Reading A.B. Guthrie's
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by Fred Erisman
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Shortly after midday on 31 August 1837, thirty-four-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson stepped before the Harvard chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts, preparing to give the annual oration associated with the university’s commencement exercises. In the audience, in addition to some two hundred students, were such luminaries as the physician-essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Abolitionist Wendell Phillips, the poet James Russell Lowell, and the governor of Massachusetts, Edward Everett, who later became president of Harvard. Emerson's presentation, entitled “The American Scholar,” lasted for slightly more than an hour (Richardson 261-63).

 Barely a month earlier, and two thousand miles to the west, in what was to become Wyoming, another kind of assembly had come to an end: the Green River Rendezvous of 1837. As remote from the Cambridge exercises in content as it was in distance, the 1837 Rendezvous was to be one of the last of a decade-long series of such assemblies. Taking part were several hundred traders, Indians, and fur trappers of the Rocky Mountains, rough, stalwart, often unlettered men who lived for months in the wilderness, far from the comforts of civilization, the niceties of learning, and the society of others. Like the rendezvous that preceded it, this was an occasion for two-fold activity: straightforward mercantile transactions as trappers and traders exchanged goods, and a staggering range of debauchery—gambling, drinking, brawling, and fornication—as the trappers made up for months of isolation (Gowans
These solitary hunters and their enterprises are a far cry from the genteel scholars who make up Emerson's audience, yet they are as much a part of the American experience as the intellectuals of the East and their role in the shaping of the nation cannot be ignored.

In his presentation, Emerson calls for a new view of the American character, basing his argument on two principal themes. First is the importance of the individual he dubs "Man Thinking"—the Scholar of his title, who, by an active participation in nature, books, and affairs of the world, becomes the "delegated intellect" of the community (Emerson 53-60). As that delegated intellect, the Scholar has the obligation to exercise his or her self-trust, proceeding on the basis of first-hand experience and considered judgment to act in the world as an independent yet responsible individual—free, brave, and principled (Emerson 62-65). His second theme builds upon the first: these individuals, drawing upon the as yet unexploited materials of the United States, will in time make of the nation an intelligent, energetic, progressive society free of the corrupting influences of Europe and ready to take its place among the great nations of the world (Emerson 67-70). To many of his audience and to the host of persons who read the oration in its published form, Emerson's text expressed all that was distinctive in American life: principle, vigor, individualism, and independence. The United States was at last a civilized nation on the threshold of taking its place among the other civilized nations of the world.

Civilized it may have seemed from the vantage point of Cambridge, but the United States of 1837 embraced the mountain men as assuredly as it embraced the Emersonian ideal; indeed, in their unconsciously organic way of life, their emotional response to the natural world, and their fierce self-confidence, the mountain men are an extreme expression of one manifestation of the individ-
ualistic American that Emerson sketches so eloquently. Yet they also constitute an asocial, often primitive society that is doomed to failure almost from its beginnings, a class of persons whose very endeavors made their demise inevitable. Theirs is a brief, compelling story of ironic, even tragic tensions—among them the freedom of the West versus the civilization of the East; the individualism of the hunter versus the social obligations of the settler; and the desire to capitalize upon natural resources versus the desire to preserve them untouched. Theirs is a story quintessentially American, and the story of their lives, the very record of “the near, the low, the common . . . ; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body” for which Emerson calls, is a necessary part of the story of the nation (Emerson 67).

Few other works so effectively convey the complexity, ironies, and enduring consequences of the mountain men’s life in the 1830s and 1840s as does A.B. Guthrie’s The Big Sky. First published in 1947, it is a landmark of American literature as prominent in its way as Chimney Rock or Scott’s Bluff were to the trekkers of the Oregon Trail, for it marks the first effort of a novelist to present the American West in fully realistic fashion and in its larger historical context. Guthrie is well aware of the shortcomings of the mountain men, and minces no words in his presentation of their crudity and violence. But he is aware as well of the historical milieu in which they were working, and his awareness situates the mountain men in their proper historical perspective.

It is this dual vision that gives The Big Sky its enduring stature. Never out of print since its first publication, enshrined in a Hollywood film (1952) that, for all its merits, fails to do justice to the book, the novel memorably captures the fierce independence of the mountain men. It records their individualism and their self-reliance, yet it records as well their part in bringing community and civilization to the West. It never ignores the historical tensions of
American life, and, as no other western novel before it had done, places them at the center of its action, tracing out the far-reaching consequences that result as the United States moves ever more steadily westward.

Born in Bedford, Indiana, on 13 January 1901, Alfred Bertram Guthrie, Jr. traveled as an infant with his parents and older sister to Choteau, Montana, where his father was to become the first principal of the Teton County Free High School. His boyhood and youth he spent in Choteau, hunting, fishing, as a teenager pitching for the town baseball team and working as a helper at the local newspaper. He briefly attended the University of Washington, then transferred to the University of Montana, graduating in 1923 with a degree in journalism. After two years of odd jobs throughout the West, he became a reporter for the Lexington, Kentucky, Leader, where he remained until 1953, rising to the position of executive editor.

Although he tried his hand with fiction-writing with the mystery novel, Murders at Moon Dance (begun in 1936, but not published until 1943), he did not give the craft serious attention until 1944, when he won a Nieman Fellowship to Harvard. Here he gained access to the materials that opened the door to The Big Sky. With a fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in 1945, he saw the book to completion in 1946. Its reception, coupled with that of The Way West (1949), which won a Pulitzer Prize, and the writing of the screenplay for George Stevens’s filming of Shane (1953), enabled him to give up journalism and turn to a career of full-time writing. During his literary career he produced eleven novels, an autobiography, and a number of short pieces, nonfiction as well as fiction; in his later years, he became an outspoken advocate for environmental concerns. He died on 26 April 1991, in Choteau.

Guthrie’s major works of fiction fall into three categories. First is the “Dick Summers” trilogy, comprising The Big Sky, The Way
West, and *Fair Land, Fair Land* (1982). These constitute Guthrie's account of the opening of the West, as his mountain man, Dick Summers, introduced in *The Big Sky*, leads a wagon train to Oregon in the 1840s, renews his acquaintance with Boone Caudill, and, in 1870, dies needlessly at the hands of the United States Army. Carefully researched and movingly written, these books constitute Guthrie's greatest achievement.

Close behind them in significance, however, is the "Arfive" trilogy, made up of *These Thousand Hills* (1956), *Arfive* (1970), and *The Last Valley* (1975). In these Guthrie examines the settling of the West, from the ranching West of the nineteenth century (in the first volume) to the coming of the settled, semi-urban West of the early and middle twentieth century (in the latter two). Although lesser achievements than the Summers trilogy, the Arfive books derive depth and interest from Guthrie's use of autobiographical materials; the town of Arfive closely resembles the Choteau of Guthrie's youth, the local schoolmaster, Benton Collingsworth, echoes the elder Guthrie, and local names and businesses resonate throughout the stories.

The final group, the "Jason Beard" stories, reflects Guthrie's return to the mystery-story format. Including *Wild Pitch* (1973), *The Genuine Article* (1977), *No Second Wind* (1980), *Playing Catch-Up* (1985), and * Murder in the Cotswolds* (1990), the books trace the maturation of Jason Beard as he grows and works under the direction of Chick Charleston, sheriff of Midbury, Montana. These, too, are rich in autobiographical overtones; Midbury is reminiscent of Choteau; Jason, like the young Guthrie, pitches for the local baseball team; and Chick Charleston bears the nickname of Guthrie's younger brother (*Blue Hen's Chick* 30). Competent mysteries in their own right, the Beard stories additionally give Guthrie an opportunity to write of the modern West and its socio-environmental problems.
The Big Sky, however, remains the single work that establishes Guthrie’s reputation. A vividly concrete recreation of the Rocky Mountain fur trade and the era of the mountain man, it dramatizes as few other works have the complex vitality and inherent tragedy of the era. It serves, moreover, to introduce the themes that characterize all of Guthrie’s fiction: the theme of “each man kills the thing he loves,” that of “no clean choices,” and that of the far-reaching and often irreversible consequences of unthinking (or even well-meaning) actions. Guthrie’s first significant novel, it remains the starting point for any considered reading of his works.

Framing the events of The Big Sky are two formative episodes in American history: the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and its aftermath, and the opening of the Oregon Trail in 1840. Standing like mileposts along the path of history, these episodes effectively mark the beginning and the end of the era of the mountain man and the fur trade as he knew it and supply a necessary context for Guthrie’s novel.

