

SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

SETH EASTMAN'S WATER COLORS

THAT AN ARMY OFFICER who has been characterized as "the master painter of the North American Indian" was stationed at Fort Snelling for some seven years in the 1830's and 1840's and served at four different times as its commandant is perhaps known to few present-day Minnesotans. They visit Washington, gaze upon the canvases of Seth Eastman in the Capitol and in the Corcoran Gallery, and fail to appreciate the fact that many of them are based upon sketches made in their home state in pre-territorial days. And doubtless, too, they fail to realize that to see original work by Eastman they need only visit the James Jerome Hill Reference Library in St. Paul, which has in its collections no less than sixty water colors by this distinguished artist of the western frontier.¹

Eastman was twenty-one years of age when he was graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in July, 1829, attached to the First Infantry as a second lieutenant, and sent to Fort Crawford, at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. There he began sketching the scenery and the natives, an avocation that he continued when he was transferred to Fort Snelling in the following year. He did not remain long at the Minnesota post, for in 1831 he was assigned to topographical duty. From 1833 to 1840 Eastman served as a teacher of drawing at West Point, and in

¹ Oil paintings of Minnesota scenes by Eastman are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society and by Dr. Harry Zimmerman of St. Paul. In the first, the artist depicts a wide valley, possibly that of the Minnesota River. An equestrian figure overlooks the scene from a bluff in the foreground. Dr. Zimmerman's picture is a view of Mendota as seen from the east side of the Mississippi, with several Indians on the bank above the river. It is signed "S. E.," followed by a date which, though partly obliterated, is probably 1848.

1840-41 he was stationed in Florida. With the rank of captain, he returned to Fort Snelling in 1841, and there, with the exception of a few months spent on recruiting service in 1846, he remained until the autumn of 1848. For brief periods in 1841, 1844, and 1846, and from March, 1847, to September, 1848, he was the commanding officer of the post at the mouth of the Minnesota.²

After leaving Fort Snelling, Eastman was stationed for a few months at Camp Houston, Texas. In 1849, however, he went to Washington, and in February, 1850, he was instructed to prepare the illustrations for Henry R. Schoolcraft's *History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (1851-57). For five years the artist worked on the scores of small water-color pictures which are reproduced as engravings and colored lithographs in the six volumes of this monumental work. The originals of fifty-one of these illustrations are preserved in the Hill Library. The collection, which consists of sixty-eight items averaging nine and a half by six and a half inches in size, includes also nine paintings by Eastman that do not appear in Schoolcraft's *Indian Tribes*, a color lithograph of C. B. King's portrait of Red Jacket, four pictures by Lieutenant J. C. Tidball, two probably by the same artist, and one by Captain A. A. Gibson.³ James J. Hill purchased the water colors as a group, and they eventually came into the possession of the magnificent reference library established by the Empire Builder and endowed by his family.

It is appropriate that this unique collection should be preserved in Minnesota, for more than half the pictures included are of interest for that locality. At least twenty of the water colors reproduced in Schoolcraft's work depict

² David I. Bushnell, Jr., *Seth Eastman: The Master Painter of the North American Indian*, 1-7 (Washington, 1932); Richard W. Johnson, "Fort Snelling from Its Foundation to the Present Time," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 430.

³ The Tidball and Gibson sketches were prepared for and reproduced in Schoolcraft's work.

scenes and natives of the Northwest. Among them are pictures of a "Dacotah Village" (obviously Kaposia), a "Dacotah Encampment," the "Dacotah Mode of Sitting," the "Beggar's Dance," "Spearing Fish," "Gathering Wild Rice," an "Indian Sugar Camp," "Mourning for the Dead," and "Itasca Lake, Source of the Mississippi." The latter, the artist indicates, is "from a sketch by H. R. Schoolcraft." This picture, which portrays the explorer landing after his discovery of the lake in 1832, is reproduced in color in volume 1 of his work and in black and white in volume 6. The color reproduction, a lithograph, fails to follow the original in many details; the engraving is far more satisfactory. Of Northwest interest also are maps showing the "Indian Tribes of the United States" in 1600 and the "Boundaries of the Ojibwa, Menomonee, Winnebago, and Dacotah Tribes" in 1851, a record of "Dacotah Written Music" copied from an original on birchbark, and nine sheets of "Manobosho's Devices"—pictographs from the Lake Superior country. Several New York and California views also are included in the collection. Of special interest is a view of "Chicago in 1820," based upon one of Schoolcraft's sketches.

