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“REJOICING IN THE BEAUTIES OF NATURE” THE IMAGE OF THE WESTERN LANDSCAPE DURING THE FUR TRADE

KERRY R. OMAN

While traveling along the Platte River on May 18, 1834, William Marshall Anderson stopped to pick up a human skull bleaching in the prairie sunlight. Anderson was from Louisville, Kentucky, and had been sent west by his physician to accompany a fur-trade caravan to the Rocky Mountains in hopes of regaining lost physical strength. He came west not as a typical trader or trapper, but as an attentive observer. What Anderson lacked in physical strength and fortitude, he made up for with a commanding vernacular and lively imagination. Later in the day, after carrying the skull for several miles, he reflected on the

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life of its owner: “[P]erhaps he had like myself been rejoicing in the beauties of nature, that impelled by the spirit of adventure, he had sought to behold the wonders of the mountains and the savage forest.” Although this brief experience surely brought some apprehension, it perhaps ignited in his mind the need to do more “rejoicing in the beauties of nature.”¹

Though seemingly separated from the outside world, men like Anderson, and the hundreds of men who went west for the fur trade from the 1820s through the 1840s, traveled during an era that prompted them to rejoice in their natural surroundings. Their writings were more than mere travel accounts outlining directions traveled, trapping or trading activities, and encounters with grizzly bears and Blackfoot Indians. Often, they expressed aesthetic judgments about nature that created a romantic image of the West.² They were astute observers operating amidst a rising romantic consciousness within eastern society. Their collective representations of life in the West were continually defined in terms of wilderness and landscape. In doing so, they remind us of how eastern ideas influenced western experiences and they show the importance the actual

landscape had upon their thoughts, ideas, and writings. While some scholars have felt that these men were beyond the reach of the cultural influences of Romanticism, its impact actually pervaded their lives and helped shape their thinking and their written accounts about the western landscape. In a profound sense, traders and trappers, as well as the works of those like Washington Irving and Alfred Jacob Miller who chronicled their lives, reflected the country's rising concern with aesthetic sensibilities by adapting eastern ideas of the natural world to western experiences.³

The purpose of this essay is to explore how the writings of the western fur trade created a distinct image of the western landscape during the mountain man era. In doing so, I draw on the concepts of Romanticism that were so prevalent in the eastern United States and Europe at the time, and I argue that these ideas influenced how the West was depicted by western traders and trappers, and by writers and artists like Washington Irving and Alfred Jacob Miller who chronicled the fur trade. I specifically focus on the powerful concept of the sublime and show how several trappers wrote about their experiences with it as they traveled through the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. As a result, this article creates a new approach to understanding the relationship between the fur trade, the natural world, and American society.

WASHINGTON IRVING

As Meriwether Lewis and William Clark gathered recruits and finished making preparations for their epic journey to the Pacific Coast, a young Washington Irving left New York City, where he served as a clerk in a law office, and journeyed to Montreal. In 1803 Montreal was the base of activity for numerous Northwest Fur Company traders. It was not uncommon to run into one of the partners, clerks, or even some of the fur traders just returned from one of the remote interior posts in the Canadian providence walking along the streets of the city. The fur traders particularly caught Irving's

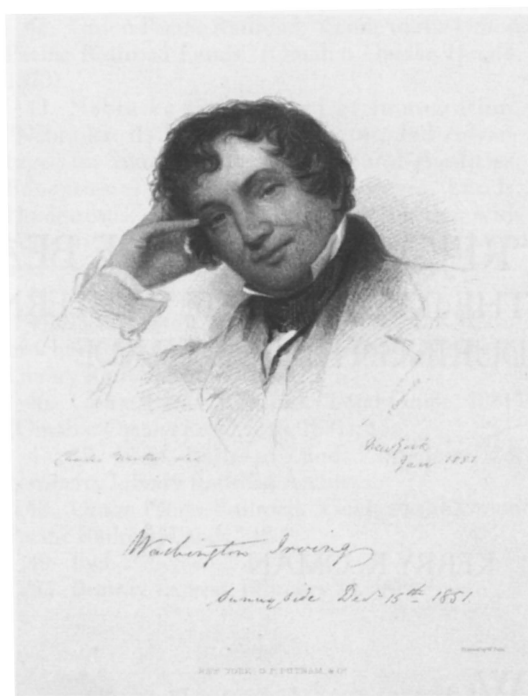


FIG. 1. *Washington Irving*. Courtesy of the Emmet Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

attention, as he often ventured close to hear the perilous exploits and adventures of these hardy individuals who at times remained years away from the luxuries of white society. Recalling those days more than thirty years later, Irving reflected, "I was at an age when imagination lends its coloring to everything, and the stories of these Sinbads of the wilderness made the life of a trapper and fur trader a perfect romance to me." He thought of accompanying some of the Northwest traders to one of their isolated posts, and later regretted that he let this opportunity pass by. Nonetheless, his writings later identified him more closely with traders and trappers than any exploits he could have achieved on a brief voyage into the wild lands of the Canadian northeast.⁴

Nearly ten years after this memorable experience, Irving boarded a ship to England in an attempt to salvage a failing family business.

