

Habitable Utopias and their Preservation: The Case Study of Daniel Boone

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Abstract: With the repeated exploratory forays into Kentucky in the 1760s the utopic understanding of New Eden (as utopia) becomes associated with the name of a single individual. The legend of Daniel Boone becomes central to the efforts of settlement past the Cumberland Mountains. Kentucky becomes the new utopia, the new El Dorado, a “hunter’s paradise.” But it also quickly becomes the new dystopia, the “dark and bloody ground” with repeated “Indian” attacks on the first Kentucky settlements.

This paper focuses on the changes in the image of Daniel Boone from the earliest narratives about him in John Filson’s 18th century boosterist text to late 19th century biographies and fictional adventure narratives about him. Boone’s transformation from New Adam in a utopic “hunter’s paradise” (18th century) to national hero in an industrial utopia (late 19th century) is the result of a change in the idea of utopia itself. The concept of “utopia” here changes from the 18th century notion of a site awaiting habitation to the 19th century view of fast-vanishing wilderness requiring preservation. This article focuses on the texts that promote the heroic image of Daniel Boone: land boosterist text of Filson, the heroic storytelling of Trumbull, and the later encrustations of writers that include writers of histories, a dime novel storyteller, and a comic book illustrator.

Keywords: Utopia, Daniel Boone, Kentucky, George Caleb Bingham, Frontier.

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Introduction

George Caleb Bingham’s large painting “Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap,” measuring 36 ¹/₂ inches by 50 ¹/₄ inches, uses some of the major icons of American frontier expansion. The painting executed between 1851-52 recounts an incident in (around) 1775 when Daniel Boone used the Cumberland Gap to move to Kentucky. The painting itself is designed as a theatrical stage scene set amidst the wilderness landscape in the distance. Light falls on the head of the procession; Daniel Boone leads a group of settlers and is seen holding the reins of a milk white horse on which a woman sits side-saddle. Commenting on the role of visual codes in American frontier-themed paintings, Patricia Hills convincingly argues that Bingham’s picture represents Daniel Boone as a latter-day Moses leading God’s Chosen People to the Promised Land. She reads symbolic functions operating in the picture by

pointing out how the rocks and the trees give way like the Red Sea on the approach of God's chosen people fleeing from persecution (110-115).

In a detailed analysis of Bingham's artwork, Angela Miller has argued how Bingham's artwork from 1845-1857 shows his connection to the boosterism rhetoric of the time, while remaining rooted to the idea that any chaotic elements in public life (such as the social processes and their fallout in westward expansion) were subsumed under broader national aspirations and expressive formats (8-10). As such, it makes sense to think about the Bingham painting as partaking of a complex process of preservation of a historical moment in a broader panorama of history. Bingham found that the transformation of Daniel Boone into a Moses type figure suited the conventional expectations of a "national" audience and at the same time connected to the logic of western expansion: from the "vantage point of [his] generation," Boone's presence and agency in the Cumberland Gap could be understood as part of a new order, a view proposed by influential cultural critic Henry Tuckerman who proposed that artists should preserve the notion of the frontier (Miller 15-16). So, how did Daniel Boone become so important to American frontier expansion? How did he inhabit the American popular imagination of utopia as the quintessential pioneer?

