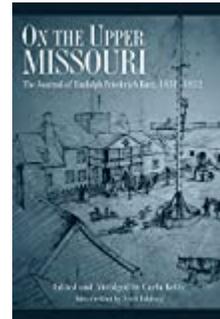




Rudolf Friedrich Kurz. *On the Upper Missouri: The Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 1851-1852.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xxv + 318 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-3655-4.



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A Romantic Travel Narrative?

This translated, edited, re-edited, and abridged version of Rudolf Friedrich Kurz's travel narrative has been produced in order to supply today's readers with insights into the mid-nineteenth-century fur trade on the upper Missouri and the lives of Indians in that region. It also offers a window into the adventures of one largely unknown artist who followed in the footsteps of two more famous ones: Karl Bodmer and George Catlin. Editor Carla Kelly notes in her preface that this book was a "Park Service project from beginning to end." As such, it is sure to attract the attention of lay readers interested in the history of the upper Missouri territory. It might also prove useful for undergraduate students in a number of venues, but scholars interested in travel literature and European encounters with non-Europeans will want to turn to the original manuscript housed in Bern's historical museum, or to the unabridged translation, which appeared in the 137th Bulletin of the Smithsonian Institution.

The son of a prosperous Swiss banker, Kurz evidenced passions for both Indians and art at a young age. The work of George Catlin, the American artist who toured Europe with his paintings of American Indians, inspired

Kurz to bring these passions together. Karl Bodmer, who accompanied Prince Maximilian von Wied on his trip to the upper Missouri, and whose artwork adorns museums across the United States and Europe today, influenced Kurz as well. Bodmer convinced him to work on his technical skills before traveling abroad, advice that led him to spend years studying in France.

Kurz's journal covers only the two years of his travel in North America, beginning briefly with his time in New Orleans and St. Louis and moving quickly to his life among the fur traders further north. The journal ends just as quickly. There is a brief account of his decision to return home and a short epilogue that describes his return to Bern, the poor reception of his paintings, and his life as an art instructor and artist in Switzerland until his death in 1871.

In his introduction to the volume, Scott Eckberg stresses that Kurz "exhibited a passionate and sympathetic inclination toward Indians that ultimately influenced his artistic portrayals of them in classical depictions of savage nobility." Much, he points out, "appears strikingly like eighteenth-century paintings de-

pecting fancy epic scenes of daily life in ancient Rome.” Indeed, he argues that Kurz “veered dramatically from Catlin and Bodmer in both his intent and his interpretation of Indian themes,” portraying Indians in a manner that exposed his “nostalgic yearning for the comparatively simpler, more pastoral human existence of earlier societies” (p. xvii). That observation would not surprise many historians of art who, since at least the publication of Bernard Smith’s *European Visions of the South Pacific* in 1985, have recognized that European artists who traveled abroad often recorded what they saw in ways that were influenced by their technical training and their world views.[1]

Yet while many of the ninety-three plates and five figures included in this book do strike one as the product of an artist who was unable to escape his lessons in classical portraiture, others do not. The same is true of the text. Kurz does state that he sought people like the Herantsa Wirussu, whom he termed “a magnificent people,” “living models of the antique,” and thus “the best of subjects for the chisel” (p. 24), and he delighted in the “nude Indians” he encountered at Fort Berthold “with their beautifully proportioned figures, their slender yet well-formed limbs, their expressive eyes, their natural, easy bearing” (p. 47). But he never shied away from describing the very human limitations of the people he met, and despite the above musings, few of the Indians he portrayed with his pen could be neatly slotted into the categories of either noble or ignoble savage. Instead, he introduces us to textured individuals making their way in a rapidly changing world characterized by ongoing negotiations between individuals and groups whose relationships appear in constant flux.

In fact, one could argue that the most romantic passage in the text was written about Kurz, not by him. In the prologue (there is a preface, an introduction, a prologue, and an introduction to the original edition before one gets to Kurz’s text), the reader is told “on June 16, Kurz boarded the St. Ange to begin his journey to the Upper Missouri. He had spent a lifetime preparing for this event. Armed with a telescope from his brothers, a sketch pad, pencils, watercolors, and his journal, the Swiss artist with classical European training and the soul of a romantic took his place in the tumultuous life of the American fur trade. His ambition was to publish an account of his experiences that would complement a series of paintings. Ironically, that journal—published long after his death—became a priceless window to a world on the edge of enormous change” (p. xxi).