The business soon went bankrupt, but Irving found success as a writer. Over the seventeen years he lived abroad his reputation spread throughout Europe and America. His often romantic descriptions of life appealed to a public accustomed to reading the works of men like Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron, and his fame quickly grew to rival that of his countryman James Fenimore Cooper. Despite his absence, Irving was an American golden boy who brought great pride to his country.⁵

When he finally returned to the United States in 1832, much had changed. A new form of expression in art had taken hold of the American imagination and given it wings to explore anew man's relationship with the natural world. The cause of this new development largely rested on the shoulders of a young English emigrant named Thomas Cole. Cole moved to America in 1818 from Lancashire, England. He had been trained as an engraver, but his often dreamy and romantic views of nature soon led him, in the spring of 1825, to New York City where he began painting landscapes. During this year, Cole was fortunate to have been discovered by several notable members of the American Academy of Fine Arts, and by the fall he had gained nearly immediate recognition as a landscapist and his talents quickly turned into a new genre in American art.⁶

Cole's landscapes presented nature in dramatic compositions. He embraced the wildness of nature as no American artist had before him. His work suggested sacred and moral messages in the landscape, not by depicting a scene with accuracy, but by bringing together images that inspired emotion.⁷ Cole's use of dramatic light, larger-than-life natural features juxtaposed against seemingly insignificant human bodies, and a conviction for influencing the senses while expressing an intimate connection with deity tended to exhibit many of the characteristics of the sublime. By the late 1820s the concepts of the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque were commonly known throughout the United States, largely through the efforts of Thomas Cole and his followers who

incorporated them into American landscape painting.⁸

Following Cole's example, painters and writers took up the call to look upon nature as an unexploited source for American inspiration. Beginning in the 1820s, the influences of Romanticism upon Americans created a mode of perception that enabled people to attempt to convey the incomprehensible. Poets, artists, and men of letters all began to emphasize the value of intense observations of the natural world, giving their visual and written representations of nature a redemptive quality. This was particularly true with art, but it also carried over into the writings of western travelers as they reflected upon and described the landscapes they encountered. For their interpretations they needed personal experience with the natural world, in areas that many imagined to be wilderness. Cole found it along the Hudson and in the Catskills; traders and trappers found it in the West.⁹

The initial landscape images created by the Hudson River School artists, a name given during the 1870s to those who followed Cole's example, depicted northeastern vistas, not the West. They concentrated on rivers, waterfalls, forests, and mountains that had all been well explored by Europeans long before the 1820s, yet in the eyes of men like Washington Irving and his contemporaries these images offered a way of seeing that could be applied to the West. It was in the East that the passion for nature first became visibly evident, and it was in the East that wilderness first began to take on positive characteristics. Eastern landscape artists however, provided a way of thinking about nature that could easily be transported into the Far West. Their works not only served as visual backdrops for understanding the role of nature within American society, but they became models of description and themes for contemporary writing about the western landscape viewed by American traders and trappers. By the early 1830s, Thomas Cole's paintings of the American landscape had been on exhibition throughout the northeast, most notably in cities like Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and

New York, and the many newspaper articles discussing the new genre made the rise in landscape art familiar to most urban Americans, while also providing an opportunity for the more literate men who joined the fur trade to learn about them as well.

With American landscape art surrounding him, Irving developed an insatiable desire to get out and see America. To fulfill this need, he took a much-celebrated tour of the western prairies during the fall of 1832.¹⁰ When he returned to New York, Irving developed his travel journals into a narrative and published them in a small volume as *A Tour on the Prairies*. Appearing in the spring of 1835, the book achieved immediate success. Before *A Tour on the Prairies* appeared in print, however, the powerful mercantilist John Jacob Astor had commissioned Irving to write a history of his American Fur Company's efforts to establish a fur-trade empire on the Pacific Coast. With the image of trappers emerging out of the western landscape fresh in his mind, he surrounded himself with nearly all of the published literature on the West and returned to work.¹¹

Astor provided Irving with all of the journals, letters, and business papers of the enterprise. In addition, Irving consulted the published works of travelers who had already been into this country: the history of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the travel narratives of John Bradbury and Henry Brackenridge, Edwin James's account of the Long expedition, and Gabriel Franchère's account of the early Canadian fur trade.¹² From these and other western travel accounts, Irving gleaned details of the western environment that made his book seem like a vivid firsthand account. This reading, combined with his trip across the prairies, modified his views of the western landscape and led him to see it positively, if not romantically.

In his completed work, *Astoria; or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (1836), Irving told an incredible story of man's perseverance amidst hostile forces in what he often described as "the rough life of the wilderness."¹³ As a product of eastern society, Irving echoed the sentiments of American landscape

artists who praised wilderness. Although he never personally operated in the fur trade, his writings of this western lifestyle reached a huge audience, and countless Americans came to know of their activities through his work. As a result, Irving played a significant role in celebrating the idea of wilderness during the first half of the nineteenth century. In *Astoria*, Irving combined romantic descriptions of the western landscape with heroic tales of trappers' exploits. The general account of the enterprise reflected the surrounding influences of American society. He emphasized the wilder aspects of the West in correspondence with the wide acceptance of the attributes of landscape art and the continually growing desire throughout America to know more about the western lands.

In *Astoria*, Irving's "wilderness" often appeared as dangerous, destructive, punishing, relentless, rugged, frightful, and dreary. When he wrote about wilderness it was to make scenes more dramatic and the exploits he wrote about more impressive. His use of wilderness relied heavily upon the presence and threat of Indians. His heroes had to pass through a "howling wilderness infested by savage tribes"; a "frightful wilderness that intervened between them and the shores of the Pacific!" By emphasizing the dangers inherent in wilderness, he glorified the lives of western traders and trappers and tried to make his story more compelling. Yet Irving at times also made wilderness full of beautiful landscapes through word sketches of quaint, picturesque, and romantic sights of the western landscape.¹⁴

On the heels of *Astoria*, Irving delved into another examination of the American fur trade. While writing *Astoria*, he met Captain Benjamin Bonneville, recently returned from the Rocky Mountains and possessed of a journal of his experiences. Bonneville was a headstrong military officer who had been granted a two-year leave from the army to go west. Motivated by financial gain, adventurism, exploration, and knowledge, he traveled throughout much of the American West from 1832 to 1835. As Irving would later remark,



FIG. 2. General B.L.E. Bonneville. Courtesy of Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, Z-8881.