In securing a vantage point for historical speculations on the nature and function of the frontier, Daniel Boone's pedigree was admirably suited for the job. I wish to survey the biographies of Boone because it is important to see first the range of cultural responses to frontier cultural dynamics. John Filson, a schoolmaster with a chequered career in land speculation, made Daniel Boone famous with his 1784 text titled *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke*. However, it was the book's appendix about Daniel Boone that made a hero out of a hunter-turned settler and founder of Boonesborough. The book was reprinted in French and German (Taylor 514, Lofaro "Eighteenth" 92). John Trumbull offered a pirated version of Filson's edition about a dozen times between 1787 and 1824 (Lofaro "Eighteenth" 93). After Boone's death in 1820 there was a veritable flood of interpretations with C. Wilder's version of Boone's story that saw the hero being presented as a white renegade. In 1823 Byron wrote a poem about Boone and John A. McClung and presented Boone in broader panoply of western characters in *Sketches of Western Adventure* (1832). Timothy Flint's 1833 biography of Boone called *Biographical Memoir of Daniel Boone, the First Settler of Kentucky* gave Boone the ideological contours that permeate his image today and made him stand out from other important contributors to western expansion (Lofaro "Many Lives" 497-501). Various books celebrating the frontiersman appeared up till the Civil War such as John Peck's *Daniel Boone* (1847), W. H. Bogart's *Daniel Boone and the Hunters of Kentucky* (1854), and George Canning Hill's *Daniel Boone: The Pioneer of Kentucky* (1860). Works on Boone in the years from the Civil War period till the First World War include Cecil B. Hartley's *The Life of Daniel Boone* (1865), John S. C. Abbott's *Daniel Boone: Pioneer of Kentucky* (1872), Edward S. Ellis's *Life and Times of Col. Daniel Boone* (1884), Reuben G. Thwaites's *Daniel Boone* (1902), C.H. Forbes-Lindsay's *Daniel Boone, Backwoodsman* (1910), H. Addington Bruce's *Daniel Boone and the Wilderness Road* (1910). In the years from the 1920s till recent times works include John Bakeless's *Daniel Boone: Master of the Wilderness* (1939), Michael A. Lofaro's *The Life*

and Adventures of Daniel Boone (1978, revised 1986) and *Daniel Boone: An American Life* (2003) (Taylor 517).

I: Daniel Boone: Heroic renditions by John Filson and John Trumbull

John Filson first made Daniel Boone famous in his 1784 boosterist text on Kentucky and with the appendix on Boone's life introduced a philosophical hero through an autobiographical method. Allegedly in Boone's own words, Filson characterized Boone in the Appendix as a pioneer who evidenced a clear conflict between civilization and the wilderness (Lofaro "Eighteenth" 85-86). As a man of thought rather than a man of action, Filson's Boone is a composite of three parts: the nature lover who retreats from civilization to the simplicity of forest life, a hunter-adventurer and "Indian-fighter," and a pioneer who acted as herald for progress (88). Lofaro claims (quite correctly) that Filson's Boone is given a philosophical role that is at odds with his active hunter-fighter image and capabilities; in Filson's text, there is a clash between the philosophic, learned Boone and the hunter and Indian-fighter Boones while he attempts to use the philosophic Boone as a unifying factor that ties in the various parts (88-90). The frontier is visualized as the opposite of civilization, a non-urban utopia that shelters the hero and teaches him valuable lessons about life and leadership.

Filson informs the reader that Kentucky was discovered in 1754 by one James McBride whose name etched on a tree proves the claim. Rediscovered by John Finley in 1767, Kentucky was known locally as the "Dark and Bloody Ground" because it was a no-man's land for contending tribes (Filson8). Finley encouraged Boone to visit the area and saw Kentucky from an eminence, a stage-set piece that is often mentioned in later biographies. Filson describes the geographical location (latitude and longitude) and the various physical features (towns, rivers), soil composition, climate, quality of the forests, fauna, touristic curiosities, salt springs, fossil deposits, river navigation, and the ease of river-based commerce (11-48). The Boone "auto" narrative begins with his 1769 visit to Kentucky with Filson and ends with the Painkashaw Council in 1784 where peace was considered between the warring factions (82-86). The last section is an extended meditation on the nature and character of Indians seen as a whole.

