

10-1-1987

Phil Strong's Buckskin Breeches

Louie W. Attebery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Attebery, Louie W. "Phil Strong's Buckskin Breeches." *The Palimpsest* 68 (1987), 184-188.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol68/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

PHIL STONG'S *Buckskin Breeches*

by Louie W. Attebery

PHILIP DUFFIELD STONG wrote one good novel of the American West, *Buckskin Breeches* (1937). The time has surely come to attempt to show where the book may be placed in the canon of America's western literature, to point out strengths of the work, and to consider Stong's notion of history and its uses.

Phil Stong was born in Keosauqua, Iowa, in 1899, and died of a heart attack one April day in 1957 in Washington, Connecticut. Between those dates he was a football player, a B.A. graduate from Drake University, a dropout from the English graduate program of Columbia University, a high school teacher and coach, an editor for Associated Press, a successful novelist and scenario writer whose *State Fair* (1932) has been standard fare for Hollywood and the musical stage. He was also, say literary biographers Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, a socialist and a Knight Templar.

Buckskin Breeches opens in the state of Ohio and concludes in what was then Wisconsin Territory but is now Iowa (specifically, Van Buren County). Although the book is about what we today geographically call the "Midwest," by its historical content it is a western novel. Any book set in the time and place of settlement moving east to west can lay claim to being a western novel. In 1837 Iowa represented that frontier, that line of settlement beyond which lay the American West.

More specifically, Stong's novel is a *regional* western novel, a category less submissive to definition. H.G. Merriam (former English department head and editor of *Frontier and Midland* at the University of Montana) used to

say that it has taken in each instance about a hundred years for a region to emerge. Settlement, civilization, and self-conscious awareness of itself might summarize the evolution of a region. In that third component — self-conscious awareness — is the production of a regional literature, and the writers who produce it have most often been attracted to the region's history for their subjects. In *Buckskin Breeches* and such lesser novels as *Ivanhoe Keeler*, Phil Stong is a regional novelist treating frontier materials — in this case, Iowa of 1837. In works like *State Fair* and its sequel *Return in August* (1935), he is a *regionalist* using contemporary materials.

Buckskin Breeches is a good book. It has a strong narrative line, engaging readers in the action of the story by making them wish to know what is coming next. It features a well-conceived plot, encouraging the reader to ask why these things happen. Most of the cast are well conceived, and even some of the minor flattish figures are memorable. A final merit of the book emerges through the advancement of our understanding of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis while Stong develops and clarifies his own theory of history.

The story is of Jesse and Margaret Ellison and their four children; they keep a tavern in Ohio through the generosity — or indulgence — of Margaret's father in civilized Cincinnati. Jesse decides to move west, way out to the loway section of Wisconsin Territory, practically virgin land. They join another couple in making the trek and also become the surrogate family for the young, pregnant Georgine Pickett when her husband goes ahead of the others in order to put up a cabin, claim some land, and

do the necessary work to set up a mill. Old Eli Ledom, a Revolutionary War and War of 1812 veteran and Indian-fighting sidekick of Jesse's, is told that at seventy-three he is too old to go. He goes anyway. The move is accomplished in the fall with some hardship and great fatigue, the claims are marked, and Iowa is established. A threat by land speculators to buy the now mapped and improved land is thwarted when the settlers, a mixed group from various sections of America as well as from northern Europe, bid on their own parcels of land at public auction at \$1.25 an acre.

To write of the Iowa frontier of the 1830s is to include Indians, of course. Stong's Indians emerge as marginal, somewhere between the hostility of the clearly remembered Black Hawk and the acculturation of the post-statehood period. The threat of a massacre, although old Eli is hard to convince at first, is reduced to a series of fist fights between ten-year-old Hi Ellison and his young Indian buddies, to whom he introduces fisticuffs. Thus the

In 1837 Iowa represented that frontier, that line of settlement beyond which lay the American West.

feared massacre is no more than black eyes and bloody noses.

