

## THE TALL TALES OF A COLONIAL FRONTIERSMAN

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CONSTANCE ROURKE and Walter Blair, among others, have claimed that the literary traditions of American humor are heavily indebted to oral tradition.<sup>1</sup> Numerous scholars have documented this generalization by identifying and cataloguing folk elements in works by the humorists of the Old Southwest, Mark Twain, and Faulkner.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have claimed that besides certain kinds of motifs, the manner of telling a story and the vernacular language are legacies of the oral tradition.<sup>3</sup> A few students have reversed the approach and

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1 Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York, 1931), especially in her first three chapters, on the Yankee, the frontiersman, and the black. Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (New York, 1937), 70-101, and passim. Blair's more recent considerations of oral influences upon literary humor are "'A Man's Voice, Speaking': A Continuum in American Humor," in Harry Levin, ed., *Veins of Humor* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 185-204; and chapter 3, "Folk Journalism," in Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York, 1978), 26-38.

2 See, for example, the articles by James H. Penrod cited in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *The Frontier Humorists* (Hamden, Conn., 1975), 331, especially Penrod's "Folk Motifs in Old Southwestern Humor," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 19 (1955): 117-24. For Twain, see Ray W. Frantz, Jr., "The Role of Folklore in *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Literature* 28 (Mar. 1956): 314-27, and Donald G. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York, 1961). For Faulkner, see Frank M. Hoadley, "Folk Humor in the Novels of William Faulkner," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 25 (1957): 75-82.

3 Blair argues that the "chief general effect" of oral literature is "a zestful exuberance," mentions that Longstreet's "The Shooting Match" is "sometimes too derivative from commonplace oral tale formulae," and claims that "mimicry of speech (particularly for purposes of characterization), humorous depictions of men and beasts, and the development of a story with a point are important in the art of story-telling." *Native American Humor*, 75, 77, and 78.

examined the anecdotes of a well-known teller of tales to see what influence, if any, such a teller and his tales have upon literary works.<sup>4</sup> But no one has attempted to do this for a colonial storyteller.<sup>5</sup>

I have identified a number of tall-tale tellers of colonial America including the Indian Sam Hyde, who supposedly died in Dedham, Massachusetts, in 1763;<sup>6</sup> the Maryland Jacobite George Neilson; the Virginia planter John Wormley;<sup>7</sup> and the Pennsylvania frontiersman Benjamin Sutton.<sup>8</sup> But a corpus of stories by one individual is rare. Although the expression "He lies like Sam Hyde" was proverbial from eighteenth- to twentieth-century America, few Sam Hyde stories are known and those are of doubtful authenticity.<sup>9</sup> And we only have

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4 For example, Stephen Dow Beckham, *Tall Tales from Rogue River: The Yarns of Hathaway Jones* (Bloomington, Ind., 1974), and William H. Jansen, *Abraham (Oregon) Smith: Pioneer Folk Hero and Tale-Teller* (New York, 1977).

5 James R. Masterson supplies the primary materials for several possible such studies in "Travelers' Tales of Colonial Natural History," *Journal of American Folklore* 59 (Jan.-Mar. 1945, Apr.-June 1946): 51-67, 174-88.

6 Sam Hyde is discussed by Richard M. Dorson, "Comic Indian Anecdotes," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 10 (June 1946): 114, 123-24; and by George Lyman Kittredge, *The Old Farmer and His Almanack* (Boston, 1904), 240-43, who could find no record of Hyde in Dedham. B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of New England Folklore* (New York, 1947), 234-45, adds another Sam Hyde anecdote and reprints (pp. 549-50) the one quoted by Kittredge and Dorson. Although Sam Hyde may originally have been an actual person, the name came to be common in New England folklore. Dorson notes that the name is sometimes "Tom Hide" (p. 123). Thoreau recorded in his journals a folkloristic anecdote about a "Tom Hyde" and repeated it in *Walden* (in paragraph 12 of the "Conclusion"). Thoreau's Tom Hyde was a white man, a tinkerer, and a murderer. J. Lyndon Shanley, ed., *Walden* (Princeton, 1971), 327-28; see also the annotated editions edited by Walter Harding (New York, 1962), 262 and n. 32 on p. 318, and by Philip Van Doren Stern (New York, 1970), 443-44.

