

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

John Filson (1734-1820)

The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone

Although written by John Filson (c. 1747-88) and first published as an appendix to Filson's *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* (1784), "The Adventures of Col. Daniel boon" (sic) is an autobiography in that it is based on stories Boone told to Filson during Filson's two years in Kentucky as a surveyor and land speculator. Furthering the idea that it is Boone's own story, Filson has Boone narrate it in the first person. With the rest of his *Kentucke* being as Richard Slotkin has said, "an elaborate real-estate promotion brochure designed to sell farm lands...to easterners and Europeans, "Filson needed the direct testimony of an actual inhabitant. Even more important, Slotkin argues, Filson needed a heroic figure who would "portray the promise of the frontier" while also not "glossing over the obviously perilous realities of the pioneer's situation."¹ In 1784, tight after the Revolution's many Indian attacks there, Kentucky was known as "the Dark and Bloody Ground"—a name that discouraged prospective settlers.

Boone, therefore, emerges as the "instrument ordained to settle the wilderness." With his references to "Providence" and "our Creator," he does indeed imply that he is on a divine, historic mission. With his almost emotionless chronicle of his travels and Indian fights, he also seems more like an "instrument" than a man. And yet behind the few and formulaic descriptions of feeling ("sorrows and sufferings vanish," "a long and fatiguing March"), readers can sense a person with vision and human concern, not just cold discipline. He is very fond of elegant, poetic diction for describing landscape, and this plays into his vision of Kentucky as a future site of great cities and fertile farms. He also respects his Indian enemies, even though sometimes calling them "barbarous savages." At moments such as his long captivity, he shows them coming to like and respect him. What keeps him from being more responsive and friendly, what makes him tricky and cautious, is his always underlying purpose "to settle the wilderness."

These complexities and tensions in Boone's character which the "Adventures" are too short to work out and resolve almost begged later novelists, playwrights, biographers, and mythologizers to study him, not just celebrate him. And they did, giving us as many later images of Boone as there are images of the frontier. He is heroic, but he is cold-blooded; he is folksy and illiterate, or he is educated and ambitious. He is tragic, jolly; sincere, ironic; handsome, scarred; young, old; sociable, solitary. A longer, more self-scrutinizing kind of autobiography might not have left so many questions open, so much room for the imagination to work and thus for myth-making. But one thing there is no doubt about is that being published right at the end of the Revolution and the beginning of trans-Appalachian settlement, "The Adventures of Daniel Boone" made Boone the personification of American national expansion.

The modern edition of Filson's *Kentucke* is a facsimile edited, with notes, by W.R. Jillson (Louisville: Standard Printing Co., 1930). The most recent biography of Boone is by John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York: Holt, 1992).

1. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973), p. 268.

Reading

John Filson: The First Historian of Kentucky – His Life and Writings
<http://archive.org/stream/johnfilsonfirsth00durr#page/n7/mode/2up>