Bonneville had the soul to appreciate the beauties and glories of the western landscape. Upon his return, Bonneville wrote a manuscript based upon his journal but failed to find a publisher. Irving bought the manuscript, quickly polished it up, and published it in 1837 as *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*.¹⁵ In essence, the book picked up where *Astoria* ended by telling the story of Bonneville's exploits amidst the traders and trappers of the Rocky Mountains. Although Bonneville was a miserable fur trader, Irving made him into a hero by presenting him as a reflective, daring, and brave voyager of the West.

In *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, Irving's western "wilderness" changed from his earlier descriptions in *Astoria*. It became much more romantic, resembling more closely the landscape artwork that had taken hold of the eastern imagination. His descriptions of the lives of traders and trappers remained equally heroic, but now, as he put it on one occasion, "the wilderness was a region of romance."

Although it still retained elements of danger, his references to wilderness largely took on positive characteristics.¹⁶ Allowing the western wilderness to take on a positive connotation in a source that reached such a wide audience makes this an important moment within American cultural history. One reviewer of *Bonneville* captured this when he commended Irving for having "literally made the solitary wilderness blossom like a garden."¹⁷

Although Irving never entered the Rocky Mountains, his writings of western adventure stimulated the eastern imagination about the western landscape and wilderness. In three years, 1835 to 1837, Irving fashioned a powerful image of fantastic and at times mysterious landscapes, savage Indians, reckless and heroic trappers, and wild animals. He presented the West as a dangerous, yet glorious land of unrelenting plains and rugged mountains, lands of "savage grandeur" to be equally feared, respected, and revered. The landscape possessed "wild and romantic scenery," with "wildness and sublimity" the prevailing characteristics.¹⁸ Indians, and most notably the "bold enemies" the Blackfeet, supposedly waited to kill any American who came in their path.¹⁹ Crows, Flatheads, Sioux, Arikaras, and others who Irving described, were "as wild-looking as the surrounding scenery," wanted nothing more than to steal horses and any other goods they could capture.²⁰ Long stretches of dry, barren, and unchanging prairie beat down any party of men who dared cross this undulating surface. Winds, snow, rain, and heat all combined to torture the poor traveler. What spirit the Great Plains did not kill the Rocky Mountains would. According to Irving, there was little chance for anybody to survive except for those hardy "mountaineers"—trappers and traders who made the western landscape their home: these men seemingly feared nothing, and had no use for the white man's civilization.

ALFRED JACOB MILLER

Visual examples of the western landscape during the era of the traders and trappers also



FIG. 3. Alfred Jacob Miller, *Wind River Mountain Range Scene*, circa 1858. Courtesy of the Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Bequest of C.R. Smith, 1991.

found their way into the American mind, at first dressed in the humble suit of the twenty-seven-year-old Alfred Jacob Miller. Miller was neither a trader nor a trapper, but an eastern artist who, like Washington Irving, portrayed the lives of traders and trappers while at the same time celebrating the idea of wilderness. Born the son of a Baltimore grocer, Miller early took to painting. His training led him to Europe during the early 1830s, where he studied English romantic portraiture. Unlike Thomas Cole and his protégés, Miller had little experience painting landscapes. Despite this inexperience, Miller later produced scenes of western travel that unquestionably revealed the influence of the Hudson River artists. In 1837 Miller joined the Scottish nobleman Captain William Drummond Stewart on a journey to one of the annual mountain man rendezvous. Miller was hired to produce visual souvenirs for Stewart to take back to his home in Scotland. In doing so, Miller became the first American

artist to penetrate the Rocky Mountains and visually record the activities of the mountain men. Aside from Samuel Seymour and Titian Peale, only two other artists had preceded Miller west, Karl Bodmer and George Catlin, neither of whom reached the mountains or painted the lives of the western traders and trappers.²¹

Miller and Stewart traveled west in company with a party of traders and trappers led by veterans Thomas Fitzpatrick and William Sublette. Fitzpatrick and Sublette had been involved with the western fur trade since the early 1820s, and they knew the Rocky Mountains as well as any men alive. Their journey took them over much of what later turned into the Oregon Trail: across the Great Plains following the course of the Platte River, up the Sweetwater, over South Pass, on to the Green River, and eventually to the rendezvous site at the confluence of Horse Creek and the Green. Throughout the journey, Miller kept

busy making over 200 sketches of dramatic scenes that caught his attention. He found the activities around sunup and sundown among the most lively and interesting. Yet his design was not to act as a visual reporter, but to create spectacular images that captured the essence of the West.²²

As one scholar has pointed out, Miller "took advantage of that which was exotic within his own country—the Indian, the mountain man, and the western landscape."²³ He sketched his companions traveling across the plains, at the rendezvous, and in the mountains; he recorded the likenesses of dozens of Indians; he depicted buffalo hunts, grizzly bears, and antelope; he sketched wild horses as well as his companion's noble steeds. Miller painted not in the scientific and literal traditions of his predecessors, but in an effort to provoke the imagination and alert the senses to the wild scenes similar to that of the Hudson River artists. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than with his many images of the Wind River Mountains.

