

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOK EDITION

by Michael A. Lofaro

~~All please rise and sing the Daniel Boone theme song. That's right. It's certainly not too much to ask of those of the TV generation. Yet, if we try to sing any part of that short ballad without the words in front of us, we would likely either flounder or break into "Born on a mountain top in Tennessee, / Greenest state in the Land of the Free." We might even get as far as "kilt him a b'ar when he was only three" before we realized that we were singing about Davy Crockett rather than Daniel Boone.~~

Such is the power of television that we now often confuse and merge the images of the two most preeminent frontiersmen in the history of our country. Much of the problem can, of course, be laid at the cabin door of Fess Parker, who starred convincingly as Davy Crockett in the five Walt Disney episodes of "Disneyland" (1954-56) that were reshaped into two movies and as Daniel Boone in 165 episodes of the prime-time television series (1966-70) that bore the name of that pioneer.

Yet the heart of the problem behind the confusion of Boone and Crockett lies deeper than the staying power of their respective television theme songs. If the vitality of these men's lives can be brought to life for most people only through an audiovisual medium, then popular history, what we remember of history after our formal education is over, will be confined to those events, matters, and issues that convert easily into a vivid dramatization, one that can capture an audience's interest and can fit within a certain time slot that is predicated upon commercial constraints. For them, the actual lives of Boone and Crockett become a muddy mixture of history, legend, and media hype.

The problem was perhaps less acute for our parents and grand-

parents, who had only radio and the movies to contend with as formative influences in their youth, and who, at the very least, could distinguish between Boone and Crockett. And in Boone's case, they might have been lucky enough to read the book that you now hold in your hands.

When John Edwin Bakeless's *Daniel Boone: Master of the Wilderness* was first published in 1939, it was hailed as the definitive biography of the frontiersman.<sup>1</sup> It also was one of those far too infrequent happy marriages between exhaustive scholarly research and a vigorous and readable style. A reader who remembered Bakeless's account, for example, would recognize that the Daniel Boone theme song combined some truth, some falsehood, and some wish fulfillment, for the lyrics that began with "Daniel Boone was a man! / Yes, a big man. . . ." went on to exaggerate matters a bit. In this biography, Bakeless documented the facts that Boone's height was just a bit shy of being "as tall as a mountain," unless the mountain the songwriter had in mind was about five feet eight inches high; that he never wore a coonskin cap because he thought them uncivilized; and that far from being the "rippin'est, roarin'est, fightin'est man / the frontier ever knew!" he was a peaceful man who fought only when he had to.

Those who remembered the history brought to life in this biography no doubt also recalled that Boone was the contemporary of George Washington and that Crockett was the contemporary of Andrew Jackson. Boone, in fact, became internationally famous at the age of fifty when his "autobiography" appeared in John Filson's *The Discovery, Settlement And Present State of Kentucke* in 1784.<sup>2</sup> That was two years before Crockett was born. Informed readers would also have a sense that Boone was more fitted to history and Crockett to legend.<sup>3</sup> The case was that of the private versus the public man; the quiet, modest pioneer versus the backwoods storyteller with a gift for telling tall tales, both for entertainment and for his own political benefit. The discrimination hinged as well upon their respective deaths. Daniel's peaceful demise, brought about by a combination of old age and an overindulgence in his craving for sweet potatoes, was a far cry from Davy's death at the Alamo. Since a warrior's death ful-

filled the traditional role of the hero far better than death by indigestion, it was no wonder that Crockett became the favorite of Hollywood.<sup>4</sup>

But before the Crockett craze of the mid-1950s inspired by Walt Disney, Boone was far and away the country's twentieth-century choice as its favorite frontiersman. His stature was determined by his life rather than by the circumstances surrounding his death. The early fame that he experienced as a result of Filson's book and its many subsequent reprintings in various forms did not translate, however, into any account of his life that was highly accurate as to dates, places, and events, and that clearly sifted the myths from the facts.