Richard Slotkin has argued that Filson's discourse on Kentucke and the addition of the Boone text is representative of a "utopian vision of western agrarian democracy" that connects "agronomy with utopia" even as it connects nation-building with Indian wars and shrouds Kentucky with romance and mystery (Slotkin 273). He argues that the Kentucky narrative was more popular during its time than the Boone narrative; in all likelihood, the incorporation of a captivity narrative in recounting the life of Boone would have tipped the scales in the hero's favor, thus linking the hero to the location in a more sentimental way (278, 286). Slotkin finds in the descriptions of Kentucky "a peculiarly neoclassical flavor" "with nature appearing as an artful landscape designer and master gardener" (280-281). As a historian, Slotkin's new critical approach to the contradictions in the text are not necessarily problematic because he sees in Filson's text the integration of the pioneer to his environment in a way that contributes to the myth of the frontier (292). This is however, a sore point with later scholars like Michael Lofaro and Richard Taylor who have seen significant differences between the various aspects of the Boone legend.

While Filson's text popularized Kentucky and made Boone a philosopher-hero, John Trumbull's pirated edition of Filson in 1786 made Boone an action hero. Having edited out much of the flowery language from Filson's edition, Trumbull set out to make Daniel Boone an "active frontier hero" (Lofaro "Eighteenth" 87). The Trumbull edition received far greater attention in America most likely because Americans involved in settling their country had little time for romantic speculation; Trumbull's edition was reprinted a dozen times (92-93). Most biographers found Trumbull's trimmer version of an active hunter figure more acceptable and it became the baseline for most American versions from 1786-1824 (91). Lofaro argues that it was Trumbull's editorial work that might be thought of as contributing to the present-day biographical image of Daniel Boone as an active frontier hero. Interestingly, Trumbull did not actually create the image of a hunter; rather, he collapses the sequence of events in the life of the pioneer and makes them appear like short diary-style entries. It provided the impression of a "realistic personal chronicle" of a pioneer who remained always a man of action rather than a natural philosopher (93-94). Reading incorporations of outside material just like Lofaro, Slotkin shows that, in essence, Trumbull presents an Edenic image of Kentucke with an adventurous Boone by incorporating two distinct stories. Trumbull added the captivity narrative of one Mrs. Frances Scott to the story of Boone's adventures. If Boone is the active hero, Frances Scott is the helpless heroine. This suggestiveness was to make Daniel Boone a potent heroic figure who rescued damsels from savage capture in the wilderness (Slotkin 324). In an outrageous tall tale, J.B. Jones's *Wild Western Scenes: A Narrative of Adventures in the Western Wilderness* (1856, rep. 1863), Daniel Boone shows up at critical moments in a developing narrative of characters who act and behave like Shakespeare's courtiers in the Forest of Arden). Boone saves Mary who was captured by the Osage tribes (Jones 133-162) and her escape is aided in part by the Indian chief who had captured her, possibly because he was her long-lost brother who had been taken captive many years before. This sort of complex storytelling that intermingles multiple captivity narratives and the Boone legend contributed a lot to an image of heroism in Arcadia.

In making a hero out of a backwoodsman, Daniel Bryan of Virginia wrote *The Mountain Muse*, an epic that represented Boone as an "aristocrat in buckskins, a sentimental Romantic in his regard for picturesque scenery" (Slotkin 348). The epic supports Filson's philosophical Boone and manages to fit Boone's frontier experiences into a neo-classical image with the unintended consequence of turning the wilderness of Kentucky into the background of an opera (Slotkin 351-352). Allegedly, Daniel Boone, Bryan's uncle by marriage, is said to have become rather uneasy at the news of this transformation.

II: The Changing Ideology of Utopia in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Timothy Flint treated the Daniel Boone myth from 1823 to 1833 in three separate publications. Adding various fictional incidents to the life, Flint makes the hero look more "Indian," who takes to Indian ways of life in the forest more readily than other versions of the story. Differentiating between Eastern and Western heroes, Flint makes Boone look like a poet whose life vocation is skill in hunting; Flint generalizes the hunting image to include all Americans, for all Americans, he claims, are hunters at heart. Boone becomes an American everyman

(Slotkin 424-426). Flint's Kentucky is a "hunter's paradise", "a new El Dorado" located in an "unbroken forest," a "region of wonders," a "wilderness-paradise" that "blossoms as the rose," the "garden of God," "the garden of the earth," that had to be claimed "from the dominion of the savage tribes" and "opened as an asylum for the oppressed, the enterprising, and the free of every land" (Flint 24, 56, 36, 52, 226-227). Boone is compared favorably to Robinson Crusoe and history, Flint claims, cannot find a parallel to another like Boone, who "voluntarily consent[ed] to be left alone among savages and wild beasts seven hundred miles from the nearest white inhabitant" (62). The pioneer is posited as necessary in the grand scheme of expansion and whose work prepared "the way for the multitudes that would soon follow" (37-38).