Miller's romantic preoccupation in sketching the expansive vistas and lakes lying within the Wind River Mountains led to often soft, feathery watercolor images more demonstrative of a wild utopia than the actual appearance of the landscape. These were specifically composed to exhibit the sensations of wilderness panoramas. In describing one particularly compelling lake scene, Miller commented on how the favorable lighting of the morning and evening enhanced the views of the mountain lakes. "At these times," he claimed, "one side or the other would be thrown into deep purple masses, throwing great broad shadows, with sharp light glittering on the extreme tops,—while the opposite mountains received its full complement of warm, mellow & subdued light;—thus forming a . . . contrast most essential to the picturesque." Depicting these conditions created an emotion of timelessness. Miller tried numerous times to capture this quality, on one occasion finally lamenting that it "would have required the pencil of Stanfield, Turner, or Church in giving it due effect and rendering it complete justice."²⁴

Miller typically supplemented his landscapes with small images of mounted warriors or traders and trappers that appeared barely discernable amidst the immensity of the landforms. This was a common device used by European and eastern landscapists to portray nature's majesty and man's relative insignificance. Many of Miller's views included his patron, Captain Stewart, in moments of heroic adventure. Upon returning to the East, Miller developed his field sketches into dramatic finished paintings. In his first year alone, he produced eighteen large oil paintings and nearly 200 smaller watercolors, many exhibited in Baltimore and New York. Aside from those who were familiar with Edwin James's account of the Long expedition, or had personally examined Samuel Seymour's original paintings, Miller's work represented eastern Americans' first views of the Rocky Mountains. Miller's art, like Irving's writing, exemplified the romantic tradition by creating "wilderness" images that enshrouded the lives of western traders and trappers and placed them with the dreamy solitude and grandeur exclusive to the American West.²⁵

TRADERS AND TRAPPERS

The men Irving and Miller portrayed, as well as all other western traders and trappers, came from every aspect of life and were motivated by adventure, financial reward, or simply a curiosity about the mysteries of the western landscape. They came only temporarily, wanderers in search of trade, not settlement. While many lacked the basics of education, others came from learned backgrounds, being respected citizens of their home communities. Generally, they were "adventurous, hardy, and self-reliant," as Miller observed in 1837, "always exposed to constant danger from hostile Indians, and extremes of hunger and cold . . . they penetrate the wilderness in all directions in pursuit of their calling."²⁶ Although many experienced a sense of freedom in the West, only a few ever made a significant amount of money. Those who profited were the leaders—

the entrepreneurs of the western fur trade. Most traders and trappers returned to the East carrying little more than memories. In fact, many never made it back at all, falling victim to Indians, or dying from exposure, disease, or starvation. Those who survived not only learned how to interact with the Indians, but often intermarried, stayed in the West, and had children.²⁷ They discovered where to find food and water, how to pass from one watershed to another, who to trade with, where to trap, and when to encamp to avoid the extreme forces of winter. The center of their universe became the lands of the Rocky Mountains and the enchanting southwestern vistas around Taos and Santa Fe. Their lifestyles forced them to adapt to the natural environment, something powerfully exhibited within the published and private writings about their lives in the West.²⁸ Even more than the early government-sponsored exploring parties, traders and trappers helped make the western landscape familiar to the nation.

Few of these men found time to write, but given the relatively small number of individuals involved in the fur trade, their published and private accounts of trading and trapping activities are impressive. In writing about the West, many of the traders and trappers built upon the images of earlier explorers.²⁹ These writings consisted of simple letters, diaries, and journals from which occasional pieces circulated in the nation's newspapers. Other accounts found audiences as published narratives of western adventure. Still other trappers and traders found time later in life to recall their activities in "reminiscences" that often drew heavily upon the conventions of the day. American traders and trappers typically looked back upon their lives in the West with nostalgia, remembering with pleasure their freedom and closeness to nature.

Most of the traders and trappers who kept personal accounts never came close to Irving's romantic view of wilderness. They viewed wilderness in contradictory ways. When traders and trappers spoke positively about the West it was generally in terms of landscape, not

wilderness. Wilderness was typically a negative term used at significant moments during their time in the West: preparing for a difficult and long journey, entering a region for the first time, after a harsh encounter with nature, narrowly escaping a grizzly bear attack, surviving a skirmish with Indians, contemplating the fate of fellow trappers. For some, wilderness could contain "freaks of nature" unfound in the "civilized" world, where one had to provide for his own subsistence, and the threat of perishing was a constant reality. It could be a place destitute of trees and devoid of water, or it could exist as a thick forest along the steep slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Yet wilderness could not be separated from the Indians who inhabited the country. In fact, Osborne Russell, a trapper in the 1830s, even called some Shoshones he befriended the "sons of the wilderness."³⁰

Although Irving, particularly in *Bonneville*, depicted wilderness as a romantic home for traders and trappers, most of the men he described saw it as a temporary place of residence, a workplace. During the early years of the western fur trade, trappers operated in such remote areas that chance encounters with others in places they often called "wilderness" could catch them by surprise. Zenas Leonard, a fur trader of the 1830s, described his astonishment at meeting four white men along the Laramie River in today's state of Wyoming. This was Leonard's first experience trapping in the West, and as he later pondered the encounter he claimed: "a white man was the last of living beings that we expected to visit us in this vast wilderness—where nothing was heard from dark to daylight but the fierce and terrifying growls of wild beasts, and the more shrill cries of merciless savages."³¹ For Leonard, and countless other traders and trappers like him, wilderness meant not only a remote area uninhabited by white men, but a land full of Indians and wild animals.

THE SUBLIME

In describing the landscape, however, the rising romantic sensibility of the first half of

the nineteenth century not only influenced Washington Irving, but it also pervaded the accounts of numerous traders and trappers. During the western fur-trade era, aesthetic expression placed a greater emphasis on the sublime and picturesque. As more traders and trappers imbued with romantic sensibilities ventured beyond the Mississippi, they found the "beautiful" inadequate to describe the new country. The beautiful implied calm, smooth, serene, and ordered landscapes that created a pleasing sensation. Traders and trappers, however, had come to expect and look for the most dramatic sensations and images, things best captured by the sublime, the picturesque, and the wild. The sublime, even more than the picturesque, brought together the appreciation of the works of nature that openly corresponded to eastern landscape art. Thus, as a direct result of the Hudson River artists and their literary counterparts, examples of the sublime and picturesque reappeared throughout the published writings of western trading and trapping ventures.³²

The sublime could appear as a great prairie thunderstorm or amidst the perpendicular cliffs near the Canadian River.³³ It could materialize on the Plains, in stark contrast to anything ever experienced in the East.³⁴ The sublime could burst forth on the distant horizon embodying the jagged features of the Rocky Mountains or the Sierras.³⁵ It could also be found floating high amidst the mountain lakes that hid themselves from the view of the world.³⁶ In short, for traders and trappers the sublime was everywhere.