Stong creates suspense and invents scenes, difficulties, and conflicts that are convincing. One such scene occurs in the Ohio tavern as a slave catcher notices the beauty of Martha the maid, who is mixing him an eggnog.

She put the bowl down and arranged the napkins and the cups and prepared to serve the men. Still the Southerner's gaze never left her face. She blushed but went on. She finished and curtsied and then the bull-necked man's fist shot out and his fingers clutched her wrist brutally. He glanced at the nails, stared into her eyes.

"Nigger," he hazarded, "where did you run away from?"

Every sound in the barroom stopped. Jesse was out and at the table in an instant. He struck the man's arm at the point of the elbow

with his open hand, grinding the joint back on its own cartilage, so that the Southerner belated and released Martha.

The slave catcher pulls one of the new revolvers on Jesse, who tries to make it plain that the girl is legally free. After giving three warnings, Jesse acts in concert with Old Eli:

There were no more words. Eli and Jesse glanced at each other and the two knives flew together. Eli was old and his knife drove in above the wrist, hung for a moment and dropped to the floor, but Jesse's blade, in its last, venomous arc, lodged exactly between the middle bones of the hand and quivered there.

The man said, "Hunnh!" in surprise. Eli picked up the pistol and began to examine it, curiously, without glancing up when Jesse returned his knife to him.

It is one of many scenes that cinematography could do much with, as are the two following. In the first, it is clear that there is a rift between Jesse and Margaret as Jesse has just called the Reverend Elmer Spence Newton a subjackass:

"He had a call to do God's work. You know more than God?"

The serenity and amusement of Jesse's face as he lighted his pipe quieted her to fury.

"Yes," said Jesse, "if God taught him the Greek he was showing off with one Sunday. Pretty bad."

"You know so much — !" She saw his cold, unmoved face and hesitated, then went on. "He's a minister of the gospel and you're running a tavern."

"Yes — yes, that's true. It's good of you to remind me that I haven't touched bottom yet."

In the other scene, Jesse is on his knees, scrubbing the tobacco-stained tavern floor, for he tries to spare his children the more noisome tasks associated with tavern-keeping:

Then [Jesse] rose quickly and impatiently, without touching his hands to this sewer, and went on with his mop.

He looked up when the door squeaked. . . . Which one would this be?

"Hi! I thought you were in bed three hours ago."

The youngster did not pause. "I hadda go somewhere." He made for the stairs, weaving a trifle as he went. He caught the post and pulled himself up the first step.

"Hi — come here."

The boy paused. "All right, papa. But I'm sleepy." He waited to be dismissed on this plea. He could explain everything — later.

Jesse bent until his nose could catch the boy's breath. "It made you sick, uh?"

"I feel all right, daddy."

Jesse lifted his brows and smiled but his heart was cold and lifeless as a rock. "You threw it up."

"Threw what, father?"

"The whisky."

Hiram nodded. He could strain his trained honesty a trifle but not enough to make the effort useful. "All of us did. Gee, we all thought we'd die. Duffy Hitchcock — he kept going 'oop — oop — oop' for about an hour after he'd got through."

As for struggles and conflicts, Stong creates several of them and several kinds of them. There is the struggle overland, through forests and mud, rising streams, and snowdrifts.

The moral energy of the book develops from the struggles within and between characters.

There is the struggle to clear the land and bring it into production. There is the struggle against cold and hunger, setting in motion the traditional frontier provisioning processes. And these are all well done, convincing and real. But the moral energy of the book develops from the struggles within and between characters, particularly in respect to that time-honored element in human relationships — love. In an amazing display of geometry, Stong develops six sets of triangles of varying degrees of intensity. A brief identification of a few of the characters is necessary to make this business of love triangles clear.

Jesse, forty-six and white-haired, resembles

Old Hickory. Under other circumstances he would have gravitated to a college, for he has a good knowledge of Greek and Latin and reads widely. He is proficient with all the frontier weapons. His past is blighted, for although he fought the British in 1812, his father had been a New York Tory in 1775. Margaret Garrison Ellison knows the temptations of social climbing and whist playing but is intelligent and a good mother to their four children, two of whom seem to favor the Ellisons and two of whom are Garrisons.