7 Dr. Alexander Hamilton devotes Book One, Chapter Two, of "The History of the Tuesday Club" to "The History and Character of Mr. George Neilson." See Robert Micklus, ed., "The History of the Tuesday Club" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1980), 82-86 (p. 87 for Neilson's tall tales). In line 2 of "A Satire on the Times," *Virginia Gazette* (P&D), Jan. 8, 1767, Bolling wrote "Men, laughing, thought they heard Vermilio's tales" and glossed "Vermilio" with the explanatory note, "John Wormley of York County, famous for shooting flying." See J. A. Leo Lemay, "Robert Bolling and the Bailment of Colonel Chiswell," *Early American Literature* 6 (Fall 1971): 135 and 139.

8 Masterson, "Travelers' Tales," 65, n. 94, first called attention to Sutton.

9 Kittredge, *Old Farmer and His Almanack*, 241, testified in 1904 that "he lies like Sam Hyde" was "still a New England saying." In 1690, Cotton Mather testified that "lying" was one of "Three Scandalous Qualities" of Indians: "They are also most impudent *Lyars*, and will invent Reports and Stories at a strange and monstrous rate." *The Way to Prosperity* (Boston, 1690), 27. I find it culturally significant that the Indian — who was often a scorned figure in early American culture — had become a type of trickster by the mid-eighteenth century. Thus the Indian archetypal figure Sam Hyde anticipated the black archetypal character Brer Rabbit in the American myth-

snippets of Neilson's tales as recapitulated by Dr. Alexander Hamilton and only Robert Bolling's statement that John Wormley was a "famous" liar. The major sources for colonial tall tales (other than the works of such writers as Thomas Morton, Ebenezer Cook, Benjamin Franklin, and Samuel Peters)<sup>10</sup> are nature writings and travelers' journals. Time and again, an Englishman visiting America or an Eastern American traveling on the Western frontier recorded tall tales. Most informants were anonymous or were mentioned only once by one diarist; but Benjamin Sutton was cited extensively by one diarist and quoted by two others.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, Sutton's stories in the diaries of James Kenny, the Reverend Charles Beatty, and the Reverend Dr. David McClure give a good sample of one colonial frontiersman's repertoire. Sutton's tall tales are, of course, influenced by the settings and the auditors.<sup>12</sup>

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ology of popular trickster characters. For an overview of the trickster archetype and some notes on Brer Rabbit's role, see Roger D. Abraham, "Trickster, the Outrageous Hero," in Tristram P. Coffin, ed., *Our Living Traditions* (New York, 1968), 170-78.

10 Louis B. Wright, "Human Comedy in Early America," Louis Leary, "Benjamin Franklin," and Lewis P. Simpson, "The Satiric Mode: The Early National Period," in Louis D. Rubin, Jr., ed., *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1973), 17-31, 33-47, 49-61, respectively, constitute an interesting introduction to early American humor. Although Carl Holliday devoted a book to the subject — *The Wit and Humor of Colonial Days, 1607-1800* (Philadelphia, 1912) — the comments in Henry Clay Lukens, "American Literary Comedians," *Harpers* 80 (Apr. 1890): 783-88, and W. P. Trent, "A Retrospect of American Humor," *Century Magazine* 63 (Nov. 1901): 46-47, are more discerning. The early chapters in Blair and Hill, *America's Humor*, especially those on Franklin (pp. 53-91) are now the best survey of early American humor.

11 The only additional mention of Benjamin Sutton (who I am reasonably certain is the same Benjamin Sutton) I have found is Captain John Stewart's laconic report to Colonel Henry Bouquet, from Fort Ligonier, April 5, 1764, saying that no hostile Indians have been seen recently "except four, who chased Mr. Sutton, who was a hunting." B.M. Add Mss 21650, f. 121, *The Papers of Col. Henry Bouquet*, Series 21650, Part I (Harrisburg, 1942), 82.

12 For the significance of the total context of storytelling, see Alan Dundes, "Texture, Text, and Context," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 28 (Dec. 1964): 251-65; and Robert A. Georges, "Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events," *Journal of American Folklore* 82 (Oct.-Dec. 1969): 313-28. I define the tall tale as a short narrative of three possible types: (1) those that grossly exaggerate or understate reality; (2) those that portray highly absurd, fanciful, supernatural, or grotesque effects, events, or characters; or (3) those that testify to some lie or legend. Tall tales generally are characterized by a realistic tone and are typically told by a native or experienced person to a greenhorn, tourist, or youth. Thus tall tales usually contain two kinds of tension or conflict: (1) a discrepancy between the subject and the tone; and (2) a conflict between the speaker and the primary (stated or implied) audience. The usual purposes of tall tales are: (1) to ridicule and possibly correct a misapprehension of the immediate audience; (2) to delight the primary or secondary audience by the conflict between the subject and tone; and (3) to