Flint idealizes the settlers, creates a generic (and genetic) profile of the frontiersmen, and he corrects the popular impression that such men who lived, loved, and died in the backdrop of violence were not "demi-savages" with "long beard, and a costume of skins, rude, fierce, and repulsive" (107). Instead, they are "generally men of noble, square, erect forms, broad chests, clear, bright, truth-telling eyes, and of vigorous intellects" (107). Flint sees such times as lost, glorious moments of American history; nineteenth-century American life is but a falling off from the hardihood and honesty of life in Arcadia (110). Flint highlights Boone's exploits in dealing with various tribes as a master strategist who chooses to adopt Indian ways (during his captivity with the Shawnese) in order to understand the ways of the enemy (148). Flint's work romanticizes Indians and settlers: the oppositions are direct, the consequences dire. Flint's illustrations in the book are set pieces of action from those of his childhood years to his feats of strength. The motions are exaggerated, the lithographed figures melodramatically statuesque. Flint takes care to remind his readers that Boone's fights with Indians are celebrated with "sculpture over the southern door of the Rotunda in the Capitol at Washington" (123). Flint closes his book after reproducing Byron's romantic encomium at length (250-252).

With the onset of industrialization, the introduction of the trans-Appalachian railroads in the 1820s, and the later introduction of transcontinental railways across the American West in the 1860s, the focus on Daniel Boone became more overtly political because the "West" was understood as a getaway from the pressures of the east coast city. The Ohio Valley that Cooper's Natty ranges in, is the West just as the Oregon Trail of Francis Parkman is the West. The West as utopia is now a state of mind. As G. Edward White argues: "The sense that this region drifted and floated, limitless in scope and devoid of the confining social aspects of the East—devoid, in fact, of society in any form—gave the West its special flavor" (White 31). In the first of the Leatherstocking Series, *The Pioneers* (1823), Cooper has Leatherstocking question the laws of an urban order; Natty is able to posit the wilderness as an escape from the "oppressive aspects of social organization" (32). Gifted individuals from the east coast, who find life stifling in the cities, find relief and succor in the West: the painter Frederic Remington, the aspiring politician Theodore Roosevelt, and an aspiring writer Owen Wister change the cultural landscape of American arts and letters after succumbing to the lure to light out west. In this regard, G. Edward White's *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (1989) presents a powerful case for the dramatic shift of values in the generation that came of age in the post-bellum

Eastern industrial culture and which began to see the West as a decisive stage in American history. White's work is pertinent to this project because I found that he astutely analyzed Roosevelt's interest in the conservation of the West as a likely utopia and also in light of the fact that he expended a fair amount of space in his treatment of Daniel Boone in his *The Winning of the West*. Using his cue, I focus here on Roosevelt if only as an interesting example (and because he was more focused than the others on Daniel Boone and the concept of utopia) to highlight the cultural processes at work in positing Daniel Boone as an icon by paradoxically showing him as a fast diminishing (if not already vanished) type of frontiersman in an equally precariously vanishing wilderness.

