

Comment by the Editor

THE FORTUNES OF A BOOK

Jonathan Carver's book, *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, was published in London in 1778. It was durably bound in leather and well printed on good paper with quaint type in which the letter s resembled an f, according to the style of that time. The first one hundred and sixty-five pages contained "A Journal of the Travels", while a treatise "Of the Origin, Manners, Customs, Religion, and Language of the Indians" filled the last two-thirds of the volume. In an extensive introduction, the author gave his reasons for exploring the Upper Mississippi Valley and for publishing his observations.

Probably no book of American authorship in the eighteenth century was more widely read than the *Travels* of Jonathan Carver. Two new editions were published in 1779 and the third London edition appeared in 1781. A German translation had been printed in 1780 and later the book was issued in French and Dutch. Meanwhile several American publishers had reprinted the volume. More than thirty editions have been discovered.

Aside from the popularity derived from the perennial fascination of travel, whether beyond the

Great Lakes or in the South Seas, Carver's book possessed literary merit that made it a veritable oasis in the dreary waste of eighteenth century American literature. Moses Coit Tyler described it as "noble and fascinating", having the "charm of a sincere, powerful, and gentle personality — the charm of novel and significant facts, of noble ideas, of humane sentiments, all uttered in English well-ordered and pure." It is said that Carver's poetical report of the harangue of a Nadowessian chief over the dead body of a warrior inspired Schiller to write the dirge, "Nadowessiers Todtenlied".

For many years the *Travels* were accepted as an important contribution to the early history of the Northwest, being the experiences of the first English-speaking traveller west of the Mississippi. But the time came when Captain Jonathan Carver began to be discredited. Men like Henry R. Schoolcraft, who spent years among the Indians, challenged Carver's description of their customs; and later explorers complained that his geographical observations were vague and inaccurate. Finally, in 1906, the great historical critic, E. G. Bourne, showed by means of parallel columns that Carver had apparently made liberal use of the writings of various French travellers in North America, especially in his descriptions of Indian life. This fact, together with uncertainty surrounding Carver's identity and some derogatory gossip by contemporary critics about his character, education, and

military service, led historians to believe that the second part of the *Travels* was plagiarized and that the first part was not the authentic journal it purported to be. Moreover, the assumption that Carver, being an unlettered shoemaker, had hired someone in London to write the book gained general acceptance, and the suspicion grew that his trip to the West was only the figment of a fertile imagination.

But recently the genealogists have undertaken to rescue Captain Carver's reputation. They have found that he came of a prominent and wealthy family in Connecticut, that he served with some distinction as a captain in the French and Indian War, and that he was a man of unusual intelligence as evidenced by the fact that he was a cartographer of recognized skill. Milo M. Quaife has presented conclusive evidence that Carver went West as third in command of Major Robert Rogers's expedition to Oregon, and that his geographical observations while on that exploration tally substantially with the facts.

There seems to be very little room for doubt that the journal of Captain Jonathan Carver of Connecticut is authentic and that he was quite capable of writing his own book, albeit in describing Indian life he used the reports of preceding travellers too freely, as many another has done before and since. Although he died in London on the verge of starvation he need not be pauperized in reputation also, nor should his book be denied the importance to which it is justly entitled.

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