

DANIEL BOONE CORRESPONDENT OF THE LONDON SUN

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Daniel Boone has not suffered for want of recognition, even in the field of literature. Lord Byron's well-known eulogy, which presents him "of the great names which in our faces stare . . . happiest among mortals anywhere," is merely illustrative of an admiration—which was widespread, particularly among the romanticists of the early nineteenth century. But the tribute of the romanticists was paid to the "backwoods man of Kentucky" who "lived hunting up to ninety." Neither they nor the students of Boone's life appear to have thought of him as a literary man—certainly not as the correspondent of a London newspaper. Yet, the facts are that during October, 1792, under the by-line of "Colonel Daniel Boon," the *London Sun* ran a series of stories on the Indian wars in far-off Kentucky.

The series was given a send-off with the headlines: "Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boon. One of the original Settlers at Kentucky: Containing the Wars with the Indians on the Ohio from 1769 to the year 1784, and the first establishment and progress of the Settlement on that River—written by the Colonel."¹ The four installments of the series appeared in the *Sun* on October 5, 9, 10 and 12 respectively. The account begins in 1769 when Boone "resigned" his "domestic happiness for a time," leaving his family in North Carolina, to wander "in quest of the country of Kentucky." The narrative progresses through varied experiences to a vivid and moving eye-witness account of the Battle of Blue Licks (1782). Finally, when the settlers have at last prevailed over the "Savages," the account concludes with "Peace crowns the Sylvan shade."²

Readers have doubtless begun to suspect something of a hoax; those familiar with Filson's *Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* may have recognized the pattern and language of "The Advtures of Daniel Boon" as presented by Filson. Although the *Sun* makes no mention of it, the newspaper was in fact merely printing a somewhat garbled abridgement of the "Filson-Boon" narrative. Most of the editing which was done in accomplishing the abridgement appears to have been inspired by nothing more than a desire to omit repetitious phrases and to combine sentences in order to save space, but there is some evidence of patriotic sensitivity. Statements in the Filson account which

indicate British support of Indian attacks on the settlers are either toned down or omitted altogether. Thus Filson has Boone say: "Finding the great king beyond the water disappointed in his expectations, and conscious of the importance of the Long Knife, and their own wretchedness, some of the nations immediately desired peace."³ The *Sun* merely renders it: "Soon after the Indians desired peace."⁴

There is little reason to suppose that London newspaper readers in the early seventeen-nineties saw anything out of the ordinary in the Boone series. To be sure, the public of the era was not accustomed to reports from war correspondents, at least not to accounts of the Indian wars in America. But during the latter part of 1792 the *Sun* received more or less regular reports from "Our Correspondent in Paris" who offered what purported to be eye-witness accounts of some of the stirring scenes which were taking place in Revolutionary Paris. For some years the official *London Gazette* had followed the practice of publishing battle accounts which British commanders sent to the home government, and the independent press normally reproduced them for their own readers. Even if it can scarcely be assumed that the result of the Battle of Blue Licks (fought ten years earlier) was news in London in 1792, it is unlikely that the Boone description of the battle in Filson's *Kentucke*, which had appeared only in the American (Wilmington, 1784) edition, had been read by many Londoners. Although not yet at war, the British were moving precipitously in the direction of a major conflict which was to last for almost a quarter of a century. In September, 1792, the French Republican forces had made their first successful stand at Valmy against the troops of the First Coalition. News of the war on the continent was eagerly sought by London editors. When continental news was scarce, as it often was, accounts of other wars made logical fill-in material.

Granted that Colonel Boone's story of his adventures in the Dark and Bloody Ground was acceptable, even desirable, copy in the eyes of the *Sun* editor, the question remains of how the editor happened to get his hands on the account. There appears to be no conclusive evidence with which to answer the question, but the circumstances point to a plausible hypothesis. In all probability the literary agent in the case was Captain Gilbert Imlay, author, soldier of the Revolution, adventurer, shady frontier land speculator, and the first husband of Mary Wollstonecraft.⁵ As is well-known, Filson's *Kentucke*, which includes Boone's Adventures, was reprinted as a supplement to Imlay's

Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America. The first edition of Imlay's work, which does not include the Filson contribution, was printed in London around August, 1792.⁶ Later in the same year, a second printing did include the Filson history,⁷ as did subsequent editions. It is reasonable to suppose that Imlay was engaged in preparing the second printing of his work for publication at the very time that the *Sun* editor came into possession of Colonel Boone's Adventures. Imlay states in the Preface to the first edition of his work that he had sought to publish his own Topographical Description, which consists of letters purporting to be written from Kentucky to a friend in England, in the London *Chronicle*, but that the editor of the *Chronicle* had declined to publish the letters in their entirety.⁸ So . . . Imlay had the Boone narrative and he was in touch with the newspaper market.

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There is no particular moral to this little story. It adds nothing to our knowledge of Boone. Perhaps, just perhaps, the appearance of Boone's Adventures in a London newspaper in 1792 has a measure of importance in contributing to the Kentucky pioneer's reputation in England. The newspaper incident strikes the present writer as being one of those interesting tidbits of history which should not require the apology of significance. So far as the writer knows, Boone's London *Sun* contribution was his sole excursion into the realm of British journalism. Any appraisal of the good Colonel as a British newspaper correspondent must take into consideration the facts that he was ghost-written (by Filson) and that in all probability he was completely unaware of his reportorial career.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The London *Sun*, Oct. 5, 1792.

² *Ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1792.

³ Willard Rouse Jillson, ed., *Filson's Kentucke. A facsimile reproduction of the original Wilmington edition of 1784* (Louisville, 1930), 80.

⁴ The London *Sun*, Oct. 12, 1792.

⁵ The known facts of Imlay's life are given in Ralph Leslie Rusk, *The Adventures of Gilbert Imlay*. Indiana University Studies (March, 1923), X, No. 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14, n.47. Professor Rusk states that a notice of the publication appeared in the *Monthly Review*, August, 1792.

⁷ Jillson, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁸ G. Imlay, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (London, 1792), iii.