David, the oldest son, is nineteen and gray-eyed, like his father. At seventeen, Susan is part style-conscious adolescent and part flirtatious woman who keeps an itinerant musician named Ivanhoe Keeler dangling. Teddy is fourteen, a gentle and somewhat shy Garrison. Hiram at ten is an Ellison, profane, intelligent (recall how he used all the terms of paternal address in an attempt to blunt what he feared would be Jesse's wrath — papa, daddy, father), and bellicose. His frequent black eyes conceal that he is victor more often than loser.

Eli Ledom hates Indians. Dangerous with rifle and knife, he had fought the notorious Simon Girty (a Loyalist who had led war parties against other American frontier settlers). Like Natty Bumppo, Eli is unmarried, though his chastity is open to question. His name is an anagram for *model*, and he is wise and venerable, though impulsive. The Reverend Newton is an eastern minister with advanced ideas and, in Jesse's opinion, backward Greek. Ella Bauer, the town's loose woman, dallies with David. Julia Drummond is the daughter of emigrants whom the Ellisons meet on the way to Iowa. Caesar Crawford and his family settle near the Ellisons. Of the rest of the cast I shall mention only Samuel Carpenter, a man of means who becomes the benefactor of Georgine and Leland Pickett, though otherwise he is a misanthrope who has moved to the West because he was "tired of living with bastards."

But let's look briefly at the triangles. Triangle One: Through much of the book Jesse and Margaret are estranged. Into this void Martha, the maid, would like to step, but her innate decency and Jesse's morality make this triangle potential rather than real. There is no question of Martha's devotion to Jesse, which

Stong's theme is the desire to salvage integrity by withdrawing from the known and comfortable and making a new beginning in the West.

she proves when Jesse outlines a future for her that does not include her accompanying the party to Iowa. In rejecting life without Jesse, the maid stabs herself and dies with his kiss on her lips. Triangle Two: Margaret is attracted to the Reverend Newton, and he pleads for her to run away with him, considering the same two choices of escape that occurred to Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale — the land beyond settlement or a return to the East. Triangle Three: Another three-part tension develops when Margaret is temporarily hostile to the attentions a visiting Boston girl begins to show to the Reverend. He, in turn, ponders Miss Apperson's attractiveness — and Boston position — but rejects her because Margaret Ellison is the object of his passion. But Margaret sincerely loves Jesse, so this triangle, too, remains potential.

Triangle Four: David's involvement with Ella Bauer, whom I have uncharitably called a loose woman, however, is kinetic: it is real, not merely potential. Reluctantly, Ella decides she prefers David's rival for her favors because the rival, though not the lover David is, will inherit the tannery. Frontier sex is well managed here, particularly in one scene in which Ella seduces David. Later, while on the migration, David bitterly reflects on his father's rejection of Ella as a possible daughter-in-law, for David's first encounter with sex has made him vulnerable to her charms. Another wagon joins the little group, and Triangle Five appears in the form of a shy, pale girl, Julia Drummond, who is not without a feminine wisdom of her own. She wins David partly by her quiet strength but partly by her naked foot glimpsed in the firelight.

The final triangle is provided by Susan

Ellison, Ivanhoe Keeler, and Caesar Crawford. It is broken when she rejects the musician and chooses Caesar, a neighbor lad of great promise.

The tension generated by these relationships and the manner in which those passions are managed contribute to the general theme Stong is advancing. That theme may be stated as the desire of a man to salvage the integrity of himself and his family by withdrawing from the known and comfortable and making a new beginning in the West. Withdrawal is thus a strategy for advancement. This general theme divides itself into five subthemes, as Jesse's motives for moving west are clarified: (1) to get his youngsters away from the baleful influences of the tavern and tavern life; (2) to get out from under the father-in-law and become his own man; (3) to make a start for himself and realize ambitions that had earlier almost driven him to Texas; (4) to heal the breach between himself and Margaret; and (5) to take part in the growth of the soil and the development of a free and spacious land.