All three diarists were staying in comfortable homes in the Ligonier-Pittsburgh area of Pennsylvania. All were religious, and two were ministers. The person whom Sutton found most susceptible was James Kenny, who had been sent out from Philadelphia to tend the trading store established by the Commissioners of Indian Affairs at Pittsburgh. The first time Kenny met Sutton, in December 1763, the frontiersman was with an Indian named White Eyes. After White Eyes left, storekeeper Kenny asked Sutton about him, and so the frontiersman spun a yarn about how religious White Eyes was. Kenny noted in his diary that the Indian often asked Sutton to read the Bible aloud to him, questioned parts that he did not understand, "will not allow his Children to make any Noise to interrupt, or allow the other Indians to laugh or despise it, he would rather then 50 Pounds he could Read he says, & intends to send his son to Philada to be taught. . . ." <sup>13</sup> Such stories about the Christian concerns of Indians were common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sutton's differ from others (such as the reports heard by Andrew White, S.J., in London in 1632) only in their greater specificity. <sup>14</sup>

The next time Kenny talked with Sutton, the frontiersman was in a garrulous mood. Sutton said that he had traveled up and down the Ohio and Mississippi, lived for years among various Indian tribes, especially among those great warriors of the Alabama-Mississippi area, the Chickasaws, and had journeyed with them several hundred miles west of the Mississippi to attack an Indian nation that lived on the Great Plains. He reported that in order to make fires, the Indians on the Great Plains had to burn dried buffalo dung and grass because there were no trees. Having no commerce with whites, the Great Plains Indians fought only with bows and arrows. For shields, they sewed together the skins of two buffalo necks, with sand between as additional protection. Water was so scarce on the Plains that the Chickasaws carried long sharp sticks to poke holes down into old stream beds, where they got water by sucking it out through hollow reeds. <sup>15</sup>

With such realistic, fascinating, and generally factual details, the

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delight the secondary audience by exposure of the ignorance of the ostensibly primary audience.

<sup>13</sup> John W. Jordan, ed., "Journal of James Kenny, 1761-1763," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 37 (1913): 1-47, 152-201, esp. p. 178. Jordan has also edited Kenny's "Journal to Ye Westward, 1758-1759," *ibid.*, 395-449.

<sup>14</sup> [Andrew White], *A Declaration of the Lord Baltimore's Plantation in Maryland* (London, 1633), cited in J. A. Leo Lemay, *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1972), 12.

<sup>15</sup> "Journal of James Kenny," (n. 13) p. 180.

frontiersman won the confidence of storekeeper Kenny, who must have heard similar tales concerning that *terra incognita*, the land west of the Mississippi. But Sutton went on to tell of the dragons that lived there. Sutton's description coincides with the increasing scientific interest in mastodon fossils throughout the Western world. Bones of mastodons from what is now the United States first claimed important attention when those found in the Hudson Valley in 1705 and 1706 were reported: (1) in the *Boston News Letter*; (2) in a letter from Edward Hyde, Viscount Cornbury, to the Royal Society of London; (3) in Joseph Dudley's letter to Cotton Mather; (4) in Cotton Mather's letter to the Royal Society; and (5) in Edward Taylor's poem.<sup>16</sup> No one in the early eighteenth century was certain what these fossils were. Cotton Mather and Edward Taylor, like all previous Europeans who discovered elephant or dinosaur bones, thought they were the bones of giant men. But by the mid-eighteenth century, such people as John Bartram and Benjamin Franklin thought they might be the bones of elephants.<sup>17</sup> Sutton had probably seen some mastodon fossils, for they were a great curiosity; and Christopher Gist, another Pennsylvania frontiersman, had visited a major fossil location in Kentucky in 1751 (probably Big Bone Lick, Boone County).<sup>18</sup>

By the time our frontiersman told his tale, storekeeper Kenny knew about the bones, for on July 21, 1762, some Shawnee Indians on their way to the Lancaster treaty passed through Pittsburgh with fossil mastodon teeth which Kenny examined and weighed. And on July 22, Kenny talked with Robert Pusey, who had spent five years as a Shawnee captive, and Pusey assured Kenny that some bones where the Shawnees collected their specimens were enormous, too heavy to carry. Further, Pusey had seen horns about twelve feet long and he himself carried a fossil mastodon tooth which Kenny examined. Kenny, reflecting recent opinion, thought it was the eye tooth

16 Donald E. Stanford, "The Giant Bones of Claverack, New York, 1705," *New York History* 40 (Jan. 1959): 47-61.

17 See George Gaylord Simpson, "The Beginnings of Vertebrate Paleontology in North America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 86 (1942-43): 130-88; and *ibid.*, "The Discovery of Fossil Vertebrates in North America," *Journal of Paleontology* 17 (Jan. 1943): 26-38. George Frederick Frick and Raymond Phinias Stearns, *Mark Catesby: The Colonial Audubon* (Urbana, Ill., 1961), 74 and n. 19, point out that Catesby first recognized the similarity of the elephant and the mastodon fossils, and thus they claim that Catesby rather than Charles Le Moyne, second Baron de Longueuil, should be regarded as the discoverer of fossil vertebrates in North America. Simpson points out that Le Moyne collected specimens which were used as the basis of the first published scientific paper on the fossils.