In Roosevelt's multi-volume work, *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896), we find a good example of the new west as utopia in that the political historian (and former "dude" rancher in the Dakota Badlands) projected Boone as "a symbol of the rugged individual" who could foster self-reliance and hardihood in the face of a rapidly declining set of values in the era of American industrialization (Taylor 519). Roosevelt treats the Kentucky frontier as a "dark and bloody ground"—the term by which Shawnee tribesmen used to refer to it—because he approaches frontier settlement as an act of countering meaningless violence (on the part of the Natives) through brute strength and a "ruthless and undying abhorrence of the Indians" (Roosevelt Vol.2. 76). Kentucky is a settler's utopia that is won by blood, lead shot, hand-axes, and gunpowder. Seeing the frontiersmen as backwoodsmen, Roosevelt portrays them in almost as savage a manner as the racial "Other". Despite making distinctions by nomenclature (for various tribes) Roosevelt sees Native Americans *en masse*: the latter are "natural foes of the American people" (Vol. 2. 74). In the same manner, all frontiersmen are alike. The frontiersmen "greatly resembled one another," writes Roosevelt, adding that "their leaders were but types of the rank and file." Such men, implies Roosevelt, were bound by a natural democracy of spirit for "They stood shoulder to shoulder in the wilderness, far from all help, surrounded by an overwhelming number of foes" (Vol. 2. 65). Utopia was conquered; the conquest could be re-lived by a deliberate act of narration:

. . . many other men whose names became famous in frontier story , and whose sufferings and long wanderings, whose strength, hardihood, and fierce daring, whose prowess as Indian fighters and killers of big game, were told by the firesides of Kentucky to generations born when the elk and the buffalo had vanished from her borders as completely as the red Indian himself. (Roosevelt Vol. 2. 62-63)

Utopia is recoverable through nostalgia for a lost epoch. The promise of plenty that characterized initial settlement—if one considers the narratives of Daniel Boone's promises to his fellow pioneers—is now replaced by a desire for preservation. Utopia is preserved in the fireside tale and now, in an industrial age, the late 19th century, through the scripting of the wresting of the west.

Roosevelt argues that the major cause of Kentucky's settlement was Boone's own efforts at founding Boonesborough (Vol. 2. 36, 48). Incidentally, Roosevelt's chooses to spell Boone as "Boon." and I have retained his spelling in my text when I refer to Roosevelt's study of frontier history in order to preserve the flavor of the idiosyncratic original. Since Roosevelt treats

Boon's narrative history as merely one among a fairly large ensemble of personal trajectories, Boon remains an important yet a generic frontier backwoodsman. In Volume 1, Roosevelt argues that Boon's fame rests not on his "wide wanderings in unknown lands" but on the fact that "he was able to turn his daring woodcraft to the advantage of his fellows" (Roosevelt Vol. 1. 163). So, even though Roosevelt pays a lot of attention to the details of the pioneer's adult life—and this comes as a sharp distinction from later authors who use Boon as a model for American youth—he is clear that Boon didn't discover an Eden or a new Paradise. Kentucky was well-known by the time Boon came to visit the "vast solitudes," "land of running waters, of groves and glades, of prairies, canebrakes, and stretches of lofty forest" (164). Roosevelt is also insistent in his notes that "Boon stands merely as the backwoods type, not as an exception" when mentioning how he managed to live "absolutely alone in the wilderness, without salt, sugar, or flour, and without the companionship of so much as a horse or a dog" (167). In writing of Boon's relationship to the wilderness, Roosevelt writes that:

Other hunters, of whom we know even the names of only a few, had been through many parts of the wilderness before Boon [sic] . . . and the head tributaries of the Kentucky. Boon [sic] is interesting as a leader and explorer; but he is still more interesting as a type. The West was neither discovered, won, nor settled by any single man. No keen-eyed statesman planned the movement, nor was it the work of a whole people, of whom each man was impelled mainly by sheer love of adventure; it was the outcome of the ceaseless strivings of all the dauntless, restless backwoods folk to win homes for their descendants and to each penetrate deeper than his neighbors into the remote forest hunting-grounds where the perilous pleasures of the chase and of war could be best enjoyed. We owe the conquest of the West to all the backwoodsmen, not to any solitary individual among them; where all alike were strong and daring and there was no chance for any single man to rise to unquestioned preeminence. (Roosevelt Vol 1. 171)

