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Baronets and Buffalo: The British Sportsman in the American West, 1833-1881

Robert Thacker

St. Lawrence University

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This book, “a narrative history of the American West as seen through the eyes and exploits of British sportsmen,” begins with an epigraph from George Frederick Ruxton: “Although liable to an accusation of barbarism, I must confess that the very happiest moments of my life have been spent in the wilderness of the Far West” (v,iv). Ruxton was but one of scores of British sportsmen who wandered through the American plains during the nineteenth century—killing buffalo and elk, seeing (and sometimes fleeing) Indians, undergoing hardships, and generally revelling in the wildness they found beyond the frontier. After spending 1846–47 in Mexico and the American West, Ruxton returned to Europe and wrote Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains (1848) and Life in the Far West (1849), books that were well-received by the Victorians, whose appetite for vivid accounts of wilderness and wildness seemed insatiable. In this, his experience is representative of the type.

Equally well-known are such figures as William Drummond Stewart, who hired Alfred Jacob Miller to illustrate his penultimate western trip; Charles Augustus Murray; and
John Palliser, who after his hunting trip to the American Plains in 1847 led, a decade later, three geographical explorations in western Canada. And easily the most opulent of these men was Sir St. George Gore who, in the course of his three years' wanderings throughout the plains, “by his own estimate slaughtered more than 2,000 buffalo, 1,600 elk and deer, and 100 bear” (93).

Because many of these men published their exploits—both first-person accounts and thinly-veiled autobiographical fiction—their has been a well-known presence in plains scholarship. Even so, this book is a fine one indeed, a real contribution: Merritt details his stories dramatically, effectively, and accurately. Barons and Buffalo is written with style and elan—it is a hard book to put down. It offers us a detailed view of these visitors’ “happiest moments,” when the romance and dangers of the plains hunting life beckoned them, even as it passed away.

Robert Thacker
Canadian Studies Program
St. Lawrence University