18 Lois Mulkearn, *George Mercer Papers Relating to the Ohio Company of Virginia* (Pittsburgh, 1954), 25-26, 115, 265, and n. 149-151 on p. 504.

of an elephant. Such was Kenny's knowledge of the mastodon when he talked with our frontiersman.<sup>19</sup>

It is quite likely that Benjamin Sutton had seen fossils at Big Bone Lick, and perhaps at other paleontological locations. Perhaps he had visited St. Augustine, Florida, and perhaps fossils were mounted above the gate there. But he clearly embroidered the facts. James Wright recorded some Indian legends about the fossils in a letter of August 22, 1762, to John Bartram;<sup>20</sup> Thomas Jefferson set down a different version in his *Notes on Virginia*;<sup>21</sup> and fictionalized versions of the legends appeared several times in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> But Sutton either did not know the Indian legends or did not choose to recount them. Instead he fused together actual animals, European folklore, tales of the unknown American wilderness, and the facts of the mastodon fossils.

Sutton made these mysterious animals larger than the largest known land animal, the elephant — as, indeed, fossil remains testified that the mastodon was; portrayed the mastodon as a cross between the rhinoceros and the unicorn — but larger; and gave it a function and a food by calling it the Elephant Master (that is, an animal that ate elephants). Of course, this also meant that he claimed elephants for the American West. And in designating it an Elephant Master, Sutton in effect called it a dragon, for that was a seventeenth-century name for the dragon.<sup>23</sup>

Here is Sutton's account, as recorded by James Kenny, January 7, 1763: "Some Distance from this [the place where the Plains Indians lived] lies other Nations in Whose land are the Rhinosses or Elephant Master, being a very large Creature of a Dark Colour having a long

19 "Journal of James Kenny," 163.

20 Simpson, "Discovery," 36, prints the letter. Like Kenny, Colonel Henry Bouquet had seen the fossils brought by the Shawnee Indians and had written John Bartram about them, thus prompting Bartram's inquiries to Wright. By chance, Peter Collinson had just before this received two fossil teeth from Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia. And Collinson had written Bartram on June 11, 1762, requesting that he "inquire after" the fossils. William Darlington, ed., *Memorials of John Bartram and Humphrey Marshall* (Philadelphia, 1849), 238-39. See also Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1959), vol. 10, 165; vol. 14, 25-29, 221-22.

21 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. by William Peden (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1955), 43-47, 53-54, and n. 56 on p. 270.

22 For example: N. Guilford, "Traditions of the Mammoth," *The Western Souvenir for 1829* (Cincinnati, 1829), 19-32; Cornelius Mathews, *Behemoth: A Legend of the Mound-Builders* (New York, 1839); and Henry B. Hirst, *The Coming of the Mammoth . . . and Other Poems* (Boston, 1845).

23 Under "Elephant-killer," the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Topsell, *Serpents*, 703 (1607), "Neither have they any other name for those Dragons but Elephant-killers."

Strong horn growing upon his Nose (with which he kills Elephants) [and] a Short tail like an Elk; two of said Horns he [Sutton] seen fixd over a Gate at St. Augustine, & that its the Bones of Some of these lies down in Buffelo lick by the Ohio, wher the Great teeth Comes from, the Sholder Blades in said lick he seen Nine in number, the largest about a Yard Wide at the Top, some teeth weighing about Seven Pounds (I seen one brought here & part of a Horn the tooth weigh'd about five Pounds)—" 24

Tales of gold mines and buried treasures have always been popular subjects in America, from the sixteenth century to the present.<sup>25</sup> Captain John Smith in his inimitable brusque manner ridiculed these stories and the men who believed them.<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Franklin burlesqued the buried treasure stories in his *Busy-Body* essays in the 1720s;<sup>27</sup> Thomas Forrest spoofed them in his 1767 play *The Disappointment; or, the Force of Credulity*; Edgar Allan Poe used the motif in *The Gold Bug*; and Faulkner's Flem Snopes snookered Ratliff (along with Henry Armstid and Odum Bookwright) with the lure of buried treasure in *The Hamlet*. In colonial times, the Spanish successfully sacked the existing hordes of wealth of the great Indian civilizations of Mexico and South America and also mined gold and silver in these areas. Our Pennsylvania frontiersman had visited the Spanish holdings in the Southeast United States. In his description of that area, Sutton added an early legend of a gold mine to the tradition by mentioning to Kenny that "the Spaniards have a mine where many Men" are constantly "at Work, thought to be Gold." 28