Of remark here are three distinct positions. First, the Western utopic space of the frontier (i.e., Kentucky) is understood as a vast arena of "adventure" in the "remote forest hunting grounds" that offered "pleasures" such as the hunting "chase" and "perilous" "war." Second, this assumption was clearly understood as an exclusively male domain where "each man" in the collective ("whole people") conquered by consistent effort ("ceaseless strivings") a home for his descendant. Finally, this utopia (now perilously close to a dystopia) is populated by a particular type ("leader and explorer"), "all backwoodsmen" so that no single individual (such as Boon) can be given "unquestioned eminence" or especial credit.

In this background of attempts to preserve the notion of an exclusively male domain of the wilderness frontier, one must understand the later encrustations of the Boone legend. Dan Beard's outdoor movement used Daniel Boone as a "model for American youth." Beard, who went on to found the Sons of Daniel Boone in 1905—a precursor to the Boy Scouts of America—was part of a revival of American nationalism with Daniel Boone as a sort of poster boy (Taylor 518-519). Thus, many Boone biographies posited themselves as assisting youth to emulate a model of a frontiersman who saw the American landscape as a preserved utopia for the regeneration of American manhood; each youthful male citizen became a new Adam. Popular

adventure books for boys such as Everett Tomlinson's *Scouting With Daniel Boone* (1914) and Stewart Edward White's *Daniel Boone: Wilderness Scout* (1922) made clear the connection between scouting, the outdoors, and Daniel Boone by claiming that a man who lived among perpetual danger and fought the Indians like an animal had all the virtues of an honest citizen and lived to a ripe old age (Taylor 519). In such cases, while the idea of American frontier as an Eden is reinstated through the notion of the great outdoors, the religious ideology is made palatable through a secularization of the utopic space of adventure. Utopia is not just the Kentucky frontier; rather, it is the great outdoors where the life outside the city becomes utopia. This new reorganized utopia's preservation offers the implicit promise of a happy life.

John Bakeless's 1939 work is a comic book rendition meant for children and it posits Daniel Boone as a hero to be emulated by youthful audiences. The cover page depicts a buckskin-clad Boone with his hunting rifle poised and ready to fight; the opening panel jumps *in medias res* to the battle of the Blue Licks River where the Shawnees routed the settlers and the British regulars. Boone's childhood is projected as a warrior-in-training; all the episodes focus on the immensity of the race war (Indians and whites), captivity at the hands of Indians, rescues of women, deaths of loved ones at the hands of Indian braves, alliances and broken treaties; in one of the panels Boone is shown performing a judo maneuver, common combat training for American soldiers by the time of the Second World War. Bakeless' book is in the tradition of reinstating the importance of the great American outdoors that started with Theodore Roosevelt's policy of celebrating American masculinity through the propagation of frontier virtues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one may see in the rise of Daniel Boone, the ideologies of American expansion, the peculiar changes within popular literary discourse in connection with the changes of the notion of utopia. In the eighteenth century, understandings of utopia were colored by the idea of America as a fledgling republic (post 1776) that was still dependent on the mother country for its cultural ideologies. As such, a boosterist text like Filson's *Kentucke* posited Boone and Kentucke as functions of the political imagination that retained traces of the first settlers' impressions of the wilderness. However, one notices also a gradual shift in sensibility in terms of the American predilection for action-heroes rather than philosophic ones. With the rise of industrialization, the shift is keyed towards the preservation of a distinctly American representation of the West, a nostalgic return to an allegedly simpler time when clear distinctions could be drawn, or were allegedly drawn, between the white man and the "redskin." While ground realities of American civil society prevented such easy distinctions even in the early days of the Republic, the nineteenth century saw a gradual racial polarization in the representations of the two races. By the early twentieth century Daniel Boone becomes the childhood hero of the American youth as he stands poised, sharp on the lookout anywhere and nowhere (utopia), in the so-called dark and bloody ground of the United States.

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