Eight of the nine water colors that are not reproduced in Schoolcraft's work appear in another Lippincott publication—*The Iris*, one of the elaborately illustrated gift books that were popular in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Eastman's wife, Mrs. Mary H. Eastman, an author of considerable ability, recorded many of the Indian tales and legends that she heard on the upper Mississippi, and eighteen of her stories were printed in *The Iris* for 1852. They must have proved popular, for in 1853 the publishers issued the volume in a new edition, under the title *The Romance of Indian Life*, with Mrs. Eastman's name on the title page. Both editions are illustrated with highly colored chromoliths, eight of which are reproductions of originals in the Hill collection. Here are included

such interesting Minnesota scenes as a view of the Falls of St. Anthony with a canoe carrying a woman and child poised upon the brink of the waterfall, to illustrate the legend of the falls; a picture of Minnehaha Falls, "The Laughing Waters, Three miles below the Falls of St. Anthony"; and a view entitled "Wenona's Leap, Lake Pepin, Miss. River," illustrating the legend of Maiden Rock.⁴ Unfortunately the reproductions are crudely executed, in garish tones, lacking completely the delicate beauty of the originals.

Only one picture in the collection, that of an "Indian Burial Ground," appears to be unpublished. This is a view of a Sioux cemetery with three burial scaffolds on a high bluff overlooking a river and a native village in the valley below. It may well represent the Sioux cemetery on the heights above Kaposia. The lithograph of King's portrait of Red Jacket appears to be an impression from the stone used in the first volume of McKenney and Hall's *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* (Philadelphia, 1837). It is, nevertheless, an interesting Eastman item, for in the margin the artist has written: "This is not to be engraved, but is sent to assist the engraver in keeping the likeness." His own full-length portrait of the Seneca chief, which is executed in sepia, bears marginal instructions in the artist's autograph to "engrave the head and hands in line in place of stipple," with the added comment that "above all the likeness must be preserved."

According to a typewritten description, evidently prepared by an art or book dealer, which accompanies the Eastman collection in the Hill Library, "other drawings executed for Schoolcraft's book were destroyed" in a fire that wiped out the publishing house of J. B. Lippincott and Company, which issued the work. These pictures are said to have

⁴A somewhat different view of Maiden Rock, also by Eastman, appears in Mrs. Eastman's *Dahcotah: or, Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling*, 165 (New York, 1849). Several pictures that appear in Schoolcraft's work were reproduced also in Mrs. Eastman's *American Aboriginal Port Folio*, published by Lippincott in 1853.

been saved only because a member of the firm removed them from the plant before the fire. Nevertheless, a number of other water colors that Eastman prepared for this work have survived. The Minneapolis Public Library, for example, has the original of the view of the Falls of St. Anthony that is reproduced in the first volume of Schoolcraft's work.⁵ And in the Edward E. Ayer Collection of the Newberry Library in Chicago, there are eleven original Eastman water colors, ten of which were engraved for the fourth volume of the same work. Of these, the most interesting for the student of Northwest history are a view of Michilimackinac as seen from the lake and three pictures of buffaloes on the western plains. The well-known view of Indians "Hunting Buffalo in Winter" is included.

Mr. David I. Bushnell, Jr., of the Smithsonian Institution points out that "Eastman's career as an artist may be divided into two distinct periods," and he asserts that the first, extending from the time the artist left West Point until he went to Washington to illustrate Schoolcraft's book, is the "more important." The two decades from 1829 to 1849 afforded Eastman opportunities to perfect his technique while teaching at the military academy, and to accumulate, while living on the frontiers of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Florida, and Texas, the sketches upon which the work of his mature years is based.⁶ As a result of his early experience, the many canvases and water colors executed between 1850 and his death in 1875 are not only productions of artistic merit, but dependable records of the scenery and native life of the frontier West.

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⁵This picture was presented to the library in December, 1892, by Edward E. Ayer of Chicago, the well-known collector of Americana. The Lippincott plant was burned in 1899, according to information furnished by the company.

⁶Many of these sketches have been preserved and are now in the possession of Mr. Bushnell.



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