Sutton's last story to Kenny, though it contains the same geographical framework as the earlier ones, caused even the gullible Kenny to record his doubts. Sutton himself attributed this tale to another frontiersman, perhaps in an attempt to try to retain his own credibility. Analogues for the haunted island motif can be found in medieval descriptions of the otherworld, in Indian and folk traditions of evil places, in the classic story of the humor of the Old South, and in gothic tales of haunted houses. Here is Kenny's record of Sutton's

24 "Journal of James Kenny," 180.

25 For surveys, see J. Frank Dobie, *Coronado's Children: Tales of Lost Mines and Buried Treasures of the Southwest* (Garden City, N. Y., 1934), and Charles M. Skinner, *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (Philadelphia, 1896), vol. 1, 242; vol. 2, 373, 395.

26 Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Jamestown Voyages Under the First Charter, 1606-1609* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), vol. 1, 242; vol. 2, 373, 395.

27 Labaree, ed., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (n. 20), vol. 1, 136-39.

28 "Journal of James Kenny," 180.

folktale which combines features of Grendel's lair and Circe's island:<sup>29</sup>

He [Sutton] being Offten up & down the Missipi Says also, he is informed by his acquaintance Samuel Peckwood, who was taken Prisoner out of Virginia & lived 2 years amongst the Tawas up near Detroit or further, that there is a Great Lake they always Cross Going from Lake Mitchigan or Mitchelemackenack to Mount Real which I judge to be Lake Huron, in which is two Islands, one of which in the Summer is defended so by Snakes that they swim to meat a Canoe when Coming near Shore & oblidged to beat them off with the Paddles seeing many on the Shore. — The Other Island Still worse, in which many of the said Indians & French have landed & all that ever went in it never returned; when some small Distance in the Woods was hear'd by them that lay off in Canoes to cry & screem; at one time 14 Men Going in it never one return'd, the other Company waiting two Days & two Nights off some Distance but could never hear more, of them; the Indians call it the Devil's Island, they seen Paths much trod & like a large man's or Bear's track in the Sand by the Shore, the French imagins it to be a Dragon that destroys them.

After recording this tale, Kenny commented, "I know not how much Credit to give this Story, it may be so, but very Strange if true."<sup>30</sup>

Another Sutton story appears in the journals of two missionaries, the Reverend Charles Beatty in 1766 and the Reverend Dr. David McClure in 1772. This folktale concerns the descendants of Madoc, the Welsh prince who supposedly discovered America in the twelfth century. Since this patriotic English propaganda gave England a claim to America, the Madoc legend was cited by a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English scholars, including Hakluyt and Purchas.<sup>31</sup> Among Welshmen, it was patriotic doctrine that Madoc discovered America. A delightful poem by Richard Lewis, written

29 For the haunted island in T. B. Thorpe's classic story, see Lemay, "The Text, Tradition, and Themes of 'The Big Bear of Arkansas,'" *American Literature* 47 (Nov. 1975): 331. See Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, 5 vols. (Bloomington, Ind., 1955), B, 11.3.8, *dragon lives in isolated island*; and F 134, *otherworld on island*.

30 "Journal of James Kenny," 181.

31 The two best brief accounts are by Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, AD 500-1600* (New York, 1971), 84-87, 106-7; and David B. Quinn, "Madoc," in George D. Brown, ed., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, 1966), vol. 1, 677-78. A good full-length study is Richard Deacon, *Madoc and the Discovery of America: Some New Light on an Old Controversy* (London, 1967).



for the 1734 St. David's Day celebration in Philadelphia, is entitled "Upon Prince Madoc's Expedition to the Country now called America, in the 12th Century."<sup>32</sup> From at least the 1690s, American reports existed of an Indian tribe with light skin who spoke Welsh and treasured a Welsh Bible.<sup>33</sup> After the publication of Lewis's poem, a group of Welsh Philadelphians proposed that they search for this Indian tribe: "Some reliques of the Welsh tongue being found in old and deserted settlements about the Mississippi, make it probable that he [Madoc] sailed up that river." The Philadelphia Welshmen said that their discovery of the Welsh Indians would not only enlarge "the British Empire in America" but also prove "the prior right" of England "to the whole Continent."<sup>34</sup>

