Reviews of Two Books on The Life of John Dunn Hunter

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Review by Richard T. Farrell of Hunter's Memoirs

Memoirs of a Captivity among the Indians of North America by John Dunn Hunter; Richard Drinnon
Review by: Richard T. Farrell
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Memoirs of a Captivity Among the Indians of North America, by John Dunn Hunter. Edited by Richard Drinnon. New York: Schocken Books, 1973. 252 pages. $7.95, cloth.

John Dunn Hunter was taken prisoner by the Kickapoo Indians just prior to the turn of the nineteenth century. He was apparently an infant orphan at the time of his capture. For the next twenty years he lived at various times with the Pawnee, Kansas, and Osage Indians, returning to civilization in 1816. After he learned to read and write, he published an account of his experiences among these tribes. Hunter's book caused a major sensation in both the United States and England, not because captivity chronicles were uncommon, but because his narrative presented a most favorable impression of Indian life and society.

Although frequently romantic in tone, Hunter's account is generally sober and lacking in the usual blood, gore, and sensationalism common to this genre. The first part of the book is a narrative of Hunter's personal experiences and, when appropriate, brief commentaries on aspects of Indian culture. Of particular interest are his observations on the hardships Indians endured, his description of the personal interactions among and within various tribes, and his comments on the impact of the white man's civilization on Indians. This is followed by a more generalized series of brief essays on the "manners and customs of several Indian Tribes located west of Mississippi." He discusses religion, courtship, family life, crime and punishment, governmental structure, martial character, and medical procedures. Collectively, these commentaries provide one of the earliest descriptions of nineteenth century Indian life and have proved to be most useful to ethnologists and historians.

This edition concludes with Hunter's "Reflections" on the conditions of Indians and an outlined "Plan to Ameliorate the Circumstance of the Indians of North America." At the time his proposals appeared quite radical, since they were designed for "the preservation of a high-minded, noble race of the human family, who have been debased, cheated, and slandered, from a destruction which inevitably awaits them, unless some kind arm be imposed to arrest the causes which are hurrying them to oblivion." More important, Hunter was willing to go beyond simply proselytizing; he was murdered in 1827 while trying to establish a buffer colony between the United States and Mexico for displaced Indian tribes.

This book is a significant contribution to the primary materials available to students and scholars in American Indian history.

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Review by Thomas F. Andrews of White Savage

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White Savage: The Case of John Dunn Hunter
Thomas F. Andrews

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Drinnon, Richard
White Savage: The Case of John Dunn Hunter
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From Hunter's captivity narrative, a century and a half ago, to the recently published *Memoirs of Chief Red Fox* and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,* books about the American Indian have been capable of generating considerable debate, with charges of fraud, plagiarism, and self-aggrandizement leveled at the authors. Few works on the Indian, however, have elicited as much controversy as Hunter's *Memoirs of a Captivity Among the Indians of North America,* the full story of which is here presented for the first time by Richard Drinnon.

Hunter was captured by the Kickapoos at an early age (c. 1799) and lived with the Pawnee and Kansas Indians before being taken by the Osages. He escaped from the Osages (c. 1816), reentered white civilization, worked as a Mississippi River trader, and attended school between trading seasons. In 1821 he went to New York to further his education and publish his life's story. Two years later, with his narrative in print, he traveled to England where both he and his book were favorably received. Upon his return to the United States, however, he found himself attacked as an imposter, the "boldest since the days of Psalmanazar," and his story discredited as a hoax. The man

chiefly responsible was Lewis Cass. Hunter's eventful and controversial career came to an abrupt ending in 1827 during his participation in the Fredonia uprising in Texas.