Arranged by Thomas Jefferson with the help of his emissaries to France, James Monroe and Robert Livingston, the Louisiana Purchase opened the heart of the North American continent to American expansion. Its 828,000 square miles more than doubled the extant territory of the United States, ranging from the Gulf of Mexico to the upper Great Plains. With the addition came the potential for a new exploitation of fur and mineral resources, an extension of American agriculture, and a major step in the expansion of the populace and the nation toward the shores of the Pacific.

Just how much room there was, and what it held, soon become even more apparent. Even as he was negotiating for the purchase of Louisiana, Jefferson was overseeing preparations for an extended exploratory excursion into the new territory—the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1803-1806. Headed by Jefferson’s private secretary, Meriwether Lewis, and a seasoned military officer,
William Clark, the expedition was charged with a variety of tasks. It was, initially, to explore the Missouri River to the west, seeking a water route to the Pacific. It was to map the areas crossed, with an eye to how the American fur trade and other commercial enterprises might be developed. It was to determine the suitability of the area for future settlement, and it was to initiate contact with the Indian tribes encountered, seeking ethnographic information and opening diplomatic negotiations (Ambrose 93-95). Lewis and Clark were, in short, to develop as comprehensive a survey of the new area as conditions allowed.

They succeeded, by almost any criterion. Though the Corps of Discovery failed to find a direct water route to the Pacific, they brought back a wealth of other information. Their scientific records (kept principally by Lewis) include almost two hundred new plant species and nearly 150 new animal species, most of which were encountered west of the Continental Divide. Their contacts with the Plains Indian tribes had largely been peaceful, and they returned with new details of the life of the Sioux, the Blackfeet, the Nez Percé, and the Shoshone. Finally, they returned with records of an extraordinarily varied land, one with landscapes ranging from open plains to rugged mountains, from fertile river valleys to near-desert conditions (Ambrose 394-402). Their discoveries made clear the potential of the new territories, and the beginnings of settlement and commerce were not slow to respond.

If the Louisiana Purchase opened the way for American expansion westward, the establishing of the Oregon Trail made that expansion an accomplished fact. The first American foothold in the Pacific Northwest came in 1792, when Robert Gray discovered the mouth of the Columbia River. The explorations of Lewis and Clark developed American consciousness of the region, and commercial incursions were quick to follow, most notably with the establishing of the settlement of Astoria, Oregon, in 1811, to anchor the western reaches of John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur Company.
These incursions soon drew the attention of the British, whose claim to the territory was at least as strong as that of the United States. A series of negotiations in the early years of the century led at last to an agreement (1818) providing for joint occupancy of the territory while the two nations continued to debate the claims of both. From this agreement came, ultimately, the Oregon Boundary Settlement of 1846, which set the Canada-United States border along the 49th parallel (Merk 309-29). Settlement pressures, however, did not wait for diplomatic solutions, for the American population, stimulated by commerce and curiosity, had already begun to flow westward.

The early stages of the Oregon Trail were established by explorers and fur traders—Robert Campbell and William Stewart initially, then later Captain William Bonneville and others. Politicians such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Floyd were quick to see the potential of the Oregon territory, as were missionaries such as Samuel Parker and Marcus Whitman, and supply caravans in support of the fur trade were commonplace by the 1830s. Organizations (among them the Oregon Provisional Emigration Society) to stimulate settlers’ interest in the region soon followed. By the late 1830s, the principal land route to Oregon and California was well established (DeVoto, 50-53; Unruh 90-93, 118).

The most widely traveled version of the Oregon Trail started at Independence, Missouri, and headed north and west along the North Platte River through Nebraska and Wyoming; principal landmarks were Chimney Rock and Scott’s Bluff in western Nebraska, and the South Pass across the Continental Divide in Wyoming. From there it followed the Snake River northward to the Columbia, and thence on into Oregon. The first actual emigrants to follow the route traced it in 1840-41; the “Great Migration” of 1843 saw nearly a thousand individuals on the Trail.
By the start of the Gold Rush in 1848, better than eighteen thousand persons had made the trek, leading puzzled Indians to wonder whether any whites remained in the East (Merk 263-64; Unruh 118-19). With the coming of the Oregon Trail, the West as the preserve of the trapper and mountain man came to an end. Instead, settlers, farmers, and developers came into the region, bringing with them the attributes of civilization that the mountain man shunned—towns, schools, churches, and stores. The floodgates of settlement had been opened; no force on Earth could hold back the torrent.

If the Louisiana Purchase and the Oregon Trail frame the events of *The Big Sky*, at the heart of the novel is the history of the Western fur trade. From the moment of its emergence until its decline, the fur trade embraces a scant forty years (1808-1840), yet it contributes a major part to popular conceptions of the West. From it comes the image of the solitary trapper, plying his trade among the majestic Rocky Mountains. From it comes the image of the rough-and-ready mountain man, buckskin-clad with his rifle and “possible sack” of personal effects, braving the wilderness and facing all comers with a fierce individualism. From it come the images of idyllic cohabitation with the Indian, and the images of bloody conflicts with those same Indians. And from it come the images of environmental depredation that bulk so large in the modern view of the West. It is one of the shaping episodes in Western history.

The first systematic efforts to capitalize upon the resources of the Oregon territory came in 1808, when William Clark, Meriwether Lewis, Pierre Chouteau, Manuel Lisa, and associates formed the St. Louis Missouri River Fur Company. They planned a combined trapping-military foray up the Missouri River to the area around the Yellowstone (Ambrose 444-454). Almost immediately, however, they faced competition from John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur
Company (founded in 1810) and two British organizations, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company. This stage, however, came to an end with the War of 1812 and the ceding of Astoria and other posts to the British in 1813 (Wishart 115-19).

The pace of development quickened with the resumption of fur-trading following 1820. The partnership of General William Ashley and Andrew Henry, formed in 1822, marked the next major development, establishing a post on the Yellowstone River and introducing the trapping techniques that were to dominate the era. Ashley sold the firm to a consortium of Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, and William Sublette in 1826; these, in turn, sold out to Jim Bridger, Milton Sublette, and others in 1830, creating the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (Wishart 121-26, 141-48).

Astor, meanwhile, had not been idle. His American Fur Company in 1822 created a Western Department, based in St. Louis, and quickly challenged the primacy of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Astor himself withdrew from the fur trade in 1834, but the Western Department remained as formidable competition for the other enterprises. Unable to compete effectively with the American Fur Company, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company merged in 1834 with the firm of Lucien Fontenelle and Thomas Fitzpatrick. Following a complex series of mergers and reorganizations involving (among others) William Sublette and Robert Campbell, the undertaking was absorbed in the same year by Bernard Pratte and Pierre Chouteau, who headed the Western Department of the American Fur Company. The Company's monopoly was secure. It dominated the mountain trade until overtrapping and a decline in the demand for pelts led to its ultimate withdrawal from the region between 1838 and 1840 (Wishart 145-52, 161-66).

The practices put into place by Ashley and Henry and later taken up by the American Fur Company became known as the
Rocky Mountain Trapping System. Under the System, trappers would trek through the region, accumulating pelts that they periodically turned over to the Company’s agents. These trappers fall into three groups. First are the *engagés*, or outright employees of the Company; the furs they collected went directly to the Company, and the trappers themselves received only a salary. Second are the “skin trappers,” who worked, in effect, on commission; grubstaked by the Company, they used their accumulated furs to repay their debt and kept any funds remaining. The third group, the “free trappers,” worked independently, either singly or in small bands; they bargained with traders from year to year, seeking all that the market would pay (Wishart 121-27).

It is the free trappers who have entered myth as the “mountain men,” for they in numerous ways expand and embody the myth of the frontiersman. They do so because they are, initially, independent and individual. They work alone and they find in the wilderness a quality of life that civilization, with all its discontents, cannot supply. They are, moreover, highly skilled. Adept with traps, firearms, and knives, they have mastered the complex skills of the trapper’s trade and the necessary skills of wilderness survival. And they are deeply engaged with the environment itself, finding in the beauty and challenge of the Mountain West an identity and fulfillment that transcend the dictates of civilization (DeVoto 44). Yet, paradoxically, they are also what William Goetzmann has called “expectant capitalists.” For all their fierce independence and identification with the natural world, they are an inseparable part of a growing mercantile system. The irony of their circumstances makes them among “the saddest of all American heroes” (Goetzmann, 106-09).

A second contribution of the Rocky Mountain Trapping System was the institution of the rendezvous. This was a prearranged meeting of trappers, traders, and agents, customarily lasting a
month or more, at which trappers would bring in the accumulated pelts, strike their bargains, and restock their supplies for the next cycle of trapping. First held in 1825, when William Ashley took a supply train to the Green River in what is now Wyoming, it quickly became an annual event. It was, to be sure, primarily a commercial undertaking, as the trappers exchanged furs for cash or credit, then turned their funds into supplies. But it also was a social occasion, providing time for yarning, drinking, gambling, and debauchery, and quickly became a fixture in the mountain man’s calendar (Gowans 8-16).