Albert Pike, for example, a tall, slim, former New England schoolmaster who traveled into the Southwest during the early 1830s as a trader and trapper, recorded his perceptions of the sublime within the western landscape with rare eloquence. "My only sources of thought and imagery have been my own mind, and nature, who has appeared to me generally in desolate fashion and utter dreariness, and not unfrequently in the guise of sublimity," wrote Pike in 1833. Growing up in Boston, Pike became familiar with the popular literature



FIG. 4. Albert Pike painted by Charles Loring Elliott near the time when Pike went west. Courtesy of the Supreme Council, AASR-SJ. The Supreme Council, Scottish Rite, owns the copyright to the image.

and travel works of the day, and in the fall of 1831, he joined one of Charles Bent's Santa Fe trading parties. He came westward ready to experience the world around him, and over the next two years he traveled over and wrote about much of today's American Southwest, then northern Mexico. In 1833 he settled in Arkansas where he recorded his experiences. The following year, 1834, Light and Horton of Boston published the manuscript as *Prose Sketches and Poems, Written in the Western Country*, providing the first real introduction to the Staked Plains of the Southwest.³⁷

Unlike many of his western counterparts, Pike possessed a gift for language and vivid expression. He was a poet-visionary full of the romantic mystique. His writing reflected his well-educated New England background and the popular images of the romantic literature of his day. In fact, he even began his narrative with a quote from Lord Byron. In an effort to comprehend the lands he passed through, Pike displayed the growing eastern propensity for

the dramatic scenes of the West. His writings not only provided a way of "communing with [his] own soul," but his book helped countless Americans envision the lands of the Far West.³⁸

Pike drew directly from the skills of the landscape artists in creating some of the best illustrations of this new emphasis upon the sublime and picturesque. During the first section of his *Prose Sketches*, Pike took the reader into the prairie, an area he suggested was "too grand and too sublime" to be simply envisioned by anyone solely familiar with eastern landscapes. To counter this, Pike painted a verbal picture. First, he covered the canvas with the landscape: "Imagine yourself," he told his readers, on a "plain to which your eye can see no bounds." Not a tree, bush, shrub, rock, or even a tall weed floats above the "barren grandeur" of the hard surface. Then he overlaid this solitary plain with images: "Imagine," he once again asked, countless dark lively shapes forming herds of buffalo scattered in the distance "as far as the eye can reach." "Imagine" occasional herds of wild horses thundering through this great expanse amidst fleeting antelope dashing off in the distance like "the scattering of white clouds," avoiding the sulking forms of prowling wolves and coyotes. Finally, he brought in the human forms: "Imagine" a band of Comanches mounted upon noble steeds with feathers and red cloth draped from their lances, bows, quivers, and sacredly ornamented shields as they chased the buffalo across the horizon. Then, Pike claimed, "you have an image of the prairie, such as no book ever described adequately to me."³⁹

Pike went on to articulate exactly why the Plains represented the sublime. With skillful descriptions rivaling any eastern image purposefully created to evoke the sensations of the sublime, Pike explained the sublimity of the Plains: "its unbounded extent, its barren monotony and desolation, its still, unmoved, calm, stern, almost self-confident grandeur, its strange power of deception, its want of echo, and, in fine, its power of throwing a man back upon himself and giving him a feeling of lone

helplessness, strangely mingled at the same time with a feeling of liberty and freedom from restraint."⁴⁰ That ability to throw a man back upon himself while at the same time creating feelings of grandeur, deception, and liberty was the power of the sublime issuing forth from a wholly unique western landscape.

Warren A. Ferris, a trained surveyor turned trapper from Buffalo, New York, also described numerous encounters with the sublime and picturesque landscapes of the West. He, like other men in his 1830 American Fur Company brigade, had engaged for reasons other than money: "health, and the strong desire of seeing strange lands, of beholding nature in the savage grandeur of her primeval state," had been the stimulus behind this "trip to the mountain wilds of the great west."⁴¹ Ferris kept a diary of his adventures over the course of the next five years, and upon returning home in 1835 he prepared a manuscript account of his experiences and reflections of the natural world that ran serially in *The Western Literary Messenger* of Buffalo during the early 1840s.⁴²

Ferris, like most western traders and trappers, was a careful observer of nature, and he possessed a powerful skill of expression. When his party pushed out onto the Plains and first encountered buffalo, Ferris could hardly control his emotions, explaining, "the scene had here a wild sublimity of aspect, that charmed the eye with a spell of power, while the natural sympathy of life with life made the pulse bound and almost madden with excitement."⁴³ On a later occasion, after climbing to the crest of Teton Pass and looking back into today's Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he could do no better than to simply praise the "Sublime creations!" In similar circumstances, Ferris's pen danced across the page, drawing literary images of the sublime and picturesque qualities of the landscape.⁴⁴