His first biographers, who did not have the need to disentangle Boone from Crockett, did not serve the pioneer or history well. Filson's bombastic, ghost-written retelling of the frontiersman's "autobiographical" adventures represented Boone as more of a philosopher than an Indian fighter. Fortunately, within a year, by means of simple editorial excision, the information gained from Filson's personal interviews with Boone and his companions appeared in a condensed form pirated from Filson's original. The new version, thus freed from the often overblown rhetoric that Filson seemed to delight in as an eighteenth-century schoolteacher, revealed Boone as a man of action rather than one of words.<sup>5</sup>

Although Daniel liked Filson's effusive language, he thought very little of the poetical attempts of his nephew, Daniel Bryan, who hoped to prove himself the American Milton by rendering Boone's exploits into a book-length poem entitled *The Mountain Muse* in 1813. Instead of being a new *Paradise Lost*, *The Mountain Muse* was a steady disaster. Bakeless noted that the pioneer singularly regretted that Bryan was a relative, for he felt that he "could not sue him for slander" and added that such productions "ought to be left until the person was put in the ground."<sup>6</sup>

Like John Filson and Daniel Bryan, each biographer or commentator on Boone's life consciously or unconsciously shaped the frontiersman's image according to his own predispositions and beliefs. In his long poem *Don Juan* (1823), Lord Byron used Boone to exem-

plify Rousseau's natural man. According to Byron, a life lived in the wilderness resulted in spiritual purity, serenity, freedom, simplicity, and good health.<sup>7</sup> John James Audubon recorded a similar romanticized conception of Boone after their chance meeting in Kentucky about 1810. To him, Boone's "countenance gave indication of his great courage, enterprise and perseverance; and when he spoke, the very motion of his lips brought the impression that whatever he uttered could not be otherwise than strictly true."<sup>8</sup>

Timothy Flint continued and expanded the treatment of Boone as the natural man in his best-selling *Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone* (1833). He saw Daniel's life in the wilderness, however, only as an initial stage in the working out of a grand Providential plan that culminated in the triumph of civilized life. Boone's roles as the expert hunter and pioneer were sublimated by the overpowering nature of Flint's main theme of the irresistible advance of civilization.<sup>9</sup>

Boone's life continued to be a malleable public property insofar as his biographers were concerned. William Gilmore Simms presented a Boone who was a "knight errant," a heroic exemplar of the virtues of the southern aristocracy, but who was still a man who could out-Indian the Indians and who was "a hunter of men too, upon occasion."<sup>10</sup> This savage side of the pioneer was fully exploited by John A. McClung in 1832, thirteen years before Simms's sketch. McClung's Boone pined away for the "thrilling excitement of savage warfare" and clearly favored the author's point of view that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian."<sup>11</sup>

To conclude this brief sample of how radically Boone's life was shaped by his early biographers and "autobiographers," one need only mention a pamphlet published in 1823 by C. Wilder, who cast Boone in the role of a white Indian, a racial turncoat. Wilder did so by plagiarizing large sections from *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Col. James Smith* (Lexington, Ky., 1799) and attributing them out of context to Boone.<sup>12</sup> And it would be wrong not to note what was likely the most idiosyncratic biography of the frontiersman, written by John Mason Peck, an itinerant Baptist minister, who presented Boone as the ideal Christian, family man, farmer, and pious teetotaler.<sup>13</sup>

It was not until the beginning of this century that Daniel Boone received accurate biographical treatment. Reuben Gold Thwaites's 1902 biography was the first to draw extensively upon the Draper Manuscript Collection, perhaps the premier source of materials on the history of the pioneer and the Trans-Appalachian West. Yet Thwaites's book was small by his own admission, one limited by his belief that "we are living in a busy age, and life is brief—condensation is the necessary order of the day."<sup>14</sup> Daniel Boone's life would have to wait another thirty-seven years to receive the comprehensive and generous treatment that it deserved.

Perhaps because Boone was a private man, perhaps because his real autobiography was twice attempted and twice lost, perhaps because his biographers were often more interested in serving their own ends rather than those of history, interested readers had to wait until the appearance of John Bakeless's *Daniel Boone: Master of the Wilderness* before the full story of one of the most intriguing lives ever lived could be told. The extent of Bakeless's achievement can be measured by the thoroughness of his investigations and research; after fifty years his is still the standard by which all other biographies of the frontiersman are judged.<sup>15</sup>

All subsequent biographers and scholars investigating the life of Boone are heavily indebted to his work. Corrections to it tend to be few and, for the most part, small in significance.<sup>16</sup> Most of the new studies arise from a change of emphasis or expansion of Bakeless's pioneering use of the Draper Manuscript Collection. Other authors, such as Thwaites, had used it before, but none so effectively. More testimony to his scholarly precision is seen in the fact that present-day scholars return to the veritable treasure trove of transmontane history in the Draper Collection often to focus precisely on the areas that Bakeless excluded, for what he did, he did extremely well.<sup>17</sup>

