

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

WILLIAM JOSEPH SNELLING'S WESTERN NARRATIVES

When shortly after his father's death in 1828 William Joseph Snelling left Minnesota and returned to Boston, he embarked almost immediately on a journalistic career which lasted until his own death some twenty years later. Perhaps the peak of his work as a newspaperman was reached in 1847, when he was chosen editor of the *Boston Herald*, an influential metropolitan daily, but in the preceding years he had contributed to many literary periodicals and undoubtedly produced a great deal of writing which is still buried in obscure annuals and gift books. Today Snelling is best known as the author of *Tales of the Northwest*¹ and of the literary satire entitled *Truth; A New Year's Gift for Scribblers*, works at that time unique in their respective genres; but his name remains associated with several articles scattered throughout various magazines. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss that part of Snelling's uncollected work which is pertinent to the Northwest.

One of Snelling's early chores was a species of literary hack work intended for juveniles, much as Hawthorne wrote historical summaries for Peter Parley, who was the publisher, S. G. Goodrich. Under the pseudonym of Solomon Bell, "Late Keeper of the Traveller's Library, Province-House Court, Boston," Snelling wrote a number of travel digests dealing with the adventures of explorers in the West, in Africa, and in the far North.² These books were couched

¹ This work, which was reprinted recently with an introduction by Mr. Flanagan, is reviewed *post*, p. 450-452. *Ed.*

² *Tales of Travel in Central Africa* (Boston, 1830); *Tales of Travel in the North of Europe* (Boston, 1831); *Tales of Travel West of the*

in the simplest of styles and were little more than factual recountings of the exploits of celebrated travelers. Typical is the volume entitled *Tales of Travel West of the Mississippi*, in which Snelling addressed his preface "To My Little Readers" and proceeded to describe the terrain and the animals of the West: the prairies, a prairie fire, buffalo, elk, beaver, and the like. Then followed a bare narrative of the Lewis and Clark expedition, an account of Major Long's journey to the head of the Arkansas River, and an epitome of John Jewitt's captivity among the Indians of Puget Sound. For the most part Snelling employed the simplest chronological method; he made no attempt to embroider the incidents and was content to write in the lucid, colorless style which was once thought suitable to children. Of the vivid personality of the real author there is no trace. He had not seen the regions he described and he could only trust the explorers' words.

A little later Snelling began his association with Joseph Buckingham, editor of the *New-England Magazine*, and became a more or less regular contributor to that periodical. Among the works that may be ascribed to his pen are two short stories which are comparable in theme and excellence to those which appeared in *Tales of the Northwest*. Although they are unsigned, there is conclusive evidence that they came from Snelling's hand. He was listed by the editor himself as one of the chief contributors;³ signed work by him does appear in several volumes of the *New-England Magazine*; there was no other person on the staff, and perhaps none in New England, who had at once the experience and the skill necessary to write such sketches of aboriginal life; and, finally, the resemblance between these stories and the previously published ones is too close to be accidental.

Mississippi (Boston, 1831); *Polar Regions of the Western Continent Explored* (Boston, 1831).

³ Joseph T. Buckingham, *Personal Memoirs and Recollections of Editorial Life*, 2:76 (Boston, 1852).

"The Fortunes of Mendokaycheenah" is the story of a Sioux brave who offered himself as a vicarious victim to white man's justice.⁴ The original offender had killed a *voyageur* near the mouth of the St. Croix and had then made good his escape. The tribe, after admitting complicity in the offense, had delivered the criminal to the traders below Fort Snelling; but these men had refused to try him and had shipped him down the river to Prairie du Chien. Mendokaycheenah was in charge of the native escort of the prisoner. One night en route to the Wisconsin fort the prisoner escaped, and Mendokaycheenah, panic-stricken over his negligence, offered himself to the commandant at Prairie du Chien to appease white vengeance. The offer, of course, was refused, but Mendokaycheenah disdained to accept his liberty and continued eastward, arguing his right to die before the officers at Michilimackinac and Detroit. Finally he was brought before Sir William Johnson, was sent to Canada, and was there exonerated to his own satisfaction by the governor-general. Upon returning to his people, Mendokaycheenah was honored and revered; later he died in an Indian raid while making a futile defense of goods which traders had left under his protection.

The second story, "Shoankah Shahpah," recounts the adventures of an ill-favored Sioux brave (his name in translation means Dirty Dog) who was scorned and practically ostracized by his own tribe because of his appearance.⁵ Even his mother could hardly stand his sight, for,

Shoankah Shahpah came into the world halting; that is, one of his legs was shorter than the other. His eyes were of a delicate gooseberry green; he squinted; his nose was too small, his mouth too large, and his neck too short. Besides, his back approximated very nearly to a hump. In short, he was the ugliest boy ever seen.

Yet with this unprepossessing exterior Shoankah Shahpah was furnished with a quick, perceptive mind. And finally,

⁴*New-England Magazine*, 3:290-296 (October, 1832).

⁵*New-England Magazine*, 4:187-195 (March, 1833).

when the indignities heaped upon him had become too much to endure, he left his home and entered the encampment of the Sandy Lake Chippewa, prepared to die. But there he was welcomed, adopted into the tribe, and given all the privileges of the warrior. One day the Kahpozhahs, his own band, assaulted the Chippewa and butchered Shoankah Shahpah's wife and daughter. Enraged and hungry for vengeance, the exile led a Chippewa war party to Nicollet Island and there enticed the Kahpozhahs to pursue him in canoes over the Falls of St. Anthony. He himself perished, wrestling with his brother as they hurtled over the cataract. Legend, said the author, claimed that their cries could still be heard in the death plunge, their spirits still seen.