Popular attention was focused on the legend of the Welsh Indians by the publication in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (March 1740) of a Welsh minister's account of his stay among the Doeg Indians of North Carolina. This hoax, supposedly written in 1686 by the Reverend Morgan Jones, testified that Jones lived with the Doeg Indians for four months, constantly talking to them in Welsh.<sup>35</sup>

Such was the background when the Reverend Charles Beatty, whom Benjamin Franklin characterizes in his *Autobiography* as a zealous Presbyterian minister, encountered Benjamin Sutton.<sup>36</sup> Sutton's *bona fides*, as published by Beatty in his *Journal of a Two-Months Tour* (1768), were that he "had been taken captive by the Indians, had been in different nations, and lived many years among them." The gullible Beatty reported that Sutton said: "when he was with the Chactaw Nation, or Tribe of Indians, at the Mississippi river, he went to an Indian town, a very considerable distance from New-Orleans, whose inhabitants were of different complexions, not so tawny as those of the other Indians, and who spoke Welch. He said he saw a book among them, which they carefully kept wrapped up in a

<sup>32</sup> The poem is discussed in Lemay, *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland*, 173-76.

<sup>33</sup> "Daniel Falckner's *Curieuse Nachricht* (1702)," trans. and ed. by Julius Friedrich Sachse, *The Pennsylvania German Society: Proceedings and Addresses* 14 (1905): 125-26, and n. 33, pp. 249-50; and Frederick Von Rech, "Reese-Darium," in *Ausführliche Nachricht von den Saltzburgischen Emigranten*, ed. by Samuel Urlsperger (Halle, 1735), 158.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1770), 128-29.

<sup>35</sup> "England's Title to America," *Gentleman's Magazine* 10 (Mar. 1740): 104, reprinted in Benjamin Franklin's *General Magazine*, no. 2 (Feb. 1741): 80-83; and reprinted from the *Gentleman's Magazine*, with notes, in the *American Historical Record* 1 (1872): 250-52.

<sup>36</sup> Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1964), 235. Like Sutton, Franklin made Beatty the butt of his humor.

skin, but that they could not read it; and that he heard some of the Indians afterwards in the Lower Shawanaugh town, speak Welch with one Lewis, a Welchman, captive there. This Welch tribe now live on the west side of the Mississippi river, a great way above New-Orleans." <sup>37</sup> Scholars who wanted to believe in the truth of the Madoc legend seized upon Beatty's account. Dr. John Williams, in 1791, publishing *An Enquiry into the Truth of the Tradition concerning the Discovery of America by Prince Madoc ab Owen Gwynedd*, reprinted Beatty, and, in a footnote, commented on the Indians' Welsh Bible: "It were to be wished that this Book, or a Copy of it, could be procured." <sup>38</sup> Partially because of such accounts as those by Sutton, John Evans came to America in 1792 searching for the Welsh Indians, spent years in his quest in the Far West, and finally concluded "that they have no existence." <sup>39</sup>

When the Reverend Dr. David McClure met Sutton at Ligonier in 1772 at the home of Captain (later General) Arthur St. Clair, he too heard Sutton's tale of having visited the Welsh Indians living "far west of the Mississippi" who "shewed him a Welsh bible carefully covered with skins, which they venerated as a precious relict of their fathers." But McClure was less credulous than Kenny or Beatty, and he evidently asked his host about the frontiersman's reputation. He dryly noted in his diary that "Sutton's character for veracity I found was not well established." <sup>40</sup>

Sutton also supplied the susceptible Charles Beatty with information supporting the absurd notion of the Hebraic origin of the American Indians. Perhaps Beatty, like some other literal-minded Christians, wanted to believe in the doctrine that the Indians were descended from the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel because that supposition was consistent with the theory of man's monogenesis as presented in the Old Testament.<sup>41</sup> The Reverend Charles Beatty reported Sutton's infor-

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Beatty, *Journal of a Two-Months Tour* (London, 1768), 24-25n. The version in Beatty's original diary is nearly identical: Guy Soulliard Klett, ed., *Journals of Charles Beatty, 1762-1769* (University Park, Pa., 1962), 52-53. Beatty's *Journal* was reprinted in Edinburgh in 1798 and also appeared in a German translation (1771). See Sabin, 4149 and 4150.

<sup>38</sup> Dr. John Williams, *An Enquiry into the Truth of the Tradition concerning the Discovery of America by Prince Madoc ab Owen Gwynedd* (London, 1791), 44.

<sup>39</sup> Deacon, *Madoc and the Discovery of America*, 148.