Ferris's most revealing encounter with the western sublime came in the spring of 1835 as he described an experience within today's Yampa Canyon in northwestern Colorado shortly before he left the Rocky Mountains and returned to the East. After embarking

from his winter quarters, Ferris talked of entering "the chanion [canyon] of a deep creek, and attempted to pass through one of the most frightful chasms, perhaps, in existence." In a description shadowing the sensory effects of the Hudson River artists, he wrote of huge perpendicular walls extending a thousand feet to the sky, capped with massive pine trees that "appeared but as twigs from the abyss beneath." The immensity of the walls enshrouded the canyon in a veil of everlasting night. Huge fragments of gigantic rocks, crushed and scattered on the canyon floor, made it impossible to proceed on horseback. Ferris dismounted and strained his way across a "chaotic heap of shapeless ruins" until "the sublime terror of the surrounding scene" forced him to end his journey. Momentarily, he stood "in mute astonishment and wonder." Spray from melting snow cascading down the steep walls showered upon him as the foaming current dashed down the river channel near his feet. Above, overhanging trees, rocks, and snow seemed to tremble as if ready to explode onto the canyon floor. "Shivering with dread," Ferris recorded, "I turned from a place, so pregnant with dangers, and hastening forward, heard, as I returned the deafening sound of timber, stones and snow, hurled down the giddy heights from crag to crag, into the gulph [gulf] below."⁴⁵ It was the attempt to go as close to disaster as possible without actually being in physical danger that made the sublime attractive. As Ferris demonstrated, encounters with the sublime had become so important that men risked unnecessary dangers simply to satisfy their curiosity.

ROMANTICISM AND RUFUS B. SAGE

By the 1840s, Romanticism and the concept of the sublime had clearly taken hold of the American imagination as Rufus B. Sage's often-forgotten text, *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains*, attests. Published in 1846, following his return from the mountains, Sage's account found a wide contemporary audience that demanded numerous reprintings over the next fifteen years. Born in Connecticut in 1817, he

received the basics of education that allowed him to find employment opportunities within the printer's trade. After some sporadic jobs in the newspaper business, he found himself in Independence, Missouri, in 1841—alone, penniless, and ready for adventure. With the idea of writing a book about western adventure, and being one who already appreciated the aesthetic beauty of nature, he secured himself to Lancaster P. Lupton's trading party and began to chronicle his experiences of life in the western landscape.⁴⁶

The writings of Rufus B. Sage portray the resounding alertness of an attentive eye. His visions of the natural scenery simultaneously show respect, awe, and reverence. They echo the vernacular of the artwork of the Hudson River School, particularly evident during his first trip onto the prairies. In his own way, he found the prairie sublime: "[T]here is a charm in the loneliness—an enchantment in the solitude—a witching variety in the sameness, that must ever impress the traveler, when, for the first time, he enters within the confines of the great western prairies."⁴⁷

Consciously aware of his surroundings, Sage continually described the "beauty" of the "landscape scenery." On one occasion, while traveling across the Plains, he witnessed one of nature's most destructive forces—a wild prairie fire. Yet to Sage "it was a sublime spectacle, a stupendous scene, grand and imposing beyond description, and terrible in beauty." These were concepts eastern readers could envision, the sublime as terrible and beautiful, stupendous and grand, yet imposing at the same moment. Sage demonstrated America's maturing thoughts concerning the natural elements that made what they perceived as wilderness a power to fear while at the same time being a source of splendor.⁴⁸

The first year of Sage's travels failed to take him to the Rocky Mountains. He traveled to Fort Platte, located near Fort Laramie in present southeastern Wyoming, and spent the winter exploring the region of the upper Platte River and the White River of the Dakotas. After an unsuccessful attempt to float furs

down the Platte, he again found himself in Independence, Missouri, without any money. His boss, Lancaster Lupton, had declared bankruptcy. Still determined to write about the West, Sage returned to the mountains as a "free trapper," and thus gained the experience he needed to write his book.⁴⁹

In August 1842 Sage once again found himself traveling westward across the prairie. This time taking a more southern route, Sage expressed some disappointment with the "dreary sterility" of the Southern Plains landscape until his party caught their first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains. Having positioned himself a few miles above Beaver Fork, Sage obtained a distinct view of the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains, estimating their snowy summits to be some sixty to seventy miles off. Trying to describe the inspiring scene of the mountains, he wrote: "[T]hey appeared like a pile of dark clouds just rising from the verge of the horizon, and could be identified only by their uniform and stationary position." A short time later, he penned a romantic picture of the sunset falling upon the snow-capped peaks, with "a beauty and grandeur" that could scarcely be witnessed in all of the country; this was a similar image being expressed about the less dramatic Adirondack and Catskill mountains in the East by the Hudson River artists. For Sage, the mountains proved ominous. Although he could pen a wonderful description of their captivating qualities, his images found the mountains containing "dark frowning sides" that appeared "as the minister of pent up wrath." They took on qualities of power, almost possessing control of the elements if they so desired. At any moment it seems Sage is waiting for them to pour out torrents of rain or unleash the destructive forces of a tornado.⁵⁰

As the party traveled up the Arkansas River, Sage remarked on the "romantic" and "beautiful" country. When they reached Taos, New Mexico, in October, he often wrote about the qualities of the area that "excite the admiration" of the beholders. Wanting to continue traveling, Sage attached himself to a party

journeying to Fort Hall by way of Brown's Hole on the Green River. When they arrived in Brown's Hole, Sage described it as one of the finest places in the entire West, claiming, "[F]ew localities in the mountains are equal to this, in point of beautiful and romantic scenery." It encompassed a wide valley surrounded on all sides by impassable mountains guarding it from the outside world. Almost struggling for words, he poetically explained how the elements of Brown's Hole "combine to invest it with an enchantment as soul-expanding in its sublimity as it is fascinating in its loveliness." Although he stayed only a brief time, his writings demonstrated how the aesthetic categories of nature had become the focus of his journey.⁵¹

The remainder of Sage's travels took him across much of the West, and brought him back to Missouri by the summer of 1844. When he published his narrative two years later, he was most concerned with conveying to his readers how he experienced nature in its most sublime state. Because of this, he rarely discussed the effects of the weather or his struggles to obtain food. In fact, the economic opportunities provided by the fur trade are mentioned even less frequently. He found the West romantic, sublime, scenic, beautiful, powerful, enchanting, and vexing all at the same time.