Another interesting Indian tale from Snelling's pen, "Te Zahpahtah, A Sketch from Indian History," appeared in *The Token*.⁶ In this story, the action of which takes place about 1795 in the horseshoe formed by the confluence of the Minnesota and Blue Earth rivers, the trader Henri La Roque arrived at the wigwams of Te Zahpahtah (the Five Lodges) to bargain for furs. He had brought with him two barrels of alcohol, one of which he proposed to give to his customers. Over the protests of Chief Chundopah, who envisaged bloodshed, the proposal was accepted and trading commenced. The women had taken the usual precautions of hiding all the weapons, but had neglected to cache the bows and arrows. Thus, when the first merriment and boisterousness had worn off and the savages desired more of the "minnee wawkon" (supernatural water) at any price, quarrels began, one of the braves was killed by a drunken companion, and the war whoop sounded to the peril of the whole community. Chief Chundopah attempted valiantly to restore order and eventually succeeded, at the cost of his own life. When the savages finally regained their senses, they

⁶ *The Token*, 143-151 (Boston, 1831).

resolved to make the trader suffer. But La Roque, a *bois brulé* and hence familiar with Indian custom, forestalled their revenge. Stripping himself and painting himself black, he suddenly descended the river into the encampment and placed himself at the mercy of the warriors. They, unwilling to hurt an unarmed person, washed off the black paint and made peace with the trader. La Roque immediately offered presents to propitiate the dead. Peace ensued, and when La Roque himself passed away his children succeeded him as Indian traders.

In one other tale did Snelling make artistic use of his Northwest experience, the amusing story entitled "A Night in the Woods."⁷ Although shorn of its details it loses its chief effect and although Snelling undoubtedly derived the substance from some fantastic legend rather than from fact, its use of frontier materials is interesting and authentic. The argument concerns a buffalo hunter who went after his prey in midwinter and killed an old bull, but only after he had chased the animal to the middle of a pond and had lost his gun in the process. Thus the hunter was left defenseless some twenty miles from any shelter in zero weather. Eventually he bethought himself of skinning his prey and wrapping himself in the hide, hair inward. This done, he fell asleep. The rest of the tale concerns his dreams and the strange creatures who inhabited them: a whole herd of buffalo prancing around him led by the old bull minus his epidermis, howling and cavorting wolves, a raven with a great beak, and multitudes of terpsichorean fleas. About the time the sleeper awoke, a young Indian appeared on the scene and helped to extricate him from his protective wrapping. But the hunter was more than puzzled to learn upon awakening that wolves had eaten the carcass of the slain animal while he slept and that a herd of buffalo had left their imprints on the snow around him.

⁷ *The Boston Book*, 40-48 (Boston, 1836).

These stories are remarkable for their vigor and economy of style. As a narrator Snelling appears at his best in "Te Zahpahtah," the simple realism of which is heightened by the spareness of the language. Restraint was not always a virtue with him and he was occasionally unable to reject emotional and didactic elements which weakened the narrative fiber. But in the four tales here summarized the reader is impressed by the basic relevancy of the details—even when La Roque is regaled with a singed and boiled dog, wild rice, and raccoon tallow—and the harmony between style and theme. Snelling knew his background and sketched it deftly. These tales also prove that he possessed one quality which his earlier work conspicuously lacks: a sense of humor. No one could have written that extravaganza called "A Night in the Woods" without a feeling for comic effect. The protean changes of the figures in the dream, the buffalo becoming wolves and the raven's beak being transformed into an oboe to which the ensemble dance, and finally the vindictive buffalo tossing their collective fleas on the man who had massacred their leader—this is the grand stuff of burlesque. Snelling revealed in *Truth* that his sense of irony was rich and sharp. He apparently could also relish slapstick comedy.

In a few other sketches and articles Snelling evinced his interest in the Northwest, whether it was in emigration toward the Pacific coast or in fragments transliterated from his own life.⁸ Invariably he wrote honestly, directly, force-

⁸ See, for example, an article entitled "Oregon Territory" and signed W. J. S., in the *New-England Magazine*, 2:123-132 (February, 1832); "Running the Gantlet," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:439-456 (1872); and "Early Days at Prairie du Chien, and the Winnebago Outbreak of 1827," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 5:123-153 (1907). In the *New-England Magazine* there are at least two other items which are probably Snelling's—"Rare Beasts," 2:210-217, and "A Sketch of Indian Character," 3:462-470 (March, December, 1832). A significant sentence in the first article reads as follows "We had one [prairie wolf] at Lac Au Travers, that we attempted to harness with the dogs." It is perhaps needless to remark that Snelling, in his days as a trapper and trader, resided near Lake Traverse.

fully, with little of the prolixity and sentimentalism of the contemporary littérateur. It may be that other work of his creation will yet be exhumed before the files of the magazines in which it is concealed crumble to dust. But even if such were not the case, William Joseph Snelling has left enough reputable work behind him to justify his being called the first literary interpreter of the Northwest.

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