One of the most notable of the rendezvous was the Green River Rendezvous of 1837, for it is one preserved pictorially as well as in the written record. Organized by Thomas Fitzpatrick and lasting from mid-June until early August, 1837, it and its activities were recorded for history by the artist Alfred Jacob Miller, who, with Etienne Provost and his patron, William Drummond Stewart, were traveling with Fitzpatrick. Miller’s notebooks, sketches, and paintings preserve the people and activities of the occasion, and capture, as no other account has, the pulsing vitality of the moment (Gowans 184-207; Ross Plates 159, 175, 189, 199). Miller’s recording of the event is timely, for the rendezvous as an institution was soon to come to an end. The Green River Rendezvous of 1840 was the last such assembly, for when the fur trade collapsed, it took the rendezvous with it.

The effectiveness of the Rocky Mountain Trapping System led to that collapse, for it gave the trappers, whatever their nature, an incentive to accumulate as many furs as they could manage. Market demand added to the incentive, keeping prices high for the greater part of the trade’s duration. For the trappers, the high point is generally considered to be 1832, when demand for beaver reached a high, the Company built Fort McKenzie near the Marias River, and Benjamin Bonneville erected Fort Bonneville in what is
now Wyoming. In the years following, beaver became ever more scarce, settlements began to appear in the region, and the market itself, seemingly perpetual, was quickly undercut by changes in fashion and manufacturing. Silk hats and the utilization of other furs eroded the need for beaver. In its brevity and in its far-reaching consequences for human, animal, and environment alike, the fur trade stands as one of the ironic, even tragic, monuments to the settling of the West (White 247; Wishart 205-15).

The historical record of the fur trade provides ample material for the thoughtful writer. It is a record of idealism and greed, heroism and exploitation, progress and destruction. Guthrie makes the most of it. He freely acknowledges his debt to that record and its historians in The Blue Hen's Chick, but, as Richard Cracroft demonstrates, his engagement with the material transcends mere research. In The Big Sky one finds direct mention of Washington Irving’s The Adventures of Captain Bonneville (1837) and The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth (1831-36), as well as echoes of George Frederick Ruxton’s Life in the Far West (1848). Cracroft identifies other sources in Charles Larpenteur’s Forty Years a Fur Trader (1898) and Prince Maximilian of Wien-Neuwied’s Travels in the Interior of North America (1832-34) among others, making clear the extent to which Guthrie goes to make his novel factually authentic (Blue Hen’s Chick 148-49, 164-66; Cracroft 163-76). That authenticity, however, ultimately extends beyond mere detail, as Guthrie goes on to capture the era of the fur trade and the mountain men in all its complexity and all its inherent tragedy.

At first glimpse, The Big Sky seems little more than one more retelling of what has become a familiar frontier story—a dramatization of episodes in the lives of the mountain men during the waning days of the American fur trade. Its five untitled sections, arranged in chronological order and spanning some thirteen years
(1830-1843) in the history of nation and its characters, unfold in disarmingly direct fashion, suggesting few surprises to come. A closer reading, however, reveals that behind the outwardly simple chronology is a carefully ordered structure. Each of the five sections plays a part; each introduces and develops a specific theme, and each prepares the way for the next to come. As a result, the narrative has a trajectory as precise and as unwavering as that of an Elizabethan tragedy, making Guthrie's frontier story a memorable, resonant meditation on history and human failings.

Part One (Chapters 1-8), set in 1830, could easily be titled "Civilization and its Discontents." Seventeen-year-old Boone Caudill, unable to endure the abuses of a brutal, drunken father, flees his home in backwoods Kentucky and strikes out westward. He encounters an amiable, red-haired drover, Jim Deakins, and the two arrive in Louisville, where they are discovered by Boone's father and the sheriff. Boone makes his escape, but loses his rifle to the citified but sly Jonathan Bedwell; when he tracks Bedwell down and retrieves the weapon, he is arrested and jailed. Deakins, tracking his companion, arrives on the scene, frees him from jail, and the two strike out for St. Louis, determined to shake the dust of settlement and civilization from their feet.

While it necessarily introduces Boone Caudill and Jim Deakins, Part One goes on to lay the foundation for events to come. Part of that foundation emerges in the nature of Boone himself; a product of backwoods Kentucky, he is incapable of living and working within a social context. The opening pages make clear his violence and his asocial nature. He is in trouble yet again because of drink and brawling, his most recent victim has sworn out a warrant for his arrest, and his father is determined to break his spirit once and for all. Boone, however, cares no more for his father than for any other person, and fells him with a stick of firewood (3-6).
Behind the overt violence of the episode is a wealth of implication. The act of clubbing down a parent (that the blow is not fatal is through no design of Boone's) is inherently asocial, even unnatural, and it makes clear Boone's viciousness and his readiness to act without reflection. It suggests as well his antagonism toward social conventions and social strictures. As he prepares to head west, he comforts himself by concluding that the community has closed ranks against him, forcing him to become a fugitive. In his mind, he is the victim, a person who has done only what any man would do, yet who is being punished unfairly by society and its laws (8). Self-absorbed, self-pitying, and self-justifying, Boone is unequivocally a person at odds with the larger community.

That community, as Guthrie is careful to make clear, is far from perfect. Even in its settlements, it is primitive at best; Louisville is crowded, smoky, and smelly, while the village of Paoli, where Boone is arrested, is no more than a cluster of log huts (19, 38). It embraces liars and thieves, like the plausible Jonathan Bedwell, who steals Boone's rifle and perjures himself in court. Its agents are often corrupt and violent; in a travesty of a trial, conducted by an ailing judge and an abusive prosecutor, Boone is convicted of stealing his own rifle, sentenced to a week's imprisonment, and beaten by the sheriff (37-52). As Paul T. Bryant points out, the community's flaws are echoed in the names of its people, especially Judge Test. The judge is, indeed, a test of law, justice, and social order, and he and the system alike fail the test (Bryant 205). And, yet, for all its failings, the settlement is a community, and if its laws are badly administered, they nonetheless attest to a sense of justice and a desire for rule by law. It, too, prepares the way for matters to come.

Balancing Boone is the character of Jim Deakins, who will play an ever-larger role as complement and foil as the narrative advances. Where Boone is rebellious, Deakins is easy-going; where
Boone is asocial, Deakins is amiable. Most significantly, where Boone is unthinking and quick to act, Deakins is contemplative and methodical. This point is established early on, as Boone and Deakins idly talk about the corpse that constitutes Deakins’s wagon cargo. Deakins ruminates about death and the hereafter, and admits to a bit of edginess at the presence of the body; Boone, however, makes ready for bed with the dismissive comment, “He’s dead, ain’t he?” (18-19). The remark handily confirms the developing tensions that will drive the later action. The conflicts of material and spiritual, individual and community are present from the start.

Part Two (Chapters 9-19), also set in 1830, is a chronicle of “Initiation and Awakening.” Caudill and Deakins are aboard the keelboat Mandan, headed up the Missouri River into the territory of the Blackfeet beyond Fort Union and the Yellowstone River with a cargo of trade goods, illicit alcohol, and weapons. With them is the hunter, Dick Summers, who introduces Boone to the art of buffalo hunting and supplies a folk remedy for the gonorrhea that Boone has acquired, and Teal Eye, a Blackfoot girl they hope to return to her people. After skirmishes with the Sioux, they arrive at Fort Union, where they encounter Alexander McKenzie and learn of the American Fur Company’s opposition to their plans; they encounter, as well, Boone’s uncle, Zeb Calloway, an elderly mountain man who querulously laments the disappearance of the beaver and the buffalo. Proceeding upriver nonetheless, they meet disaster; Teal Eye escapes, and the men of the Mandan, except for Summers, Boone, and Deakins, are slaughtered in an Indian attack.

The initiation motif recurs throughout Part Two, as episode after episode leads Boone farther away from civilization and deeper into the milieu of the mountain man. To his associates, his case of gonorrhea, acquired in a St. Louis whorehouse, is his initiation into
manhood (86-88). The men of the Mandan, celebrating their transition onto the Platte River, subject Boone and Deakins to a rowdy induction ceremony. Boone, though he has agreed to go through with its indignities, can barely restrain himself from lashing out at his tormenters (99-102). Dick Summers, needing another hunter, begins to teach him the skills of buffalo-hunting, a prime attribute of the mountain man (106-110). And, in the crowning act of initiation, Boone kills an Indian, his first experience with taking a human life. He pulls the trigger on his rifle with a readiness that marks his continuing movement away from the conventions of society (114-15).

