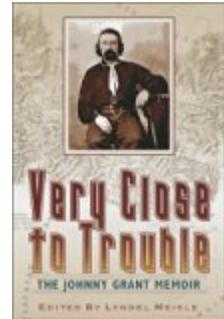


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lyndel Meikle, ed. *Very Close to Trouble: The Johnny Grant Memoir*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1996. xii + 223 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87422-139-8; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87422-140-4.

Reviewed by Will Bagley (The Prairie Dog Press, Salt Lake City)
Published on H-West (February, 1999)



At age 76, frontiersman John Francis Grant dictated a memoir to the last of his many wives, Clothild Bruneau. Born at a Hudson's Bay Company post in Edmonton in 1831, Grant lost his mother at eighteen months and was raised by relatives in Quebec until at age sixteen he joined his father, HBC Chief Trader Richard Grant, at Fort Hall in the Snake Country, near today's Pocatello. For twenty years Grant participated in the transformation of the American West, until he left Montana Territory to raise his children in the more-settled Red River country of Manitoba. Clothild did her best "to relate the incidents of my husband's life...in plain language, but it will be the truth." To his wife, the memoir shared a common purpose with many similar western narratives: it was "a warning against the indiscretions of youth, which you will see in this book have been the cause of many failures (p. 3)." Grant himself admitted his old friends might be "surprised to find little about the escapades and errors of my younger days...for I do not intend to reveal all of my private life here" (p. 4), but what he created is a wonderfully human narrative and a straightforward portrait of the West as he saw it. In Grant's memoir, as in other great narratives such as Osborne Russell's *Journal of a Trapper*, Don Maguire's *Gila Monsters and Red-Eyed Rattlesnakes*, and Dame Shirley Clappe's *Letters from the California Mines*, the West finds its voice.

The portions of Grant's narrative published here cover the twenty years from his arrival at Fort Hall in 1847 to his return to Canada in 1867. Grant visited Great Salt Lake City in 1847, Fort Vancouver in 1849, and, after an argument with his father, struck out on his own, "feeling as though I had nothing to hope for on earth (p. 26)." He took up the free trapper's life, married the first of several Indian wives, and began trading with Indians in

the winter and overland emigrants in the summer at Soda Springs. "I once thought I would always live with the Indians. I would not have exchanged my leather lodge for the finest residence in any city (p. 32)."

Grant served as a guide for military expeditions and Frederick West Lander's trail survey, provided supplies (reluctantly) to A. S. Johnston's Army of Utah, and built one of the first log houses in Montana at today's Garrison. He provided horses for Montana's vigilantes, "who undertook to rid the country of bad men, and they certainly did so" – much more effectively than punitive government expeditions sent out "to kill and arrest old men and old squaws (p. 110)." Grant thought outlaw Sheriff Henry Plummer "was at heart a miserable coward (p. 103)." His fresh perspective on the Mormons (including his appreciative comments on "Mormon girls" and his sad experiences in the gambling dens of Salt Lake) recalled Brigham Young as "a very pleasant man to talk to, a stout man, light haired, fair of skin and freckled and rather plain looking." When asked to join the Saints, Grant recalled, "I did not object to the wives, but I objected to giving the tenth of my horses to the church (p. 7)."

Richard Grant is one of the great unappreciated figures of the early West, a key figure in the transition from the late fur trade to the early overland migration. As a historian, the information in his son's memoir is intriguing, but as a son and father, I found Johnny Grant's account of his contentious relationship with his father extraordinarily moving. Richard Grant had great affection for his children and a very limited ability to show it. Yet he made every effort to be a good father, and when it became "entirely impossible for me to maintain my Children any longer in Canada," he sent his son Richard back