Drinnon, history professor at Bucknell University, biographer of the American anarchist Emma Goldman, and participant in the trial of Rev. Philip Berrigan, wears all three hats in this work. In his attempt to restore Hunter "to grace" and demonstrate that he played "a pivotal role" in the winning of the West, Drinnon is at once the historian as detective, as underdog, and as activist. He succeeds admirably in the first area: his careful sifting of the evidence and his interdisciplinary approach casts serious doubt upon the arguments of Hunter's detractors, especially Cass. The authenticity of Hunter's narrative now seems certain. But Drinnon stumbles a little in the last two categories: he has read too much of his obvious distrust of the present government into the past. Cass, for example, is viewed as a spokesman for the 19th-century "expansionist-military establishment"; Hunter becomes another of the nation's minority victims, and the clash between red and white civilizations is seen as a prelude to our 20th-century game of "cowboys and Indians ... in Southeast Asia." This line of reasoning may offer a fruitful way to reexamine American history, but only if the tendency toward oversimplification is more sharply reduced. Nineteenthcentury American Indian policy, as Francis Prucha has demonstrated, does not fit that conveniently into the mold Drinnon has created.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Drinnon has rescued a minor figure from obscurity, restored him "to grace," and in the process has shed much light on American attitudes toward the Indian.

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Review by Thurman Wilkins of White Savage

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Richard Drinnon. *White Savage: The Case of John Dunn Hunter.* Pp. 320. New York: Schocken Books, 1972. $12.50.

In April 1823, John Dunn Hunter's *Memoirs of a Captivity Among the Indians of North America, From Childhood to the Age of Nineteen* was published in London and the twenty-six year old author—then in England—found himself something of a sensation. In the seven years since leaving the life of savagery, he had made remarkable strides in education and selfimprovement, and he was now formulating plans for going back to help the Indians improve their lot, through civilization. English society lionized him like a second Robinson Crusoe. He was taken up by such notables as the

philanthropist Robert Owen, the celebrated agriculturist Thomas William Coke and his royal highness the Duke of Sussex, brother of George IV.

Hunter's book had appeared in America earlier in the year under the title *Manners and Customs of Several Indian Tribes Located West of the Mississippi.* In it, the author claimed to have been captured by Kickapoos when he was so young he could no longer remember the incident. A roving band of Pawnees took him from the Kickapoos, and he later passed into the hands of Kansas Indians, with whom he remained until he was ten or twelve years old. When hostile Osages cut off this band from the rest of the Kansas tribe, Hunter "was received into the family of Shen-thweeth, [an Osage] warrior distinguished among his people for his wisdom and bravery." While living with this family, the boy received the name Hunter because of his success in the chase. He later joined "a hunting expedition of sixteen moons duration ... in the course of which he and his party crossed the Rocky Mountains, and reached the Pacific Ocean." He left the Osages in 1816, when he went to warn a white trader on the Arkansas—a certain Colonel Watkins—of an impending attack.

Hunter was so impressed with white civilization, while visiting New Orleans, that he decided to secure a white education. He received instruction from various people and in various schools, for a little over two and a half years. After his first difficulties with English, he made rapid progress, became a prodigious reader and supplemented his formal training with rigorous self instruction. The result was that, on going to Philadelphia in 1821, he was able to put together his memoir with the help of Colonel Edward Clark, a civil engineer. Meanwhile, he had added to his name that of John Dunn, "a gentleman of high respectability, of Cape Girardeau County, . . . Missouri."

Eventually, on returning to America, Hunter went among the Cherokees of Texas on his self-assumed mission of saving the Indians west of the Mississippi from genocide. Then, as emissary of Richard Fields, a Cherokee chief, he traveled to Mexico City on an unsuccessful mandate, to secure a patent for the lands occupied by Cherokees and other Indians in east Texas. On returning there, he was murdered early in 1827 by a Cherokee confederate, while trying to rally the forces of the "Red and White Republic of Fredonia," which he had helped to organize in rebellion against Mexico.

Meanwhile, unknown to Hunter, he had been branded an arrant impostor and his book a fraud by General Lewis Cass, General William Clark, the linguist Peter Stephen Duponceau, and others. Historians have generally accepted the charges of Hunter's discreditors. On beginning his researches Richard Drinnon assumed the charges were true, but in sifting the evidence he reversed his opinion, and in this book has built a solid and persuasive case in Hunter's favor.

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