Men like Pike, Ferris, and Sage demonstrated the way that traders and trappers used the aesthetic qualities their culture had conditioned them to see to try and understand their surroundings. Their increased attention to the western sublime reflected the country's growing pride in the natural world. Because of the artwork of the Hudson River artists and the literary pieces of Irving, more and more easterners were thinking of the West as wilderness. It was a landscape free of towns and cities, yet it had potential for future development. The West was wilderness because it was unfamiliar, even mysterious. It possessed sublime, picturesque, and beautiful landscapes that created dramatic sensations, filling the mind with wonder while simultaneously provoking extended reflections upon the natural world.⁵²



FIG. 5. It was somewhere near this photograph that Osborne Russell found solace in his "Secluded Valley" in today's Yellowstone National Park. This photograph is a Gamble and Stafford Cabinet photo of the Lamar River and Surrounding Mountains taken on September 1, 1891. Courtesy National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park, YELL-13960ANCS.

WILDERNESS

Beyond experiencing the sublime, the idea of living in what many perceived as wilderness appealed to some trappers. Men like Osborne Russell, for example, were romantics who found intrigue and pleasure amidst the remote recesses of the Rocky Mountains. A native of Maine, Russell signed on with Nathaniel Wyeth to bring supplies to the annual rendezvous in 1834. Wyeth, a New England ice merchant, had dreams of establishing a Columbia River fishing and trading company that would not only take advantage of the western fur trade but also capitalize on the high demand for salmon in the northeast. He had contracted with members of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, but upon arriving at the rendezvous a rival trader had already captured the trade. Wyeth conceded defeat and traveled to the

Snake River near today's Pocatello, Idaho, where he built Fort Hall in hopes of liquidating his goods. Osborne Russell helped build the fort, but after his one-year contract ended, he eagerly joined with several others to become free trappers.

On several occasions while traveling throughout the West, Russell ventured into portions of today's Yellowstone National Park. He found this area fascinating. When opportunities permitted, he took time to examine the geysers, hot springs, and mud pots. What truly captivated him, however, was a small section of country approximately eight miles long, three or four miles wide, and mostly surrounded by lofty mountains covered with pines lying near the present northeast boundary of the park. It is known on today's maps as the Lamar Valley, but to Russell it became his "Secluded Valley." He

first encountered this region during the fall of 1835. While traveling through the valley, his party of trappers befriended several families of Shoshone Indians who inhabited the area. The Shoshones repaid the friendship by drawing Russell a map with charcoal on a tanned elk hide. Then, as he prepared to leave, Russell wrote, "I almost wished I could spend the remainder of my days in a place like this." Here, "happiness and contentment seemed to reign in wild romantic splendor surrounded by majestic battlements which seemed to support the heavens and shut out all hostile intruders."⁵³

The following fall, Russell again returned to his "Secluded Valley." For five days, he halted his trapping operations to engage in the wonders of the landscape. One evening, he climbed a mountainside overlooking the valley and simply sat and watched the sun sleepily fall from view. "There is something in the wild romantic scenery of this valley," he later wrote, "which I cannot nor will I, attempt to describe but the impressions made upon my mind . . . were such as time can never efface from my memory." Then, like Meriwether Lewis did at the Great Falls of the Missouri nearly thirty years earlier, he longed for greater skills of expression: "[A]s I am neither Poet Painter or Romance writer I must content myself to be what I am a humble journalist and leave this beautiful Vale in obscurity until visited by some more skillful admirer of the beauties of nature who may chance to stroll this way at some future time."⁵⁴ For men like Russell, the mesmerizing qualities of the West unveiled themselves in a grandeur only found in the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

In extolling the virtues and dangers of nature, traders and trappers were not only products of their times but producers as well. Typically, they saw what they expected to see and described it by using the vocabulary and sentiments toward nature that prevailed in the East. From their accounts, Americans read about narrow escapes and reckless lifestyles, as well as unrelenting efforts of men trying to create themselves into the image in which various Native Americans felt confident enough

to conduct business with them. By the end of the 1840s, no longer did Americans solely imagine explorers passing through the western landscape. But, as a result of the published narratives of trappers and traders, along with the writings of Washington Irving and the artistic work of Alfred Jacob Miller, easterners could begin to envision life in the West. While Irving and Miller described the West as a wilderness region of romance, the reality of life engaged in trading and trapping proved difficult.⁵⁵ Their images, however, became America's images, and over the next two decades, tens of thousands of people would travel through select portions of the West along the overland trails expecting to find similar pleasures within the western landscape.

NOTES

1. William Marshall Anderson, *The Rocky Mountain Journals of William Marshall Anderson: The West in 1834*, ed. Dale L. Morgan and Eleanor Towles Harris (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1967), 89-91.

2. John Logan Allen, "Horizons of the Sublime: The Invention of the Romantic West," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 27-40.

3. For two examples see Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 65, and David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 207.

4. Washington Irving, *Astoria; or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), xlv. Irving describes this journey in the introduction.

5. James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 82-84.

6. Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 23-47.

7. Thomas Cole to Robert Gilmore, quoted in Oswaldo Rodríguez Roque, "The Exaltation of American Landscape Painting," in *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, ed. John K. Howat (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 25.

8. Ellwood C. Parry III, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 21-34. See also Ellwood C. Parry III, "Thomas Cole and the Practical Application of Landscape Theory," *New Mexico Studies in the Fine Arts* 3 (1978): 13-22; John Cronon, *American Picturesque* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 19.

9. Morse Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 36-57.

10. Washington Irving, *The Western Journals of Washington Irving*, ed. John Francis McDermott (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 19-20.

