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Carla Kelly, ed. On the Upper Missouri: The Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 1851-1852

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Book Reviews

Carla Kelly, ed. *On the Upper Missouri: The Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 1851-1852* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005). Paperback \$24.95.

Rudolph Friederich Kurz (January 8, 1818-October 16, 1871) was born in Langnau im Emmental located in the Bern Canton of Switzerland. His talents as an artist were cultivated from an early age, including an extended period of study in Paris where he met the brilliant scholar and explorer, Baron Alexander von Humboldt, and the renowned artist Karl Bodmer. On retrospect, no great effort is required to understand the influence of these early foundations on Kurz's deep attraction for the sublime aspects of the American frontier. Of note is the influence of the American wilderness on the minds and imaginations of fascinated observers worldwide at the time.

Steeped in the classical traditions of European art and culture, and nurtured in the pastoral beauty of the Swiss alpine countryside, Kurz succeeded in fulfilling his boyhood dream of immigrating to America to document, in artistic representation, the lives of the First Peoples of North America. What began as an idyllic conceptualization of the American frontier matured into a sensitive and thoughtful record of a complex set of relationships that defined the fractious Midwest as a nexus of North American international trade in the mid-Nineteenth Century.

Kurz spent six years in America (1846-1852), during which time he kept a journal documenting his impressions of the Indians, traders, settlers, and wildlife of the region known as the Upper Missouri. He supported himself in a variety of ventures within a thriving network of trade established by the American Fur Company (1823-1865). Kurz's journal and pictorial sketches of frontier life fill an important niche within the canon of commentary on nineteenth century Americana, including the works of Hiram Martin Chittenden, the collected works of LeRoy R. Hafen, John Ewers, Preston Holder, Charles Lapenteur, Edwin Thompson Denig, Francis Chardon, and Ray Mattison. *On the Upper Missouri: The Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 1851-*

1852 edited by Carla Kelly, is a skillful synthesis and retranslation of Kurz's original manuscript. Kurz wrote in his native German language. His notes remained with his personal collection in Bern, Switzerland until their posthumous translation and publication in the Smithsonian Institution Bureau of *American Ethnology Bulletin* 115 in 1937.

Carla Kelly's expertise as an employee of the Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site animated her effort to provide a legitimate balance of updated material that would provide laymen and scholars alike a firsthand immersion into the world of the nineteenth century fur trader. Kurz's journal, no longer in print, is an exceptional account of the American frontier. This abridged version creates a striking portrait of a young man and European artist happily engaged in the commercial affairs of the upper Midwest. Kurz's brief tenure as a clerk at Fort Berthold and Fort Union (1851-1852) gave him precious access to learn about and to record the lives and affairs of the Indian cultures that he admired. Perhaps more important in the eyes of current scholars are Kurz's notes about the structure and economy of the fur trade and the different levels of craftsmen employed in the network. The bourgeois, traders, clerks, interpreters, hunters, steamboat crews, skilled craftsmen, engagés and voyageurs created working communities striking for their heterogeneity and cultural diversity. In his narrative Kurz commented on the bewildering number of languages that were spoken on the frontier lands populated by Indian natives, Americans, Canadians, and Europeans. Courtesy, tact, and a shrewd respect for the trader's bargain, driven by a universal delight in the trinkets of global exchange, created a fusion of internal markets that transformed the lives of its participants despite the contradictions of assumed cultural inequality and disenfranchisement.

While this abridged version of Kurz's journal is ideal for use in undergraduate programs of study, scholars interested in transatlantic comparative narratives will find that the earlier, fuller translation of Kurz's journal, as translated by Myrtis Jarrell and edited by J. N. B. Hewitt, strikes a rich and introspective counterpoint from which to interpret the American frontier just prior to the Civil War.

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