to Canada “to bring up his Sister and Brother John.” He wrote, “I cannot as a Father allow my Children to be lost or starve in Canada, if it should cost me the last farthing I have in this world” [Richard Grant to Sir George Simpson, 13 August 1846, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba]. When his youngest son arrived at Fort Hall, having been “brought up by a very indulgent old grandmother,” the veteran trader “turned me loose at seventeen to live among the Indians.” The son was equally unable to express his filial emotions. Recalling his father’s death, Johnny Grant wrote, “he did not leave me one cent, not even the lone shilling that he used to threaten me with.” But “When he called me his son, I was ready to do anything for him. Sometimes when he was in a very good humor, he would say I was the one he loved the best, but he had an odd way of expressing it.” Typically, Johnny Grant assumed blame for this rocky relationship. “I have often thought since, if I had been more patient with him, we might have got along better, but I was young and thoughtless (p. 83-89).”

Grant’s relations with his several Indian wives—Meikle estimates that in the late 1850s he was simultaneously married to three or more women—tell much about how closely the first whites in the Rocky Mountain West adapted to native culture. His moving account of the death of Quarra, sister of the noted Lemhi leader Tendoy, speaks volumes:

“[My clerk] gave the sad news of my wife’s death. She had died four months before, leaving a boy live months old. I was deeply affected as I had lost a good wife. She was a thorough Indian woman and not handsome, but a better and more clever woman could not be found, without education. She was a good mother, industrious and gay in her moods and friendly with every one regardless of nationality or color. She could speak several Indian languages as well as English and French. She was expert with her needle too and could ride horses that many could not. My little Quarra, when I heard of her death my first thought was the great loss our children sustained. She had been such a good mother. My own loss I realized more and more as time passed.”

“With a sad heart I went to my home and to my motherless children. I arrived at night, but the baby’s aunt had him. I went for him, but he did not want to come to me. After a few days he cried when I would leave him. I was told that Quarra had said she was resigned to meet death, but she would have liked to see me there when she breathed her last. Her last request before she died was to see her children. She took the baby in her arms

and pressed him to her heart until he cried. She did not want to let him go, her children were so dear to her.”

Documentary chronicles provide historians with the raw materials of history, and biographical narratives such as Meikle’s let us look at the West through the eyes of its inhabitants. Since these narratives are often as complex as the lives they recount, personal histories of the frontier routinely cover such a sweeping sample of subject matter that they offer a considerable challenge to a scholar. Grant’s narrative provides great detail on frontier business and freighting (Grant’s advice: “Trust no one, in business dealings” (p. 128), the fur trade, white-Indian relations, military operations, mining, vigilantism, stock raising, wildlife, firearms, and river travel. His account of leading a wagon party from Montana to Manitoba in 1867 demonstrates that overland travel was not confined to the Oregon-California Trail. Lyndel Meikle’s editing work is consistently excellent—precise, enlightening, and accurate.

I have only a few quibbles with the book. The road described as “sliding” (p. 63) was more likely “sidling”—sloping. I suspect the press asked Meikle to cut the first eight chapters of the memoir concerning Grant’s early life in Canada and his 1847 overland trip with A. M. A. Blanchet, later Bishop of Walla Walla. The material is capably summarized in the introduction, but there are so few 1847 trail narratives that Grant’s account would be interesting to those who appreciate such material. This omission means that if the Canadian section of Grant’s memoir is eventually issued, the initial material will be left an unpublished orphan. (Grant’s Canada memoir describes the Metis revolt of Louis Riel, and I can only second Meikle’s hope that it will eventually be published—“the sooner the better!”)

As Lyndel Meikle began investigating Grant’s memoir, she “could not believe such a wonderful narrative had not been published.” As she learned during more than ten years research, “there is buried historical treasure in attics and archives all across the continent [p. x].” It strikes me as odd that the worthwhile work of editing and annotating primary sources finds so little support in the academic community, but such inattention offers great opportunities to scholars like Meikle. In her edition of Johnny Grant’s memoir, she has unearthed a wonderful jewel and crafted for it a superb setting.

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Citation: Will Bagley. Review of Meikle, Lyndel, ed., *Very Close to Trouble: The Johnny Grant Memoir*. H-West, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

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