indictment of Henry's credibility. He accuses him of nothing less than purposefully deceit and outright lies, dismissing the entire work as a fake. H. Bedford-Jones, as he was most commonly known, is an unlikely candidate for Henry's critic. Bedford-Jones was a well known author himself, although he had built up his career as a peddler of pulp. With names like *The Opium Ship*, *The Mardi Gras Mystery* and *The Two Mr. Shens from Shensu*, H. Bedford Jones's stories leave little indication of his interest in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Lakes fur trade or its denizens.

Bedford-Jones was a native Canadian who had spent some time in Wisconsin and Illinois, but beyond this there is little indication that he was intimately aware of the region's history. Yet even though an author of dime novels living in twentieth century California hardly appears to be an authority of the life and times of Alexander Henry, he does state the very real possibility that Henry deliberately deceived the public in order to make a more sellable story.



The title of Bedford Jones's pamphlet is "The Myth Wawatam," which gets directly to the crux of his argument: Henry completely made up the character of Wawatam, his beloved rescuer, friend, and blood brother.<sup>50</sup> There is very little way of proving Wawatam didn't exist, just as it is impossible to say he did. Certainly the fact that Henry never mentions Wawatam again after his residence with him is suspicious. If they were the close friends Henry claims they were, who had such a warm and tender parting in the spring of 1764, it seems natural that Henry would write of him again. Yet Bedford-Jones accurately states that, "upon returning later to Mackinaw, Henry not only fails to reward his rescuer, but never so much as mentions him."<sup>51</sup>

Bedford-Jones is equally direct when examining Henry's emphasis on the massacre, stating his assumptions in a slightly over-the-top poem on the subject of Henry's literary motives:

How you must have made then palpitate and shiver  
 As you warmed up your narrative of blood and massacre! [sic]  
 How you must have chortled as you saw 'em shake and quiver  
 To your tale of shocking escapades by trail and lake and river.<sup>52</sup>

After the poem, Bedford-Jones sarcastically dedicates his text "in the memory of Wawatam" before launching into his assault. Most of Bedford Jones' qualms with *Travels and Adventures* are with Henry's historical discrepancies. Several times dates, names, and concerning parties do seem to be wrong, as when Henry mentions using an

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<sup>50</sup> H. Bedford-Jones, *The Myth Wawatam, or Alexander Henry Refuted*, (Santa Barbara: privately printed, 1917), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Bedford-Jones, *The Myth Wawatam*, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Bedford-Jones, *The Myth Wawatam*, 1.

interpreter stationed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish regiment in 1760.<sup>53</sup> That particular regiment, however, did not come to North America until May of 1767.

In most cases, Bedford-Jones' evidence of Henry's falsehoods can be explained away as the result of the failing memory of an old man and bad editorial work. The matter of Wawatam, however, can not be so easily dismissed. If Henry had indeed made up one of the most significant and most cited parts of his narrative, it throws the entire book's credibility out the window. In fact, it could possibly dismiss most of Henry's descriptions of Indians, the main foundation of his text. Bedford-Jones mentions that no other contemporary text can validate Wawatam's existence. Certainly, he claims, if men like the famous ethnographer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft couldn't find evidence of Wawatam, than he must be figment of Alexander Henry's imagination.<sup>54</sup>

Even if Wawatam was real, from reading Henry's text we can infer that he must have used some creative license in his narrative. The most glaring example would be his inclusion of several long, articulate speeches delivered by various Indian men of prominence. It was not unusual for speeches to be delivered; in fact oratory was one of the most respected activities native men participated in. But it is doubtful Henry was writing these speeches down as they were being given. Either Henry had an extraordinary memory able to recall elaborate rhetorical details (in Ojibwe, no less), or he heavily embellished or inserted made-up speeches wherever he felt them to be needed. Even if Henry did not make-up Wawatam and his captivity, it is certain his story was embroidered for dramatic effect.

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<sup>53</sup> Bedford-Jones, *The Myth Wawatam*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Bedford-Jones, *The Myth Wawatam*, 13-14.

The critical mirror opposite to Bedford-Jones is the historian David Armour, who edited and wrote both the introduction of the Mackinac Island publication of Henry's text as well as his biographical information in the *American National Biography* and *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. According to Armour, Henry and his book are a North American treasure. Armour asks us to imagine Henry in his old age, "hunched over a writing table scribbling furiously with a scratchy quill pen," desperately trying to write down every last scrap of memory before it fades away forever.<sup>55</sup> In Armour's version, Henry is a genuine hero, and his only intention is to faithfully describe his youthful endeavors as best he can. Armour repeats this image, stating that when the Great Lakes were seized by the British, the lands "were now open to anyone with the courage and persistence to penetrate the interior. Alexander Henry was such a man."<sup>56</sup>

This introduction to the character of Henry can be seen as an example of how history is softened or distorted for the sake of tourism. Today one can still find copies of Alexander Henry's narrative on store book shelves in the Mackinac region of upper Michigan. Some common illustrations from twentieth century copies show a luckless British soldier about to be scalped alive, and his doomed companion in the moments before he is dispatched by a hatchet. Carriage tours pass by the alleged spot of Henry's Mackinac Island cave hide-out experience, marked as "Skull Cave" on the black topped trail leading away from Fort Mackinac.

The romance of Henry's story has stayed alive all these years in large part because Henry and his book represent a by-gone era of adventure, and Armour makes full use of that image to present Henry as a source of local pride. David Armour's

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<sup>55</sup> David A. Armour, Introduction to *Massacre at Mackinac*, by Alexander Henry, (Mackinac Island; Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1966), IX.

<sup>56</sup> Armour, Introduction to *Massacre at Mackinac*, X.

romanticized description of Henry is in direct and humorous contrast to Bedford-Jones's mocking and theatrical introduction, though neither hit exactly upon the truth. Certainly Henry described truthful accounts in his book, but he also took many liberties that limit the authority he should be given as an historical witness.

## CONCLUSION

Fur trade narrative, like all first hand narrative, is a complicated mix of both history and literature. Historians who choose to use a person's diary or memoir for their information take a risk less likely to manifest in more impersonal primary sources, such as newspaper articles, organizational minutes or census data. The situation becomes even more problematic when a person packages and publishes their real-life experiences to be read like a piece of popular literature, intentionally muddying the waters of their own history to cloud their readers' perception.

Alexander Henry did just this when he published his memoir in 1809 entitled *Travel and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories, 1760-1776*. Though Henry stresses his own ability to separate fact from fiction and write an unbiased account of events, it is clear he did not set out to write an unbiased account of his own life. Henry had many potential motives to write his narrative the way he did, and none of them hinge on telling the absolute truth. Whether he wanted to recapture the excitement of his youth to show off to the younger generation, cash in on the last reserves of his career, or simply tell a different kind of story than had already been told, he took liberties with the truth and exaggerated his experiences with colorful language.

It may be a fool's errand to pick apart the truth from the fiction in Henry's account. His writings must be admired for their intense, colorful language and his descriptive powers. Indeed, Henry was an extraordinary man whose wit and intelligence is obvious in his writing. But he was also acutely aware of his own story, and how to leverage it to his advantage.

Certainly his narrative is based in the real events in his life, and Henry should not be totally discredited just because he knew how to write about his experiences well. Nonetheless, his book capitalized on exciting and exotic experiences for entertainment value, and many of his more sensational passages must therefore be taken with a grain of salt. Whatever his motivations, Henry understood the almost eternal appeal of his many youthful adventures, and manipulated these experiences to create a piece of popular literature that has remained an important source of history and pride in the Great Lakes region into the twenty first century.

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