<sup>40</sup> Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *The Diary of David McClure, Doctor of Divinity, 1748-1820* (New York, 1899), 42.

<sup>41</sup> A survey of early opinion on the Hebrew origins of the American Indians may be found in Lee Eldridge Huddleston, *Origins of the American Indians: European Concepts, 1492-1729* (Austin, Texas, 1967), 33-47, 84-86, 93-94, 128-35.

mation in the scholarly London edition of his journal:

among the Delaware tribe of Indians, he [Sutton] observed their women to follow, exactly, the custom of the Jewish women, in keeping separate from the rest seven days, at certain times, as prescribed in the Mosaic law: that from some old men among them, he had heard the following traditions — That of old time their people were divided by a river, nine parts of ten passing over the river, and one part tarrying behind; [the literal-minded, humorless Welsh scholar, Dr. Williams, proved that he got this reference, for he quoted this passage too, and noted: "Does not this Tradition refer to the passages of the Israelites over Jordan into the Land of Canaan under the Conduct of Joshua?"]<sup>42</sup> that they know not, for certainty, how they came first to this continent; but account thus for their first coming into these parts, near where they are now settled — that a king of their nation, when they formerly lived far to the west, left his kingdom to his two sons — that the one son making war upon the other, the latter thereupon determined to depart, and seek some new habitation — that, accordingly he set out, accompanied by a number of his people; and that, after wandering to and fro, for the space of forty years [here the learned Dr. Williams could not make up his mind which tradition Sutton's Indians were reflecting: "The unsettled State of North Wales, the Departure of Madog, and his Travels before he finally settled, seem implied in the above Account, or it may be a confused Tradition of the Travels of the Israelites in the Wilderness."]<sup>43</sup> they at length came to Delaware river, where they settled three hundred and seventy years ago. The way, he says, they keep an account of this, is, by putting on a black bead of wampum every year since, on a belt they have for that purpose.<sup>44</sup>

Such are the tall tales of Benjamin Sutton, told in the stores and in the living rooms on the Pennsylvania frontier in the 1760s and early 1770s. At first I found it surprising (that is, upsetting to my own preconceptions) that three of his four main tales — those concerning the mastodon, the Welsh Indians, and the Jewish origin of Indians — were based so firmly upon science or literary sources. To be sure, the influence was reciprocal: there seem to have been sixteenth-century tales about Madoc before Madoc appears in the literature.<sup>45</sup> But we

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Enquiry into Discovery of America by Madoc*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Beatty, *Journal*, 27; cf. Klett, *Journals of Charles Beatty*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Quinn, "Madoc," (n. 31), 678.

normally do not think of these scholarly topics — paleontology, the discovery of America, and the origin of the American Indians<sup>46</sup> — as the subjects of a frontiersman's tall tales. What I expected (and was rather disappointed not to find) were those archetypal stories about the antics of a greenhorn, such as Captain John Smith and Ebenezer Cook told of fearful pilgrims who spent the night perched in trees, afraid of imaginary lions and rattlesnakes,<sup>47</sup> or such as Thomas Morton and St. John de Crèvecoeur told, about greenhorns 'so fearful of Indians that they imagined themselves attacked.<sup>48</sup>

But then I realized that such tales would not have answered Sutton's purposes. Although little sense of his power as a raconteur comes through the jottings of Kenny or the notes of the ministers, we can be certain that one of Sutton's purposes was to spellbind his audience. He could not have done so with tales of the discomfiture of greenhorns, for such tales would simply have alienated — or, at best, amused — Kenny, Beatty, and McClure. The settings were not right for such tales: all the greenhorn diarists who recorded his stories were in relatively comfortable surroundings. Indeed, Arthur St. Clair's house in Ligonier, where the Reverend Dr. David McClure met Sutton, was perhaps the most fashionable home on the Pennsylvania frontier.<sup>49</sup> Instead of telling anecdotes about the discomfiture of greenhorns, Benjamin Sutton attempted to insinuate his tales into the pre-existing superstitions of his auditors. Like an expert fortune-teller, Sutton played upon his auditor's personality, his interests, and his credulity while spinning out his tale. If you tended to believe in the Jewish origin of the American Indians, then Sutton's tale was the stuff of myth.<sup>50</sup>

Sutton's second purpose was to put on, to make fools of the sophisticated, learned visitors to the American frontier — and to do it on their own ground, to hoodwink them on their own favorite sub-

<sup>46</sup> There are no entries for these topics in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Arber and A. G. Bradley, eds., *The Travels and Works of John Smith* (Edinburgh, 1910), vol. 2, 753. Lemay, *Men of Letters*, 82-83.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *New English Canaan of Thomas Morton* (Boston, 1883), 270-73 (chap. 12). St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. W. P. Trent and Ludwig Lewisohn (London, 1908), 107-9.