With that movement comes a still more telling feature of the mountain man, an inwardly turning emphasis on the immediate present. Where once he was subject to youthful loneliness and worry, Boone now is indifferent to both. He finds himself, moreover, losing track of time; his days aboard the Mandan merge until his only concerns are with the immediate here and now. Even the meat that makes up his regular diet is a thing of the moment, for its essence seems to him to flow directly into his blood, strengthening him even as it leaves him hungry for more (125-27). He is, increasingly, thinking of himself as the center of a timeless existence in which there is neither yesterday nor tomorrow. It is an appealing view of the world, but it is also one, as Guthrie makes clear, that carries its own share of shortcomings.

Those shortcomings are voiced by Zeb Calloway, when Boone and Summers encounter him at Fort Union. For Calloway, the wilderness is already spoiled. Where once there was freedom, there are forts; where once there was solitude, there are settlers; where once there were plentiful buffalo and beaver, there are ever-dwindling yields; where once the region was the rightful realm of the mountain man, it is now increasingly at the beck of the outside world. Summers and Boone pay little heed to his lamentations (Boone,
complacent in his new-found status, charges them off to the failings of old age), but they echo in the reader's mind as the section moves to its completion (150-51). They remind one, as Guthrie intends, that the forces of change are powerful, and the wise person pays attention.

If Part Two is “Initiation,” Part Three (Chapters 20-30), set in 1837, is “Fullness and Realization,” with Boone, Deakins, and Summers well-established as free trappers and mountain men. Trapping in the Wind River range is not good, but they arrive at the Green River rendezvous with pelts enough for supplies and liquor. Days of drinking, gambling, and brawling follow. Summers, feeling the inevitability of time and the weakening of age, determines to head east, giving up the hunter's life while he still has health and strength; Boone and Deakins, however, stay on in the mountains, confident of the future. Boone, determined to have Teal Eye as a wife, seeks out her people, only to find that they have been ravaged by smallpox and her father, Heavy Otter, is dead. They find her at last, bargain with her brother, Red Horn, and discover that she desires Boone as much as he does her.

Three consecutive episodes set the theme and tone of the section. The first captures Boone’s mastery of the skills of the mountain man, as it follows him through the careful steps of preparing a beaver trap; though he is inarticulately conscious of changes afoot in the world, he makes no connection with the changing circumstances and the dwindling number of beaver (182-83). The second contrasts Boone’s solitariness with Deakins’s sociability. Whereas Boone sees it only as the occasion for drinking and fighting, rendezvous for Deakins is a time of reuniting with his fellow men. Deakins, a sociable person, looks forward to the rendezvous as a time for yarning, laughing, and gambling, using the recreation to wipe out memories of loneliness and reestablish his links with humankind in general (185). And the third goes inside Dick
Summers's head, as he thinks of the region, of change, and of age. His memories of the discoveries and rendezvous of the past are more vivid than the experience of the present, and the time has come, he realizes, to take stock of who, what, and where he is (194-96).

The rendezvous of 1837 is the high point in the lives of all three, though only Summers has the experience and vision to grasp the point. For Boone, the drinking and brawling only confirm the rightness of his sense of the world. He fancies himself in a time­less world of perpetual youth and never-ending freedom, in which he can do as he likes without hindrance; time and change, for him, do not exist (201). The cautions of Summers and others he treats as superficial nay-saying, and he thinks only of a life of endless freedom and plenty. Summers, however, knows otherwise, and his growing consciousness of the incoming wagons, the disappearing game, and the physical failings of age clinch his decision to leave the region. Unlike Boone and Deakins, he recognizes “that a man didn’t give up the life but that it was the other way about” (212). He is increasingly aware that the way of life he has loved is van­ishing, and he himself must accept the realities that its disappearance imposes. It is a poignant realization, and a significant one, for it speaks to one of the most compelling of Guthrie’s larger con­cerns.

The irony of Boone’s optimism and Summers’s realism is only in­tensified by Boone’s wooing of Teal Eye. He proceeds as an Indian would; he locates Red Horn, her brother, and offers horses, pelts, and trade goods. This is, for him, as much a mercantile transac­tion as an emotional one. Although he finds himself thinking of Teal Eye in terms other than raw sexuality, his self-centeredness allows him neither to understand nor to appreciate the implica­tions of love. He thinks of their life together as simply an exten­sion of the Indians’ life, rich in hunting and fighting, with Teal
Eye always present to tend his lodge and his needs (252-55). He does not understand that the people he is joining and the life he is embracing are as threatened as the buffalo and the beaver. The stage is set for tragedy.

Part Four (Chapters 31-42), spanning 1842-1843, can be thought of as “The Serpent in Eden,” for it records a brief, idyllic time for Boone and Teal Eye that is destroyed by civilization’s pressures and humanity’s failings. Boone and Teal Eye are living with the Piegan, and Teal Eye is pregnant. Deakins returns from a foray east with news: he and Boone have a chance to guide a winter party seeking a wagon route through the mountains. Ignoring a warning from Red Horn, they meet with the group’s organizer, the New Englander Elisha Peabody, agree to the commission, and the idyll is ended.

Peabody’s interests are unashamedly commercial: he wants to locate an open, secure trade route, opening the way to Oregon once and for all. Boone and Caudill scoff at his vision, but come to grudging admiration of his persistence. Along with Peabody and two helpers, they set off into the mountains. The band, however, is trapped there when their horses and supplies are taken by Red Horn’s raiding party, Deakins is seriously wounded, and one of their number is killed. Isolated for weeks by heavy snows, they come close to starving (one survivor, in an eerie foreshadowing of the Donner Party disaster of 1846-47, is driven to cannibalism), but, through Boone’s efforts, find game enough to survive.

With the spring the surviving four return to home grounds, only to find that Teal Eye’s baby, a red-headed boy, has been born blind. Deakins, now recovered from his wound, goes on to Fort McKenzie, finds a post deteriorating as trade dwindles, and returns to Boone and Teal Eye. Boone, meanwhile, angered by drink, disappointment at the baby’s blindness, and oblique hints from various of the Indians, concludes from the child’s red hair that
Deakins is the father. When he finds Deakins and Teal Eye together in conversation, he kills Deakins in a moment of spontaneous fury.

The ironies of Part Four are intensified by the attitudes of the principal characters. For Boone, as the section opens, everything is good; he is comfortable, well-fed, and as nearly happy as he has ever has been. That beaver are disappearing is only incidental; there are still buffalo a-plenty to be had, and, so far as he is concerned, “it was as if time ran into itself and flowed over . . . so that yesterday and today were the same” (258). Deakins, on the other hand, conscious of the influx of settlers and the onset of winter, sees the autumnal landscape as weary and lifeless, its bare branches and bleak vistas instilling a nagging apprehension (264). He senses something is amiss, but cannot identify or articulate what it is. One ignores change, and the other is troubled by it, but how and why it occurs they do not understand.

That understanding becomes clearer when Elisha Peabody appears on the scene. An expansionist through and through, he speaks for the forces of progress, development, and manifest destiny. In his view, the failure of the Indian to capitalize upon the promise of the land is justification enough for the land’s occupation by the whites. The energy of the new nation is driving its borders outward, pushing ever further into lands that, to the white settlers’ eyes, are idle, uncultivated, and unexploited. Those lands exist for the use of all the people, and their inevitable assimilation is a matter of forthright destiny (278-79).

For all his expansionist zeal, however, Peabody is no callous exploiter. Educated and astute, he responds to the vastness and natural beauty of the region as strongly as Boone and Deakins; he simply brings to it a different set of values. Where they see a pristine realm ripe for the solitary hunter and trapper, Peabody sees social freedom and commercial success. Indeed, in his vision, the
freedom of the West prefigures social and economic freedom; there will be no slaves in Peabody’s West, but only the opportunity for each settler to establish a life built upon his or her own efforts (287). He understands that some things will be changed forever, but, in his larger vision, the benefits to come for the many will more than compensate for the losses to the few. He is a credible, responsible advocate for progress, and Guthrie gives him his full due.

