



Washington Irving: Three Western Narratives: A Tour on the Prairie / Astoria / The Adventures of Captain Bonneville (Library of America)

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America's first internationally acclaimed author, Washington Irving, was also one of the first to write about its then far-western frontier. After seventeen years in Europe, the famous author of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" returned to America and undertook an extensive three-month journey through present-day Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Describing scenery and inhabitants with an eye to romantic sublimity and celebrating the frontiersman's "secret of personal freedom," Irving published his account of that journey in 1835 as *A Tour on the Prairies*, an early and distinctly American depiction of the young nation's borderland and its native inhabitants.

Irving followed up this eyewitness account with two works that chart the dramatic and tumultuous history of the early American fur trade, very much in the spirit of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. *Astoria* (1836) recounts John Jacob Astor's attempt to establish a commercial empire in the Pacific Northwest. *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (1837) is a lively saga of exploration among the mountains, rivers, and deserts of the Far West. While working closely from original documents, Irving wrote also as a mythologist of the vast spaces traversed by "Sindbads of the wilderness." In these three compelling narratives he opened up a crucial region of the American literary imagination influencing such authors as Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville.

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