<sup>49</sup> Ellis Beals, "Arthur St. Clair: Western Pennsylvania's Leading Citizen, 1764-1818," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 12 (Apr. 1929): 75-96, 175-96.

<sup>50</sup> Maria Leach, ed., *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York, 1949-1950), vol. 2, 778, defines *myth* as "A story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc."

jects. That three diarists recorded his tales is proof that Sutton succeeded. Although one of the three, McClure, did not believe him, McClure was interested enough not only to record the story, but also to inquire about Sutton's reputation.<sup>51</sup> Through the publication of Beatty's *Journal* and its citation by Dr. John Williams, Sutton influenced later speculations concerning Madoc's discovery of America. The background for Robert Southey's epic poem *Madoc* (1805) reflects Sutton's tale.<sup>52</sup> The citations of Sutton as an authority by Beatty and Williams constitute splendid testimony to the success of his tales. He did indeed put on his auditors.

I must confess, however, that Sutton did not have any direct influence, so far as I know, upon America's humorous traditions.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the most important fact about the frontiersman Benjamin Sutton is that he proves that the type existed — the tall-tale telling frontiersman. The actual existence of the type has great importance. The primary significance of Benjamin Sutton and other tellers of oral tales was their example of the interaction between the backwoods American (whether frontiersman or simple "hick") and the sophisticated auditor (whether supercilious Englishman or American "city slicker").<sup>54</sup> The various strategies of the put-on<sup>55</sup> and the conflicting personae<sup>56</sup> were lessons that the literary humorists of America learned

51 McClure may have been advised — without himself asking — of Sutton's reputation. If so, my point is even stronger.

52 Robert Southey's *Madoc* deals with the adventures of the Welsh hero after his first explorations of America, and makes the Welsh the founders of the Aztec empire. Southey assumes that his readers will know the Madoc legend as presented by Dr. John Williams. In the preface to the first edition of *Madoc* (1805), Southey writes: "Strong evidence has been adduced that he reached America, and that his posterity exist there to this day, on the southern branches of the Missouri, retaining their complexion, their language, and, in some degree, their arts." *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (Boston, 1866), vol. 5, 8.

53 That is, I know of no literary humorist who reflects Sutton, although the motifs Sutton used do recur in American literature.

54 See Mody C. Boatright, *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier* (New York, 1949), esp. chapter one, "Some Mythology of the Frontier."

55 Some colonial examples are discussed in my *Men of Letters*, 78-93 (Cook's *The Sot-Weed Factor*), and 245-56 (Dr. Alexander Hamilton's Tuesday Club manuscripts); and in my "Benjamin Franklin," Everett Emerson, ed., *Major Writings of Early American Literature* (Madison, 1972), 226-33 (on the "grand Leap of the Whale . . . up the Fall of Niagara" and "An Edict by the King of Prussia").

56 I have examined colonial examples of conflicting personae in "The American Origins of 'Yankee Doodle,'" *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (July 1976): 435-64; and in "The Text, Rhetorical Strategies and Themes of 'The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,'" in Lemay, ed., *The Oldest Revolutionary: Essays on Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, 1976), 91-120. For a nineteenth-century example see my "Text, Tradition, and Themes of 'The Big Bear of Arkansas,'" 321-42.

from the oral storytellers. Benjamin Franklin probably even knew Sutton. Both Dr. Alexander Hamilton and Robert Bolling knew individuals like Sutton, people who were also "famous for shooting flying."<sup>57</sup> And all the other early American humorists, from Captain John Smith and Thomas Morton at the beginning of the colonial period to the Reverend Samuel Peters and Jeremy Belknap at its conclusion, must have known men like Sutton.

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<sup>57</sup> Above, n. 7. Bolling's phrase testifies that the hunter's lie about the difficult shot he had made was extremely common in colonial America — so common that the words describing the feat of shooting a bird on the wing (*shooting flying*) had become a synonym for a tall tale. A variant of the phrase ("on both which topics many imagined that he *shot flying*") occurs in Dr. Alexander Hamilton's "History of the Tuesday Club" (above, n. 7), 87. The existence of the expression "shooting flying" confirms the important cultural role of the hunting tale in early America. Cf. Stith Thompson, *Motif Index*, "X1120. *Lic: the great marksman* (Cf. F661" [Skillful marksman]). Unfortunately, neither "He lies like Sam Hyde" (above, n. 9) or "Famous for shooting flying" is found in Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).