A reasonable case can be made for either the mountain man’s position or Peabody’s, but the two together are inherently incompatible, and from that incompatibility comes the inevitable, tragic ending of the section. Back in camp after their gruelling winter, Boone and Deakins find only deterioration and disappointment. Teal Eye’s baby is blind, its eyes clouded and eroded by Boone’s gonorrhea, a social disease. Fort McKenzie is idle and run down, its only customers a pair of Indian women. Even the Piegan camp is corrupted, its trappers empty-handed and the camp itself stinking of rotting meat and human waste (328-35). Boone himself, already angry, is further maddened by Indian hints that red-headed Jim might be the baby’s father, and, characteristically, acts before thinking. With a single pistol shot he kills his best friend and irretrievably alienates his wife. The life he has known and loved is gone forever (340-42).

Part Five (Chapters 43-48), set in 1843, is a record of “Decline and Fall,” for it brings an end to the story of the mountain men. Boone returns to Kentucky, seeking vengeance on the lawmen who had tormented him so long ago. All are dead and their settlements are growing, giving him no satisfaction. Back at the home place, he amuses himself for a time yarning about the mountains with two young nephews. He is shaken to learn that red hair runs in the family. A young neighbor woman, Nancy Litsey, briefly attracts him, but her talk of marriage leads only to his raping her.
Boone then pulls up stakes to seek out Summers. He finds Summers settled in Missouri, aging, married, and a farmer. The two reminisce into the night, talking at last of their thoughtless enjoying of the mountains. Boone reveals that he has killed Deakins, then staggers drunkenly out into the darkness, seeking to return to a life that has disappeared forever.

Boone’s return to civilization is a mistake in more ways than one, for it dramatizes just how remote he is from conventional life and community even as it points up the expansion of that community and its steady encroachment into the wilderness. His mountain-man ways are in many respects only slightly removed from the animal; accustomed to life in the timeless mountains, where schedules are determined by natural forces, he cannot grasp the limitations imposed by structured, measured society. He is increasingly oppressed by its restrictions (346). Wherever he turns, whether in a town or in the forest, he finds himself surrounded by a stifling confinement (357). Too long accustomed to a life unfeathered by conventional standards of right and wrong, custom and propriety, he is more an outcast than ever.

The extent of Boone’s alienation is driven home during his conversation with Summers. Guthrie uses the occasion to emphasize the differences in the two men. Boone can think and talk only of the world as he has known it, rich in game and unfeathered freedom, where a man can do as he pleases. Summers, too, can recall the beauty and the freedom of the region, but he can also test it against his sense of himself and his present circumstances: “He felt himself wrench inside, wanting to be loose again and free . . . . [but] he was too old now . . . , and the old days were lost, anyhow” (384). Too wise and too experienced to succumb to Boone’s eternal present, he accepts the realities of time and change in a way that Boone cannot.

It is Summers who at last articulates the dismal truth: the destruction of their way of life was brought about by the mountain
men themselves. Boone has long striven to resist the realization that "a man couldn't get free from what he had been and done;" though the thought has surfaced from time to time, he has always been able to suppress it (295). Now, however, Summers spells out the culpability that both share: "We went to get away and to enj' youselves free and easy, but folks was bound to foller . . . . It's like we heired money and had to spend it, and now it's nigh gone" (385). The very freedom that the mountain man sought leads to its extinction; game vanishes, the Indian is put down, and settlement and security follow close behind. The eternal present that Boone so cherishes is only a cruel illusion; the consequences of unthinking action, once again, are irrevocable.

While each of the five sections of The Big Sky contributes a specific element or motif to the unfolding story, the five work together to let Guthrie address a larger concern. This, for him, is the real justification for the historical novel as a genre; he wants, he says, "to interpret American life to the American people," so they will have a fuller sense of the persons and efforts that have gone into the shaping of the American West (Breit, "Talk With A.B. Guthrie, Jr." 39). He expands upon this intention later, remarking that he believes it necessary to try to present the West as it was, and not as the romanticized West of pulp or slick fiction. Thus, he says, when he concluded that "justice hadn't been done to the fur hunter of the 1820's and the 1830's," he set out to show the mountain man as "the engaging, uncouth, admirable, odious, thoughtless, resourceful, loyal, sinful, smart, stupid, courageous character that he was and had to be" ("Historical Novel" 2-3).

As he develops that fully fleshed picture, he achieves a recreation of a time and place that anticipates the findings of the historian Howard Mumford Jones. Jones, writing in 1964, points out that pictorial artists (e.g., Alfred Jacob Miller, George Catlin, the later Albert Bierstadt, and others) and writers, in recording their re-
sponses to the American West, consistently revealed five qualities. These, he says, are astonishment, plenitude, vastness, incongruity, and melancholy. Permeating the visual and literary interpretations of the West in the mid- and later nineteenth century, the traits combined to make a "special impression upon American culture" (Jones 379-84). Guthrie, writing twenty years before Jones, not only verifies the accuracy of Jones's insights, but adds as well his own special expansion upon their significance.

The first cluster of elements, astonishment, plenitude, and vastness, appears in the responses of every significant character as he becomes aware of the presence and power of the natural world. Those responses, as the characters encounter a world seemingly untouched and unblemished by humanity's presence, uniformly speak of its astonishing size. Boone's first glimpse of the open prairie creates in him a sense of endless expanses, in which man shrinks almost to nothingness in contrast with the unconfined space. While the mountains, to Elisha Peabody, are of singular beauty, they also seem "made to giant's measure; it was as if proportion had run wild" (108, 284). The world of the West lies before them, mountain man and entrepreneur alike, like a land of dreams, its size and its beauty affecting them to the very depths of their being.

Complementing the size of the land is its richness, for the characters respond to the plenitude of the land as well as to its size and majesty. Zeb Calloway invokes all three of the traits, reminiscing to Boone and Summers about an Edenic West with "Every water full of beaver and a galore of buffler any ways a man looked, and no crampin' and crowdin'" (150). The same qualities draw Dick Summers away from civilization; though he has gainful work as a shopkeeper, his dreams of roaming, trapping, and camping make the shop walls more confining than ever (87). And, as late as 1843, Boone, speaking of the region around the upper
Teton, once more links richness and beauty: "It's fair country, Dick! Mountains to the west, and the valley and the plains rollin' away. And buffler! Christ, I seen buffler thick as gnats. I seen 'em chased over pishkuns and lyin' kickin' below by the hunderds" (384). Coarse and inarticulate though Boone may be, the size, richness, and beauty of the West affect him deeply, and his response gives readers a fuller glimpse of the mountain man's sense of time and place.

The fourth of Jones's qualities, incongruity, grows directly from the preceding characteristics of the land. The same qualities that generate astonishment serve to test as well as to inspire. There is inescapable contrast between the timelessness and magnitude of the land and the corresponding insignificance of mankind (Jones 383). In its majesty, the Western landscape poses a challenge to human values, forcing the individual to take stock of who and what he is. In that response is a measure of the person's character. The impact is particularly strong on those who come to the region with some measure of civilization, for their socially influenced values are suddenly put to an unexpected test. For Jourdonnais, leader of the Mandan crew, the region is "too big, too empty. It made the mind small and the heart tight and the belly drawn." Even Elisha Peabody, the most sophisticated of the characters, is moved by what he encounters, thinking that the Western milieu makes him "inclined to draw into himself, like a turtle . . . , sensing the awful power and glory of God all about" (156, 284-85). Thus, each in his own way reacts to the West's compelling juxtaposition of human aspirations and the physical world. In their responses is dramatic evidence of the all-pervading power of Western nature.

The last of Jones's characteristics, melancholy, is perhaps the most significant of the lot. It arises, Jones observes, from the same juxtaposition of Man and nature that creates incongruity; however,
the juxtaposition goes on to engender a sense of human transience in the face of nature. The force and magnitude of the natural world is such that it puts Man at a disadvantage, ultimately minimizing the individual and human aspirations (Jones 384). The result is an all-pervading, overwhelming sadness that feeds upon human perceptions and human memories, eager hopes and forlorn disappointments, visions of what might yet be and recognitions of what might have been. It is a quality that Guthrie explicitly acknowledges, and one that he goes on to turn to his own particular uses.

Guthrie introduces the theme of melancholy early in the novel, as Zeb Calloway querulously inveighs against the settlement forces that he sees as hemming in the mountain man’s freedom. He makes the strongest statements of the quality through the two most perceptive characters of the novel, Elisha Peabody and Dick Summers. In the case of Peabody, the sadness arises from a spontaneous reaction to a mountain sunset: “Melancholy ran through him, and ecstasy—a sad enchantment that made personal ambition seem almost unimportant. ‘Majestic!’ he said under his breath. ‘Majestic!’” (288). Compelling though his vision of wagons and railroads running through the mountain passes may be, finding himself alone among the landscape brings Peabody to a moment of deepest sadness. Man is nothing; the land is all.

