

## William Benemann, Men in Eden: William Drummond Stewart and Same-Sex Desire in the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade.

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The narrative begins and (virtually) ends with the same absurd scene: a frolicking medieval fair, gents only, in full swing—costumes and all—on the shores of Fremont Lake, in the North Platte of the wild Rocky Mountains, in the summer of 1843. By the end of the book, however, the absurdity of that camp has been clarified as the projection of another sort of camp, that of the creator and financier of the expedition, William Drummond Stewart, nineteenth Lord of Grandtully, seventh Baronet of Murthly. Stewart had become acquainted with the life of the fur trappers and traders in the Rockies—and especially with the ways the inevitable homosociality of that life allowed ample liberty for (practically open) homosexual engagements to flourish—during an earlier tours of the area (1833–38). During that adventurous time, the prodigal second son of a Scottish laird, sent to the States to hush up rumours of his scandalous inclinations, had used his prior military experience as a Hussard to distinguish himself as a cool shot, level-headed expedition manager, and very able huntsman; but also where, in the “androgynous attire” (71) and camp-abetting outrageousness of the trapper lifestyle, he first managed to express his homosexual desires physically. There was also where he met Antoine Clement, a well-known trapper and the man who was to be his partner for a decade of Stewart’s otherwise tumultuous adult life. Thus, when unexpectedly the deaths of his father and older brother left him in possession of both title and funds, Stewart, after a brief sojourn in the family’s Murthly Castle peppered with American memorabilia, returned to the Rockies to fulfil, like another Fitzcarraldo, his outlandish dream of resurrecting the long-since-withered tradition of the annual trapper “rendezvous”—where men in the fur trade sold their catches, fraternized with one another while

boasting extravagantly about their past year's dangerous exploits, held games and races, wasted all their money on gambling, prostitutes and alcohol, and woke up sore, hungover and indebted weeks later to start another year's trek and toil. Stewart's rendezvous, however, was to bear the mark of his gender-bending performative twist: instead of the colorfully decked trappers' costumes, his companions would wear medieval pageant velvet-and-lace costumes lavishly crafted in Europe, and the unbounded revelry would be of a decidedly homoerotic nature. Like Werner Herzog's hero, as well, the realization of that dream-camp would ruin the dreamer who had brought it to life out of his own love not just for men, but for the wild and pure early-American life these men lived and were formed by: camp tensions turned into nasty rumours upon the return of the expedition to St. Louis, thus driving Stewart away from America and Antoine for good. The American soon after vanished to early oblivion as a drunkard and an eremite, but the Scotsman went on to a ripe old age, having had enough time first to ruin his relationship with his only son, Will, and then to be betrayed in his relationship with his adopted son, American-born Franc Nichols Stewart, who tried to sell off and plunder what was left of the Stewart family estate right at the heels of Stewart's death.

- 2 An interesting life, yes; and colorful; but worthy of a 300-page biography, so admirably and painstakingly researched in all its available details, given that Stewart was historically only a minor figure and his few efforts as a "spectacularly ungifted" (36) author of (semi-autobiographical) fiction are risible in terms of their literary value? Not really: the reader soon realizes that the true value of Stewart, beyond an example of historical queerness rescued from the misrepresentations of earlier prudish biographers and a thematic impetus for many of Alfred Jacob Miller's paintings, is serving as a thematic kingpin for Benemann's lush, vivid overture of that part of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America that was still deliciously free and wild—and gay. Following the line of inquiry set in his award-winning 2006 book, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships*, the author-researcher provides a fascinating and detailed set of vistas where homosexual desire was enabled, from New York's Battery Park (where young Stewart's boat first landed) to the influx of eager young "counter-jumpers" and such dandies manning the urban commercial boom of America's East Coast, to the gender-bender performativity necessitated by the male-only trapper camp life, including the role of Native American gender models like the berdashes that introduced to whites the idea of a socially-acceptable queerness. Readers, therefore, should not go into this book expecting a "straight" biography, lest they become frustrated by Benemann's Melvillean lengthy detours into other lifestyles, historical vistas, or lives of other gay couples in America; as the author himself concludes, the center of the story is not Stewart, but the Rockies: "Stewart's role in the story of the Rocky Mountains in the early nineteenth century is insignificant when compared to that of William Ashley, William Sublette, Jim Bridger, or Jedediah Smith [celebrities peppering the narrative along with Kit Carson and Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau], yet his story is important because so very little is known about what life was like in America for homosexuals during this period" (303-04).

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