What makes the journal of interest, however, is less Kurz’s “romantic soul” or his “classical training” than his keen observations and his reflections on his experiences. His discussions of the declining numbers of buffalo, the deaths of entire Indian villages, and his own actions while hunting and trading reveal a rather unromantic comfort with the “tumultuous world” he encountered. Through his observations of these events we learn how white woodsmen enjoyed playing Indian when they returned to the cities in the East, but for professional reasons played white men when they were at work in the fur trade, recognizing that this distinction was all that allowed them to retain respect and thus business relations with the tribes around them (pp. 66, 73). None of these men “went Indian.” We learn how easy it was for Kurz and many others to find fault with Catlin and Bodmer’s paintings once they journeyed to the upper Missouri. Their images of Buffalo herds left out the cows, and Catlin’s paintings of Indians engaged in bold feats while hunting were often misleading: their actions were unlikely, their clothing all wrong. Kurz regarded Catlin’s portrayals of animals as equally deceptive, calling one scene, in which wolves surround a dying bull, “silly make-believe.” Evidently, this romantic wanted accuracy despite his search for classic bodies, and thus he quickly agreed with many in the area that Catlin’s book was simply “Humbug” (pp. 69-70).

Moreover, Kurz seldom waxed romantic while discussing the valor of Indian warriors. He acknowledged it and admired it. But he did not attempt to connect it to noble bearing (e.g. p. 79). Similarly, when discussing the treachery of Sioux warriors (pp.118, 122), or what many might regard as the callous treatment of the elderly (pp. 124), he did so with acceptance as much as wonder and made no effort to connect such actions to fatal flaws in Indians’ culture or character. He also accepted the changes underway in these territories, noting both the devastation wrought by disease and liquor and the benefits that came with trade goods. Some of the trade goods had improved lives just as others had ruined them.

What Kurz saw, in other words were modern Indians, not primitive savages either corrupted or preserved. Indeed, after a short time in the trading posts he began to rethink his initial mission of capturing people in some kind of primordial state, writing that “I have not yet decided whether I shall include the modern Indian in my gallery or limit my production to representations of the primitive savage. If I adopt the latter plan I lose too much that is picturesque—the majestic folds of the woolen blanket, the war horse with his splendid, impetuous rider. To represent Indian life truly, I would better mingle the an-

cient and modern, thus representing in my pictures life among Indians as it reveals itself today. That affords more variation, more action and character” (p. 85).

That variation, for example, captured Indian women who were neither submissive nor easy objects of possession for white traders, but people who engaged in hard negotiations within their families, within and between tribes, and with the whites. They created relations with men where it served their purposes, and when they turned to white men it was often for the benefit of their families as well as themselves. Kurz felt it benefited whites too, remarking that the “half-breed children of clerks and traders are a credit to the white race” (p. 173).

Through experience, rather than some sort of Rousseauvian projection, Kurz also joined the ranks of Europeans who concluded that they themselves were the savages, not the people they encountered abroad: “I assert boldly that in proportion to mental and moral training, these so-called savages are guilty of fewer acts of inhumanity and cruelty than are citizens of self-styled Christian nations.... I think the Indians’ barbarity during the wars of extermination was perfectly natural; their fury and wrath were aroused to an extreme degree. Were the people on the borders less savage? Did they not scalp with equal zeal?” (p. 125).

There is, in short, much of interest in this narrative. Instructors could easily use it in classrooms to interrogate

the trope of the romantic traveler as much as the now eagerly disparaged romantic tropes themselves. One could use this book to delve into life on this frontier, on relations between Europeans and non-Europeans, on the ways in which people make sense of their worlds (much of Kurz’s information is second hand), or the ways in which they record it. But it would be difficult to do more with the text. The original translators removed passages they felt reported “mere hearsay which might be held to be obnoxious to certain bodies of people.” Now, Carla Kelly has also removed the “philosophical introjections” in the text during which she felt that Kurz “became a groaning bore.” Such “meanderings,” she notes, “constituted a significant portion of the text” (p. xii), yet readers will have no idea what they contained. Nor will they know where they were. There are seldom ellipses to indicate where the text has been abridged, no notice of editorial intervention. This strategy, as Ekberg notes, takes away “some of the artistic fervor that impelled Kurz to the Missouri River outposts” (p. xx). It also removes much of the insights into his character and motivations, which could have provided readers with the context necessary to better understand his evaluations of what he saw. For that context, scholars will have to return to the earlier versions of his narrative.

Note

[1]. Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

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