Whereas Elisha Peabody figures in only nine of The Big Sky’s forty-eight chapters, Dick Summers is central to the novel and to Guthrie’s larger intentions. Nowhere is that centrality clearer than in the passages that relate Summers’s decision to leave the mountains and return to his native Missouri; here Guthrie makes clear the ways in which the juxtaposition of individual and nature instills melancholy, and here he goes on to prepare the reader for his own particular contribution to the place of Man in the West. Summers, unlike Boone, is comfortable with civilized ways. He
worked as a clerk before taking up the mountain man’s life, and still owns land in Missouri. And Summers, because he is older and more experienced than either Boone or Deakins, is more contemplative; what they see as new is commonplace for him, and the recognition of the change leads him at last to his decision to turn away.

Driving that decision are two melancholy revelations. One is his increasing consciousness of the passing of time: he is growing ever older, and memories of the past mingle with perceptions of the present to create a troubling, even confusing sense of place and self. He is as fond as ever of the goings-on at rendezvous, he thinks at one point, but “as a man got older he felt different about things in other ways . . . . Half the pleasure was in the remembering mind.” That remembering mind incorporates both present and past, linking vanished youth and youthful zeal with the more experienced present, so that one has a sense of “the first time and the place alone, and afterwards there was the place and the time and the man he used to be, all mixed up, one with the other” (194). Whereas Boone sees life as an eternal present, Summers is increasingly aware of time’s passing and the layering of knowledge and memories that accompanies the consciousness.

That passing has physical effects as well as emotional ones. Each encroaching day takes a little spring from his muscles, a little acuteness from his vision. These effects cannot be ignored; the mountain man’s very survival is dependent upon his senses, his physical prowess, and his adaptability to hardship; anything that diminishes those qualities jeopardizes his existence. Yet seeing time as a threat is difficult; as Summers himself reflects, “It was strange about time; it slipped under a man like quiet water, soft and unheeded but taking a part of him with every drop.” When he first became aware of time’s effects, his reaction was to fight them. Only later does he learn the futility of that reaction, and the ne-
cessity of accepting time’s reality (212). It is a notable recognition, and a telling one, for it sets Summers apart from Boone in melancholy and dramatic fashion.

Also present in determining Summers’s decision is a second revelation, the recognition that change is inevitable and irreversible. In a moment of epiphany he grasps that his very presence in the mountains has been the agency of change, and even as he was reveling in the mountain man’s freedom he was silently wearing it away; “A place,” he thinks to himself, “didn’t stand alone after a man had been there once . . . . A river wasn’t the same once a man had camped by it” (194). A place, an experience, an association: these things are new only once, and ever after they are different. The newness of the West has been the greatest part of its attraction for him. With that newness gone, the experience can never again be the same, and a failure to recognize the inexorability of change will bring only disappointment. The understanding is a necessary concomitant of maturity, and the wise person accepts its reality.

Guthrie uses the final encounter between Boone and Summers to clinch his point. As the two sit outside Summers’s farmhouse, they are approached by a man in search of mules or oxen. He has given in to the itch to head for Oregon, but is stranded in Independence, Missouri until he can find a team. His questions arouse the half-drunk Boone, who profanely warns him off as unfit for the trek and incapable of dealing with what he will find. Boone’s reaction is characteristic of his sense, even now: the land is his (i.e., the mountain man’s) by right of discovery, and those who come afterward are no better than interlopers. The last word, however, Guthrie gives to Summers: “Changes come on, regardless,” he says to his companion, and the four words speak volumes (391-92). Boone, like Zeb Calloway before him, wants to keep the land the way it was; Summers, however, accepts the impossibility of the
dream, and makes his peace with the melancholy realities that time, age, and inexorable change require.

In developing the thread of melancholy that pervades the closing sections of *The Big Sky*, Guthrie adds a dimension that is distinctively his own. This comes in his recognition that his story of the mountain West carries a theme that, while intimately linked to the circumstances of his story, transcends the specifics to become a universal. This universal, he says, is the discovery that

each man kills the thing he loves. No men ever did it more thoroughly or in a shorter time than the fur hunters of General Ashley and Jed Smith and Jim Bridger. For a short thirty years they knew their paradise—freedom, excitement, adventure, solitude, the cozy satisfaction of planting feet where white feet had not trod before. And then it was all over . . . . Nothing was left (“Historical Novel” 3).

The very qualities that draw the mountain men to the region lay the foundations for the destruction that follows. The outcome is as certain as the outcome of a tragic drama.

Whereas Boone Caudill comes only slowly and partially to an understanding of his role (under the influence of drink-induced remorse he acknowledges to Summers that he has killed Deakins and thereby has spoiled life for himself), it falls to the more reflective Summers to put the issue into words. “Everything we done it looks like we done against ourselves and couldn’t do different if we’d knowed . . . . [and] we ain’t seen the end of it yet, Boone, not to what the mountain man does against hisself” (385). Looking back, from the perspective of age, distance, and experience, he can see once more the seductive allure that the mountains and the mountain man’s life exercise, but he can also see the larger picture.

The mountain man, in his “mixture of hardihood, dissipation, heroism, brute action, innocence and sin,” came to the mountain
West to live a life that he could not find in civilization—a life of unfettered independence and individualism, in which the individual’s life and fortune were his to control (“Why Write About the West” 164). As he grew more and more intimately engaged with the region, his relationship became that of the inarticulate lover: time, place, nature, and person worked together to create an intimate relationship that provided all the fulfillment a person could ask. Yet the very nature of the relationship sowed the seeds of its destruction. Expansion of trapping devastated the game, alcohol and trade goods worked havoc upon the Indian, and the establishing of trails and trade routes opened the way for settlement. Fulfillment, not destruction, was the aim of the mountain man, but the one led to the other, and the progression was fatal.

The theme of killing the thing one loves, universal and profound as it is, leads Guthrie to another, still more profound realization. This, he says, is the discovery that all mankind does

the same thing, if not so spectacularly or completely, through some evil accident of existence. Not that we are unconscious or wanton. We kill the thing we love because we don’t have clean choices . . . . We never have the clean choices that our youth and innocence have led us to expect; and not having them, weaken or lose our attachments in the compromises we can’t avoid (“Historical Novel” 3).

No matter what the life, be it the primitivism of the mountain man or the sophistication of the modern urban dweller, it is infinitely more complex than it appears on the surface. The decisions it demands may seem simple, but their ramifications are far-reaching.

Guthrie once again uses Summers as his spokesperson, drawing upon the older man’s perspective and understanding to let him put the realization into words. And Summers does, in a single terse
sentence: “I don’t guess we could help it” (385). He says this thoughtfully, not pleadingly. He is stating a fact, not voicing a rationalization; he is acknowledging a reality, not grasping for a justification. Though he cannot spell out the full magnitude of the intermingling of cause and effect that he perceives, he understands it. He sees that the desires of the mountain man and the attractions of the region are inseparably mingled with mercantile forces and settlement pressure. The society that the mountain man leaves behind has its imperatives, too; they are no more to be denied than is the mountain man’s desire for freedom. One creates the other, the two working silently together toward an inexorable end.

Taken together, the two motifs give to The Big Sky a depth and a richness that few other Western novels have attained. They give clear evidence of the way in which the specifics of a time and place, in the hands of a skilled author, can be expanded to give meaning to life in another time and place. And they constitute, moreover, perhaps the single most consistent theme of all Guthrie’s fiction. As he continues in his later books his efforts to interpret the history of Western America for his readers, he comes to understand that ambiguous choices and inevitable (even unexpected) consequences are not limited to the decades of the 1830s and 1840s.

A.B. Guthrie has been fortunate in the hands of his critics. Although an extensive body of criticism and scholarship has developed around his work, he has so far escaped being subjected to the more extreme expressions of scholarly faddishness. Extant readings, whether admiring or critical, tend to be even-handed and substantial, often contributing notable insights into his work. The starting point for any study of his work should be biographical and bibliographical. Thomas W. Ford’s A.B. Guthrie (1981), a volume in the Twayne’s United States Authors Series, is the only book-
length study so far to appear; superseding Ford’s 1968 booklet in the Southwest Writers Series, it of course lacks any consideration of the novels appearing after 1979, but contains extensive biographical materials and an overview of the range of Guthrie’s writings. Shorter studies by Fred Erisman (1982) and Wayne Chatterton (1987) offer convenient access to other perspectives. Erisman’s “Coming of Age in Montana: The Legacy of A.B. Guthrie” (1993), though article length, is the only study to date to consider Guthrie’s entire body of work.