11. Peter Antelyes, *Tales of Adventurous Enterprise: Washington Irving and the Poetics of Western Expansion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149-201.

12. *History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark*, ed. Paul Allen, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1814); John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1817); Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Journal of a Voyage up the River Missouri; Performed in Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Coale and Maxwell, 1815); Edwin James, comp., *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820 . . . under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey and I. Lea, 1822-23); Gabriel Franchère, *Relation d'un voyage à la Côte du Nord-ouest de l'Aérique Septentrionale, dans les Années 1810, 11, 12, 13, et 14* (Montreal: Impr. De C. B. Pasteur, 1820).

13. *Astoria* was originally published in 1836, and went through numerous editions thereafter. I have relied upon the excellent edition edited by Edgeley Todd. See Irving, *Astoria*.

14. Irving, *Astoria*, 128, 147-50, 210-11, 213, 263, 265-66, 374, 386, 423.

15. Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A., in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961).

16. For examples of this see, Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 18, 66, 97, 112, 115, 136, 159, 203, 326-28, 371, 372.

17. *Ibid.*, xlv-xlv.

18. *Ibid.*, 252, 257.

19. *Ibid.*, 105.

20. Irving, *Astoria*, 251.

21. Excellent essays on Miller's western experience can be found in Ron Tyler, ed., *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1982). See also Marvin C.

Ross, ed., *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951); Michael Bell, *Braves and Buffalo: Plains Indian Life in 1837* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

22. Patricia Trenton and Peter Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains: A Vision for Artists in the Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 32-33.

23. Carol Clark, "A Romantic Painter in the American West," in *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail*, 51.

24. Quoted in Ross, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, 130.

25. William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 58-68.

26. Ross, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, 29.

27. William R. Swagerty, "Marriage and Settlement Patterns of Rocky Mountain Trappers and Traders," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (April 1980): 159-80.

28. Harvey L. Carter and Marcia Carpenter Spencer, "Stereotypes of the Mountain Man," *Western Historical Quarterly* 6 (January 1975): 17-32; William H. Goetzmann, "The Mountain Men," *The American West* 15 (July/August 1978): 4-17; William H. Goetzmann, *New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery* (reprint, Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1995), 132.

29. David J. Wishart, "Images of the Northern Great Plains from the Fur Trade, 1807-1843," in *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement*, ed. Brian W. Blouet and Merlin P. Lawson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 45-55.

30. Some examples of traders and trappers' usage of wilderness are Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies: or the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader, during eight expeditions across the Great Western Prairies, and a residence of nearly nine years in Northern Mexico*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry G. Langley, 1844), 1:33, 2:17-20, 2:42; Nathaniel J. Wyeth, *The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1831-6*, ed. F. G. Young, Sources of the History of Oregon series (Eugene, OR: University Press, 1899), 1:125; John B. Wyeth, *Oregon; or a Short History of a Long Journey from the Atlantic Ocean to the Region of the Pacific By Land*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, vol. 21 of *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1905), 50, 66-67, 69; John K. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains, to the Columbia River*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, vol. 21 of *Early Western Travels*, 181-82, 186, 195, 197, 278; Zenas Leonard, *Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader*, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 3-4, 16, 61-62; Warren A. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains: A Diary of*

Wanderings on the Sources of the Rivers Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado, 1830-1835, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Denver: Old West Publishing Co., 1983), 85, 93, 104; Osborne Russell, *Osborne Russell's Journal of a Trapper*, ed. Aubrey L. Haines (Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 23; Anderson, *Rocky Mountain Journals*, 145, 176, 209, 221-22; James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 9, 20, 48, 104, 151.

31. Leonard, *Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, 4.

32. Jean V. Matthews, *Toward a New Society: American Thought and Culture, 1800-1830* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 94-110.

33. Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairie*, 1:82, 2:48.

34. Leonard, *Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, 4. Leonard's narrative was first published in a Pennsylvania newspaper in serial form during 1838-39 and reprinted as a narrative in 1839.

35. Leonard, *Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, 76.

36. Ross, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, 93.

37. See Albert Pike, *Prose Sketches and Poems, Written in the Western Country (with Additional Stories)*, ed. David J. Weber (Albuquerque, NM: Calvin Horn, 1967). John Miller Morris, *El Llano Estacado: Exploration and Imagination on the High Plains of Texas and New Mexico, 1536-1860* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997), 211.

38. Morris, *El Llano Estacado*, 205-11.

39. Pike, *Prose Sketches*, 9-10. Irving's *Tour of the Prairies* had not yet appeared.

40. Pike, *Prose Sketches*, 11.

41. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 81.

42. For a publication history of the Ferris manuscript, see LeRoy Hafen's introduction in *Life in the Rocky Mountains*.

43. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 100.

44. *Ibid.*, 283-84.

45. *Ibid.*, 354-57.

46. Rufus B. Sage, *Rufus B. Sage: His Letters and Papers, 1836-1847*, in *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains*, vols. 4-5, ed. LeRoy and Ann Hafen (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1956); for a biographical sketch see Ann Hafen, "Rufus B. Sage," *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1966), 3:263-72.

47. Sage, *Rufus B. Sage*, 1:116, 119, 122.

48. *Ibid.*, 1:147, 160-61.

49. Hafen, "Rufus B. Sage," 268-69.

50. Sage, *Rufus B. Sage*, 2:53, 64, 66.

51. *Ibid.*, 2:79-82, 89, 135-37, 177.

52. See Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1-66.

53. Russell, *Osborne Russell's Journal of a Trapper*, 26-28.

54. *Ibid.*, 46.

55. Irving, *Bonneville*, 18; John Logan Allen, "The Invention of the American West: Fur Trade Exploration, 1821-1839," in *North American Exploration*, ed. John Logan Allen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 3:132-89.