The book is not blatantly heroic or sentimentally moral. Stong's memorable scene of Old

**"If history is anything,"
Stong writes, "it is not a
record, as has been
reported; it is something
intimately connected with
our lives."**

Eli's death following a stroke contrasts sharply with James Fenimore Cooper's artificial and sentimentalistic manner of the Trapper's death in *The Prairie*. Eli has already earned so much admiration from River Heron and Big Mouth and Ground Hog through his collection of scalps that, almost against his will, he has been reconciled to his Indian admirers and adopted by Ground Hog. With Eli on his death bed, Stong writes:

They sat for a little while and then the door opened and Big Mouth and River Heron

appeared and filled it. They ignored everyone in the room but Eli and went straight to him. Big Mouth looked at him attentively and then spoke in the clear English which he would never confess.

"It is the time, brother."

"Yes, it's the time."

Big Mouth picked up one of the helpless arms and dropped it again. "We see that you are bound. You will soon be free. You will be young. Your knives will flash again. Soon, you and I will dance again."

"And I'll dance better — I'll know the songs. But I'll show you."

Then arrangements for the medicine bundle are made as Big Mouth says:

"This you must take with you. . . . The Little White Buffalo will know you then. All the manitous will know you. The Great Manitou will be happy that you are there."

"That's right," said Eli, "that's good. Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye." The tall, wrinkled chieftains left the cabin.

Eli's eyes were closing for the last coma. "Oh, Manitou —"

Margaret knew and pitied him. "To Jesus, Eli."

"Jesus is an Easterner," said Eli. "Oh, Manitou —"

"History should be taught as a part of life — this life, now, not a strange little English-American fellow cutting up a cherry tree."

Finally, there is the problem of history. If scholars of Stong are few, judging by their output, one useful resource is available and that is his autobiography, *If School Keeps*. From this volume the reader learns many things: that Stong was a bright student, prone to black eyes, who skipped a grade in elementary school; that World War I cost him a close friend; that John Towner Frederick's *The Midland* (a pioneering Iowa regional journal later

absorbed by H. G. Merriam's *Frontier*, thenceforth called *Frontier and Midland*) published young Stong; and that history has its uses. Stong says in the autobiography:

If history is anything it is not a record, as has been reported; it is something intimately connected with our lives; so far as it exists at all it must necessarily lie on the time-point of the present; it is not merely connected to what we believe and live and do. . . .

The first and only importance of history is its application to immediate and intimate life.

And again he says:

If history is not related to life it is useless; if it is related to life it should be taught as a part of life — this life, now, not a strange little English-American fellow cutting up a cherry tree. . . . History disregards the inherent dignity of the individual; that is why it ignores our only vulgate, the truth, and why we have to attack history from roundabout directions, searching through strange paths, through psycho-pathology, through such remote materials as rocks and trees to find out what we are.

And what, we may ask of this writer, *are* twentieth-century Iowans? They are representative of the mulligan stew that is America, not part of a homogenized chicken soup but lumps and globs and liquids of this and that, not totally assimilated. Passion, violence, work, fatigue, endurance, and hope are a few of the human constants connecting today's Iowans with the Ellisons and their neighbors. And if Stong did not invent these insights, he has assuredly given them a memorable and satisfying expression. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

There is a paucity of scholarship on this interesting Iowa writer. Kunitz and Haycraft offer neat summaries of Stong's life and works in *Twentieth Century Authors. Iowa: A Guide to the Hawkeye State*, compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA in 1938, has only a paragraph on him. The curious reader will note Stong's informal and highly entertaining autobiography, *If School Keeps* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1940), excerpted in this essay, and his casual and equally entertaining *Hawkeyes: A Biography of the State of Iowa* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1940). Farrar & Rinehart published *Buckskin Breeches*, also excerpted here.