All of the preceding works include listings of Guthrie’s own writings along with selected secondary studies. Two bibliographies, however, by Richard W. Etulain (1969) and Martin Kich (1995), should also be consulted, for each lists critical materials not found in the other publications. Of particular use is Charles E. Hood, Jr.’s “The Man and the Book: Guthrie’s ‘The Big Sky’” (1971), for it draws upon interviews with several of Guthrie’s associates (as well as with Guthrie himself) in tracing the genesis of the novel, and goes on to include a number of the popular reviews that followed its publication in 1947.

Academic criticism of The Big Sky falls into two general categories: works dealing with the novel itself, and those relating it to various of the novels that followed it. Among those works examining only the novel, William W. Bevis’s Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West (1990) is the most extensive. Starting with his experiences in teaching the novel in the university classroom, Bevis goes on to argue that much of the novel’s significance lies in its combination of harsh realism and idealistic fantasy. In that combination, it embodies the various and often conflicting American attitudes toward the West.

Shorter studies can be further subdivided into two groups. One deals with the historical content and literary techniques of the novel. Don D. Walker’s “The Mountain Man as Literary Hero”
(1966) ruminates on the general records of the mountain men to suggest the larger backgrounds of Guthrie's story. Two studies by Richard H. Cracroft, "The Big Sky: A.B. Guthrie's Use of Historical Sources" (1971) and "'Half Froze for Mountain Doins': The Influence and Significance of George F. Ruxton's Life in the Far West" (1975), go further still, demonstrating the extent of Guthrie's historical research and the degree to which he assimilates the historical record into his novel.

Donald C. Stewart's "The Functions of Bird and Sky Imagery in Guthrie's The Big Sky" (1977) traces recurring images through the novel and considers their contributions toward developing theme and character. A brief note by Robert L. Gale (1980) suggests the presence of Christian imagery as Caudill, Deakins, and Elisha Peabody struggle to survive a mountain winter, while Paul T. Bryant, in "External Characterization in The Big Sky" (1996), extends Stewart's analysis to suggest the importance of naming devices and eye images in adding resonance to the story.

The second category of shorter studies uses the novel as a starting point for considering thematic issues raised by the book. One of the earliest is John Williams's "The 'Western': Definition of the Myth" (1961), which links The Big Sky with Walter Van Tilburg Clark's The Oxbow Incident and The Track of the Cat and Frederick Manfred's Lord Grizzly to argue that all three use western materials to transcend mere formula and incorporate deeply evocative mythic elements. Myth also figures in Louie W. Attebery's "The American West and the Archetypal Orphan" (1970) and Levi S. Peterson's "Tragedy and Western American Literature" (1972); each considers the manner in which Guthrie's novel addresses motifs (orphanhood, the cathartic tragedy) that are present in the literature of all times and places. And, finally, Jerry Allred in "The Magical West of A.B. Guthrie" (1973) meditates upon how The Big Sky introduces the mystical responses to
western landscape and history that become characteristic of all of Guthrie's fiction.

Four works take up questions raised by Guthrie's use of the fur trade era and the milieu of the mountain man. Richard Astro's "The Big Sky and the Limits of Wilderness Fiction" (1974) holds that the flaws inherent in Boone Caudill's makeup demonstrate corresponding flaws in the wilderness novel generally; if presented realistically, as Caudill is, the mountain man lacks the ennobling qualities essential to a tragic hero. Michael K. Simmons, in "Boone Caudill: The Failure of an American Primitive" (1984), extends this argument to contend that Caudill's limitations are those of mankind, and his failures, while those of the human condition, are sad rather than tragic.

Gerhard T. Alexis's "Wilderness Landscape and Human Values" (1984) links Guthrie with Henry David Thoreau and James Fenimore Cooper to argue that all three authors are particularly effective in portraying American responses to the natural world. David Stouck, in "The Art of the Mountain Man Novel" (1985), extends Williams's 1961 analysis, considering works by Frederick Manfred, Vardis Fisher, Harvey Fergusson, Howard O'Hagan, Forrester Blake, and Don Berry, along with The Big Sky, to argue that the mountain-man story offers distinctive opportunities to explore moral, psychological, and philosophical issues.

Thomas W. Ford's "A.B. Guthrie's Fair Land, Fair Land: A Requiem" (1988), while not strictly a study of The Big Sky, is still necessary to any consideration of the novel, for it examines the sequel that appeared forty years later, bringing closure to the stories of Boone Caudill and Dick Summers, linking it with Guthrie's evolving view of the West and his other major novels. The title of Robert Roripaugh's "Three Influential Novels of the American West" (1991) says everything that needs to be said; he ranks The Big Sky with Clark's The Oxbow Incident and Frank Waters's The
Man Who Killed the Deer as works demonstrating that Western materials, in the hands of the right authors, can remain "Western" yet stand as serious, important literature by any criterion.

Studies dealing with The Big Sky in relation to Guthrie's other novels are, not surprisingly, far-reaching and varied. The earliest is Walter Van Tilburg Clark's "Emigrants on the Oregon Trail" (1949), which speaks of the poetic qualities of the novel as it considers the newly published The Way West. In "When Settlers Began to Take Over" (1956), Clark continues his synthesis, speaking of the qualities inherent in the mountain man's existence and their relationship to the further settling of the West as it is developed in These Thousand Hills. Although Ernest E. Leisy gives only two paragraphs to The Big Sky and The Way West in The American Historical Novel (1950), his inclusion of them so early in Guthrie's fiction-writing career attests to the early regard accorded the author. Similarly, Vernon Young's "An American Dream and Its Parody" (1950) offers Guthrie and Clark as two authors who make fuller and more serious use of western materials than any other authors to date.

In "A.B. Guthrie, Jr., and the West" (1951), Dayton Kohler argues the value of The Big Sky and The Way West as dramatizations of history, a theme echoed by Orville Prescott in "The Art of Historical Fiction" (1952). Prescott, writing in The New York Times, places Guthrie and Conrad Richter at the forefront of contemporary authors who movingly use historical materials to speak to profoundly human concerns. Wallace Stegner's "Foreword" to the trade paperback edition of The Big Sky, although dated 1965, has been revised to make mention of The Last Valley and Fair Land, Fair Land; it talks of Boone Caudill as a more realistic descendant of Cooper's Leatherstocking, and goes on to offer a thoughtful and evocative rumination on the mountain West and the American scene. Guthrie's skill at historical recreation is also
at the heart of James K. Folsom's comments in *The American Western Novel* (1966), which rank *The Big Sky* above *The Way West* and *These Thousand Hills* for its melding of historical specificity and tragic vision.

Guthrie scholarship flourished during the decade of the 1970s, as academic attention was stimulated by the growing range of Western studies and by Guthrie's publishing of the Arfve trilogy. Don D. Walker's "The Primitivistic and the Historical in Guthrie's Fiction" (1971) uses Arfve in conjunction with *The Big Sky* to consider Guthrie's growing discomfort in dealing with more modern characters. In "Down to Earth: A.B. Guthrie's Quest for Moral and Historical Truth" (1971), Jackson K. Putnam considers Guthrie's protagonists, from Boone Caudill to Lat Evans, concluding that the sequence illustrates the coming of community to the West and its associated requirement of moral responsibility. The same year, David C. Stineback's "On History and Its Consequences: A.B. Guthrie's *These Thousand Hills*" suggests the latter novel is more realistic and less nostalgic than its predecessors.

Joe B. Hairston, in "Community in the West" (1973), looks further at Guthrie's evolving treatment of social responsibility in the novels, concluding that Guthrie sees active, informed participation in human society as the only recourse of the responsible citizen. Gilbert D. Coon's "A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s Tetralogy: An American Synthesis" (1976) finds in the first four novels evidence that Guthrie's resolution of the tension between the shortcomings of civilization and its advantages constitutes a distinctively American vision. In "A.B. Guthrie's Vanishing Paradise: An Essay on Historical Fiction" (1976), Donald C. Stewart draws on the same four books to suggest that Guthrie views the pristine West as Edenic, and the coming of civilization a tragic, if inevitable, destruction of that goodness.

Another slant on the destruction of the West appears in Fred Erisman's "Western Fiction as an Ecological Parable" (1978),
which uses Guthrie and other Western authors to argue that Western fiction’s necessary link to a specific locale helps it sensitize readers to environmental concerns. And, in the last study appearing in the 1970s, the Western historian Richard W. Etulain in “Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration” (1979) examines how Vardis Fisher, Guthrie, and Wallace Stegner, novelists all, have created works that are as valuable to historians as they are to literary scholars.