Since an author cannot relate every minute of his subject's life to the reader, the necessity of selecting what to include and what to stress makes the act of writing biography interpretive by its very nature. John Bakeless, like all the other biographers, presents his view of Daniel Boone, but his is the first view and interpretation built upon scrupulous attention to historical detail. Bakeless portrays

Boone as an incurable romantic and yet as a pragmatist too. The pioneer's wanderlust, his "itching foot," as Bakeless terms it, is as much a part of his character as is his drive to become rich from the new land that he discovers, explores, and places under claim. Bakeless is also the first to capture the essential irony of the frontiersman's life. Boone always looked to the wilderness to make his fortune, both through commercial hunting and land speculation, but his fame as a trail-blazer and Indian scout encouraged settlers to follow in his tracks and make their homes near him. They felt and indeed were safer for his presence, but competed with him for the game and land, and eventually forced him deeper into the woods to pursue his dreams of wealth. Wherever Boone went, settlers were soon to follow and the cycle that reinforced his "itching foot" would begin again. At times, he was literally forced to the West by the economic pressures of a budding civilization.

Another strength of Bakeless's account of Daniel Boone stems from his skill as a narrator. He captures the spirit of the man and his era. John Bakeless paints upon a broad canvas and, although his primary focus is always upon Boone, he yields up a stirring chronicle of the genesis of the United States as well. A storyteller in the best sense, he knows how to captivate an audience. The reader thrills to Boone's exploits, adventures, and escapes because his biographer thrills to them too.

Reading Bakeless's masterful biography provides a compelling tale of adventure and heroism that confirms the centrality of Daniel Boone to the frontier and hence to the American experience. Remember that Boone's optimism, courage and zest for life in the face of the violence and savagery of the wilderness are the same characteristics that formed a general pattern for the next three major heroes of the westering frontier of the nineteenth century—Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill Cody. Imaginatively, Boone was and is the prototype of the American frontier hero. After the close of the physical frontier about the turn of the twentieth century, fiction became more attractive than fact, but Boone continued to live on because his spirit formed the core of all that was admirable in the cowboys and spacemen that rode and rocketed across the silver

screen. Look closely at the characters portrayed by William S. Hart, Tom Mix, and John Wayne, or at Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, Captain Kirk, and Luke Skywalker, and you will see the same indomitable spirit that marked the life and adventures of Daniel Boone.

Significantly, Boone's spirit lives on in another way as well. The pioneer still functions directly as a model worthy of emulation for millions of young Americans. It is not widely known, but Dan Beard, the founder of the Boy Scouts of America, stated that he based his initial conception of this organization upon the following premise: "A society of scouts to be identified with the greatest of all Scouts, Daniel Boone, and to be known as the Sons of Daniel Boone."<sup>18</sup>

It is to John Bakeless's credit that he captures Boone's spirit so well in this biography. The engrossing tale he tells of the pioneer's life continues to have a universal appeal to all those who search for new frontiers or enjoy reading about those who do. He knew that there would always be men and women who would look at the unknown and see challenge and opportunity, who would be drawn forth to explore and to discover, and who would do so perhaps not entirely realizing that all the while they were looking at their new worlds through Daniel Boone's eyes.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, the following reviews: Henry Steele Commage, "Pathfinder, Land-Grabber, Empire-Maker," *New York Herald Tribune Books* September 10, 1939, p. 3; Allan Nevins, "Wilderness Hero," *Saturday Review* (September 9, 1939): 6-7; and Caroline Gordon, "Boone," *New Republic* (November 8, 1939): 101-2. Davy had to wait another seventeen years before his definitive biography was published: James A. Shackford, *David Crockett: The Man and the Legend*, ed. John B. Shackford (1956; reprint, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

2. "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon," in John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* (Wilmington, Del.: James Adams, 1784).

3. Michael A. Lofaro, "From Boone to Crockett: The Beginnings of Frontier Humor," *Mississippi Folklore Register*, 14 (Fall 1980): 57-74; Michael A. Lofaro, *The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978; rev. and expanded, 1986).

