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Wild Sports of the West

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An unknown Englishman made the accompanying pencil drawing in a notebook now in the possession of Guy Evans, Esq., of London, who kindly gave the drawing to me. Most of the rest of the notebook’s contents relate to sites and scenes in Greece and the Near East. The notebook probably dates from the 1830’s, a time when the lands west of the Mississippi had hardly emerged from being raw frontier. Boone (or “Boon” as his name was often spelled) had died in 1820 at the ripe age of eighty-five, having spent the last twenty years of his life living in the Missouri territory. Thanks in part to Byron’s famous sequence of stanzas in Don Juan describing what he thought was Boone’s idyllic life, the frontiersman had become a well-known figure in England and Europe. For many he came to embody the essence of the trans-Appalachian West.

It seems unlikely that the particular Englishman (or woman) who did this pencil sketch made it to the Mississippi. More likely, he or she read of Boone in the obviously fictitious account billed as “General Boon’s memoirs, by himself” that is quoted on the verso of the pencil sketch and reproduced below. The exaggerated and improbable behavior described in it is typical of frontier tall tales, as are the dialect spellings (somewhat reminiscent of Boone’s own) and the unusual language (“slantendicular,” “squabs”). The sketch, a free rendering of the passage quoted, will recall for some the satiric portrait of the American West in Mrs. Frances Trollope’s Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832).

Description of a most spry duel between the Kentuck & General Boon, “the slickest rifleman in all Creation”—

—“When I feels hungry for a duel,—” says the General, “I rides down upon one of my smartest Alligators, to the banks of the Mississippi & when I sees a fellur floating down stream on his raft fast asleep—Hillo, says I, stranger, if you dont take keer, that ere raft will run away with you;—& then the stranger, he looks up
“Wild Sports of the West / General Boon, finding his dander up, crosses the Mississippi on his crack Alligator, & engages in a terrible spry duel with the / Kentuck!” Pencil drawing, English, circa 1830 (Collection of John Clubbe)
slantendicular\textsuperscript{2} at me, & I looks down slantendicular on him, & the varmint flaps his wings & crows like a chicken— I rides up & shakes my mane & neighs like a horse— he takes out a chaw of turbaccur, & says he, you be ‘tarnally tarnashuned— Now as I never allows any man to ‘tarnally tarnashun me, I roars out,—till all creation shakes like an earthquake—“Mississippi swallow mine ‘tarnal soul”—stranger, if I dont send a pea from my rifle through your day peepers—so make slick ready—

Then if he has any more leever as a goose, he hankers his raft, gets a rifle & then gets behind a log— I whispers to mine Halligator to turn over a bit, with his back between me & the raft, & I gets behind—Then we crack spry as lightning & I calculates if he distrivers [sic] the thickness of my nail of his flesh or hair from behind his raft, I shaves it slick off—

When I fights a duel without mine halligator, I squabs\textsuperscript{3} behind a tree, which is much about as sartain a fortification as an halligator’s back, I guess—

—“General Boon’s memoirs, by himself”—

\textbf{NOTES}

\textsuperscript{1}See John Clubbe, \textit{Byron’s Natural Man: Daniel Boone & Kentucky} (Lexington: King Library Press, 1980 [1982]).

\textsuperscript{2}Usually “slantindicular,” defined in Webster’s Third as “somewhat oblique”—a blend of \textit{slanting} and \textit{perpendicular}. The \textit{OED} notes that the word was originally an Americanism and chiefly colloquial or humorous. Its first recorded use in England dates from 1840. For “slantindicularly” it cites an 1834 use, by Thomas De Quincey in \textit{Tait’s Magazine}, that relates the word to Boone: “For . . . a sunrise and a sunset, ought to be seen from the valley or horizontally,—not, as the man of Kentuck expressed it, slantindicularly.”

\textsuperscript{3}I.e., squat down. Webster’s Third identifies this usage as British dialect.