Although the major points of Thomas W. Ford’s “A.B. Guthrie, Jr.: A Sense of Place” (1980) are assimilated into his book-length study, the shorter piece nonetheless supplies a helpful consideration of Guthrie’s regionalism and the role of place-awareness in his works. John R. Milton, meanwhile, in The Novel of the American West (1980), examines the novels from The Big Sky through The Last Valley in tandem with Frederick Manfred’s five “Buckskin Man Tales”—Lord Grizzly, Conquering Horse, Riders of Judgment, Scarlet Plume, and King of Spades—to demonstrate how two authors, using different techniques, can use much the same materials to create two notably different bodies of work.

All in all, the critical responses to Guthrie, to The Big Sky, and to the other novels offer tangible evidence of the enduring prominence of the author and his work in the larger realm of Western studies. Critics are not blind to Guthrie’s flaws, but they respond to the growing skill with which he spells out his stories and to the evolving, poignant vision of time and place, gain and loss that comes to permeate his work. In their reflections on the characters, scenes, and themes that constitute Guthrie’s novels of the West, they acknowledge the role that he has played in shaping Americans’ consciousness of the region, its history, and its peoples.

In a New York Times Book Review interview published in 1949, shortly after the appearance of The Way West, Harvey Breit described Guthrie as being like his work—i.e., “entirely free of con-
trivance,” and characterized by “earnestness . . . , honesty, [and] depth” (39). The estimate is in many ways accurate, particularly when judged by the works that follow the first two novels. But it is also somewhat misleading, for it implies that author and work alike are as simple and unsophisticated as the stalwart characters about whom he writes. Indeed, when one closely examines The Big Sky, one finds a complexly crafted work of uncommon skill and artistry, in which plot, character, and theme work together to create a version of American history that lingers long after the book has been set aside.

Contributing to that enduring quality, first of all, is Guthrie's own sense of history, and of the contrasts created by the dramatic irony inherent in the time and events of which he writes. In literary history, the decades of the 1830s and 1840s are widely known as the “American Renaissance,” an era in which American thought and literature came into their own. This is, after all, the era of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose Nature appeared in 1836, and Essays, First Series in 1841. It is the era of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose Twice-Told Tales (1837) gave hints of the somber view of the American character that The Scarlet Letter of 1850 would expand. And it is the era of James Fenimore Cooper, whose The Deerslayer (1841) completed his Leatherstocking Series, one of the earliest literary works to acknowledge the mythic status of the frontiersman.

This is the part of the national history that most often appears in the history books, but Guthrie reminds us of the other part—the raw, dangerous life lived by the first penetrators of the West, the primitive settlements that in time were to become trading posts, then towns and cities, the experience of the natural world unsullied by human intervention. And, while Guthrie never makes explicit mention of the sophisticated East in The Big Sky (save for the passing character of Elisha Peabody), his own awareness of
that culture adds still more to his portrait of the mountain man's culture. This, readers are told, is how the mountain man lived; these are the values and attitudes he embraced. To the mountain man, the two thousand miles separating East from West were of astronomical magnitude; that Eastern world might as well not exist. Yet, even as readers see these elements, Guthrie keeps them conscious of the larger, emerging nation in the East, and conscious as well of what the future holds. For all the mountain man's sense of individualism and independence, he lives in an interdependent world, wherein actions have consequences and cause and effect cannot be separated.

Guthrie's own growing sense of that interdependence contributes to the thematic significance of The Big Sky. It allows him to write, as he intends, of the fur-trade era, in a way that will let him interpret it in the larger context of American life. He sets out initially not to romanticize the folk of the frontier, as Cooper and a host of others did and have done, but simply to present them as the flawed, fallible, and admirable human beings that they were. He wants, he says, to view them in a way that does them "justice not in the sense of idolatry but of truth, of proportion." And from that view he hopes to communicate a sense of "the dreams and deeds of the men and women who went before us" as they confront their realities so as better to equip the readers of the present to deal with the realities that they confront ("Historical Novel" 2, 8).

Those realities involve first of all an understanding of the natural world, and all that it can offer. From the breadth, beauty, and freedom of American nature can come a degree of vision and a sense of independence that no other stimulus can produce. But nature tests as well as inspires; it compels the individual to draw upon his or her inner resources, and those resources may be good, evil, or indifferent. The Big Sky shows Guthrie first grappling with this recognition. In his triad of Boone Caudill, Dick Summers, and
Jim Deakins he explores the varied ways in which mankind responds to the natural world; the self-contained, ruthless Boone, the contemplative, fun-loving Deakins, and the mature, experienced Summers give him three perspectives from which to view the world, and he makes the most of each. In later works, such as The Way West, These Thousand Hills, and Arfive, he continues his exploration, bringing individuals of different eras and different backgrounds into the American West. Some are exhilarated and others diminished, but none is untouched. The power of nature is irresistible.

That power, however, introduces a second reality, for the presence of humans implies the presence of civilization, and Guthrie is increasingly aware of the costs as well as the effects of settling the West. He acknowledges the positive attributes of settlement: it brings the attributes of civilization to the wilderness, and generates a sense of community that is a necessary counterpoint to radical individualism. Yet, because the world that he sees is interdependent, negative attributes go hand-in-hand with the positive; settlement has inevitable and irreversible effects upon the land and the people. Game and forests disappear. Air and water become polluted. Unfettered individualism is tempered by law and convention. The Big Sky shows the first stages of this process; the later works, nonfiction as well as fiction, show its inexorable consequences.

In these works, Guthrie makes clear his increasing concern at mankind’s influence upon the environment. These Thousand Hills records the coming of the big ranches and their destruction of habitat and predators. Arfive considers the emergence of towns and cities, and the ways in which their spread marks the world. And The Last Valley, moving into the later twentieth century, explores the implications of deliberately altering nature, redirecting rivers and damming their flow in the name of progress and devel-
opment. In their expression of Guthrie’s growing environmental concern, the later works build upon the seeds present in *The Big Sky*.

That concern leads to the third, and most compelling, reality—Guthrie’s understanding that cause and effect, actions and consequences cannot be escaped. The mountain man, for better or for worse, did not, and perhaps could not, understand the far-reaching consequences of his actions. Modern man can. Indeed, in Guthrie’s construction of the world, innocence is not necessarily good; as he demonstrates in *The Big Sky*, it can lead to egocentricity and irresponsibility. Knowledge, moreover, is not necessarily evil. The wisdom of Dick Summers foreshadows the more developed conclusions to come, as Guthrie increasingly calls for an informed understanding of the world. That understanding will involve a recognition of the world’s complexity and ambiguity; it will involve a tolerance toward the contrasts and conflicts that result. But, more than anything else, it will involve a considered, principled acceptance of life.

Cause and effect, difficult choices and resulting consequences, Guthrie observes, are a part of human life itself. They cannot be avoided, nor can they be escaped. The mountain man tried, to no avail, and the generations that follow him are subject to choices and consequences that, if anything, are more complex and far-reaching. Thus, the person who is to be a productive, responsible citizen, therefore, must understand the contradictions and compromises that life embodies and accept the uncertainty that inevitably follows. Choices must be made, and outcomes cannot always be accurately anticipated. The best the individual can do is to think through the likely consequences, take the steps that he or she is compelled to take, and endeavor to make the best of what results.

Dick Summers embodies much of this wisdom in embryonic form, but it remains for Guthrie’s later protagonists to bring it to its
fullest maturity. In individuals such as the Oregon settler Lije Evans (*The Way West*), the schoolmaster Benton Collingsworth, the rancher Mort Ewing (*Arfíve and The Last Valley*), or the journalist Ben Tate (*The Last Valley*) Guthrie presents persons aware of and a part of their times, individuals that he holds up as embodying the very best of human existence. Each confronts the necessities of life and each does what he can, as a mature, responsible person, to act in ways that serve his best interests and those of his larger society. They do not always succeed, but they at least knowledgeably make the effort—and in their striving is the characteristic that identifies Guthrie’s most memorably admirable individuals.

*The Big Sky* has much to recommend it. It is a novel grounded in history and rich in event, yet it is equally a novel of character and ideas. As a piece of historical fiction it succeeds in its efforts to recreate the atmosphere of the fur-trade era and the way of life of the mountain man. Yet as a novel, it does far more. It places the fur traders and the mountain men within the larger continuum of human existence. It uses its specific characters and its events to speak of universals: the hopes and desires that drive mankind, the endeavors to which the race resorts to achieve those hopes, and the consequences that come as a result of those efforts. It speaks of a limited, specific time and place, yet it effectively builds upon those specifics to convey the universal concerns that lie them. In “The American Scholar” of 1837, Emerson calls for an American literature that would use American materials to show that “one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench” (“American Scholar” 68). Throughout his novels of the American West, A.B. Guthrie more than answers Emerson’s challenge. *The Big Sky* is where he begins.
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