4. Dan Kilgore, *How Did Davy Die?* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1978); Richard Boyd Hauck, "Making It All Up: Davy Crockett in the Theater," in *Davy Crockett: The Man, The Legend, The Legacy*, 1786–1986, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 102–23; William Eric Jamborsky, "Davy Crockett and the Tradition of the Westerner in American Cinema," in the forthcoming *Crockett at Two Hundred: New Perspectives on the Man and the Myth*, ed. by Michael A. Lofaro and Joe Cummings (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

5. Michael A. Lofaro, "The Eighteenth-Century 'Autobiographies' of Daniel Boone," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 76 (April 1978): 85–97.

6. Filson, *Kentucke*, p. 3; Lyman C. Draper Manuscript Collection, 7C 43 (1), State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Daniel Bryan, *The Mountain Muse: Comprising the Adventures of Daniel Boone and the Powers of Virtuous and Refined Beauty* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Davidson and Bourne, 1813); Bakeless, pp. 394–95.

7. Lord George Gordon Byron, *Byron's Don Juan: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Truman G. Steffan and Willis W. Pratt, 4 vols. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), 3: 143–45.

8. John James Audubon, *Ornithological Biography*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam Black, 1831–1839), 1: 503.

9. Timothy Flint, *Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone*, ed. James K. Folsom (1833; reprint, New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1967), p. 46.

10. William Gilmore Simms, "Daniel Boone—The First Hunter of Kentucky," in his *Views and Reviews in American Literature, History and Fiction*, ed. C. Hugh Holman (1845; reprint, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1962), pp. 149–51. The article first appeared in Simms's *Southern and Western Magazine* 1 (April 1845): 225–42.

11. John A. McClung, *Sketches of Western Adventure* (Maysville, Ky.: L. Collins, 1832), p. 91.

12. Daniel Boone, *Life and Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boone* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: C. Wilder, 1823).

13. John Mason Peck, *Life of Daniel Boone, the Pioneer of Kentucky*, in *The Library of American Biography*, 2d ser., XIII, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Little and Brown, 1847). I wish to thank Dr. James C. Klotter, State Historian and General Editor, for permission to draw upon some sections of my "Tracking Daniel Boone: The Changing Frontier in American Life," originally published in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 82 (Autumn 1984): 321–33.

14. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Daniel Boone* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), p. x.



15. To note the comprehensive nature of Bakeless's research, see pp. xi–xii, 419–65. For a selected bibliography that updates Bakeless's material to 1986, see Lofaro, *The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone*, pp. 135–41.

16. Two such small corrections follow. On page 41, in reference to a proclamation issued in "October, 1763," Bakeless immediately notes that "Friends from Culpeper County, Virginia, visiting Boone, told him of the proclamation." He does not tell the reader that these friends did not arrive until the summer of 1765. And on page 112, Bakeless misread Draper's orthography and recorded "half a pound" instead of two pounds of powder.

Bakeless's dismissal of the traditional story that Daniel's wife, Rebecca, had a child by his brother Edward (Ned) while Daniel was away for nearly two years on one of his long hunts has been called into question (p. xii). Lawrence Elliott, in *The Long Hunter: A New Life of Daniel Boone* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), p. 215, note for p. 40, contends that the child was Jemima, who was born in 1762. Howell Boone, a Boone family historian, believes that the manuscript diary of the Rev. Georg Soelle (Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and recently translated by Bishop Kenneth G. Hamilton, used here with permission), may indicate that the child was Rebecca, whose exact birth date is unknown (1768–1770?). On September 15, 1771, the minister tells of going to see Mrs. Boone and notes: "By nature she is a quiet soul given to few words. She told me of her trouble and the frequent distress and fear in her heart. . . ." The reference is too vague to constitute proof, for the "trouble" may simply have been Daniel's long absence. There is no firm proof of such a birth occurring, but Daniel's continued long absences, together with the available traditional and circumstantial evidence, may cast doubt on Bakeless's overt dismissal of the possibility of such a birth.

17. One such fine recent study that amplifies and clarifies its subject is William Dodd Brown, ed., "The Capture of Daniel Boone's Saltmakers: Fresh Perspectives from Primary Sources," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 83 (Winter 1985): 1–19.

18. Dan Beard, *Hardly a Man Is Now Alive: The Autobiography of Dan Beard* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1939), p. 353.