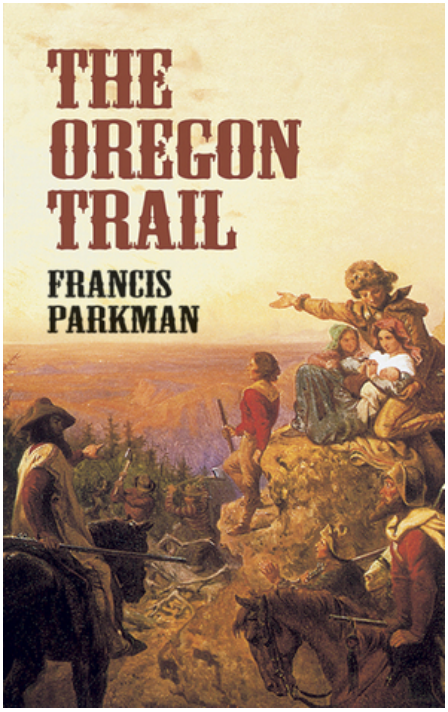

The Oregon Trail

Francis Parkman

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Keen observations and a graphic style characterize the author's remarkable record of a vanishing frontier. Detailed accounts of the hardships experienced while traveling across mountains and prairies; vibrant portraits of emigrants and Western wildlife; and vivid descriptions of Indian life and culture. A classic of American frontier literature.

The Oregon Trail Details

Date	:	Published November 15th 2002 by Dover Publications (first published 1847)
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From Reader Review The Oregon Trail for online ebook

Lori Mulligan says

I began this book because I would like to participate in a reenactment of journeying on the Oregon Trail someday. I completed it because I needed to read a history for my library's summer reading program. Parkman's writing style is elegant. It was eye opening to hear a contemporary's view of Native Americans, emigrants (those journeying West), and Mormons in an unvarnished primary source. Though I couldn't condone any of his racial views, or his dispassionate accounts of dogs killed for the stew pot, what finally wore me down were the dozens of detailed accounts of killing buffalo simply because they were there. His account of making eye contact with a starving buffalo bull, deciding in his heart he would not shoot it if it turned away first, and then shooting it reflexively when the bull walked off so incensed me I found myself scouring The Web for a descendent of Parkman's so I could give him or her a piece of my mind.

Here's the buffalo-killing passage that for me was the last straw:
"The old savage looked up when I first approached, and gave me a fierce stare; then he fell to grazing again with an air of contemptuous indifference. The moment after, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he threw up his head, faced quickly about, and to my amazement came at a rapid trot directly toward me. I was strongly impelled to get up and run, but this would have been very dangerous. Sitting quite still I aimed, as he came on, at the thin part of the skull above the nose. After he had passed over about three-quarters of the distance between us, I was on the point of firing, when, to my great satisfaction, he stopped short. I had full opportunity of studying his countenance; his whole front was covered with a huge mass of coarse matted hair, which hung so low that nothing but his two forefeet were visible beneath it; his short thick horns were blunted and split to the very roots in his various battles, and across his nose and forehead were two or three large white scars, which gave him a grim and at the same time a whimsical appearance. It seemed to me that he stood there motionless for a full quarter of an hour, looking at me through the tangled locks of his mane. For my part, I remained as quiet as he, and looked quite as hard; I felt greatly inclined to come to term with him. 'My friend,' thought I, 'if you'll let me off, I'll let you off.' At length he seemed to have abandoned any hostile design. Very slowly and deliberately he began to turn about; little by little his side came into view, all be-plastered with mud. It was a tempting sight. I forgot my prudent intentions, and fired my rifle; a pistol would have served at that distance. Round spun old bull like a top, and away he galloped over the prairie. He ran some distance, and even ascended a considerable hill, before he lay down and died. After shooting another bull among the hills, I went back to camp." Chapter 26

Bob Schnell says

Francis Parkman Jr.'s travelogue of the Wild West evokes a time and a place very well. The reader gets a very real sense of what it was like to live with various tribes, participate in buffalo hunts, meet up with wagon trains of emigrants, etc. What is missing is any real journalistic probing of what is going on and what it may mean for those who would follow in his footsteps. Obviously, the author never intended to write anything of the sort, but as a witness to a country in the midst of cultural, political and ideological change, it would have been helpful to at least get his opinion. Please note that as a product of its time, this book is not at all politically correct by today's standards and the reader may be a bit shocked at the author's joy in animal slaughter or his description of some Native Americans as "ugly Indians". An extra half star for the inclusion of the antics of Tete Rouge, a fellow traveler in the latter part of the book who provides a nice bit of comic

relief.

Colin says

A very strange mix of a book indeed. The pundits are right - the prose is marvellous, the descriptions riveting, the images produced are magnificent portraits of an age long gone. But what a git of a writer! Probably the only truly racist book I've ever read, and quite startling in his portrayal of the indigenous people of the continent. Francis Parkman really does think he comes from a different species to the north American natives. I shall not attempt to expand on his treatment, in the text, of the 'Indian'. His attitude to the buffalo is far worse, of course, but then we have moved on since then. Worth reading for the beauty of the writing, and I'm sure nobody would be affected by his nineteenth century attitude.

Thom Swennes says

The title of this narrative is somewhat ambiguous as in the author’s own words the primary goal of this account is to relay the life and customs of the plains Indians. One would imagine that the title would indicate that the author actually went to Oregon, which he didn’t. He undertook this westward trek in an attempt to satisfy his curiosity as at the time he couldn’t find reliable published references at the time. This book was first published in 1849 and describes the sights, difficulties and tribulations of a trip across the country to the Rocky Mountains. Stories of hunting and fur traders spur the imagination and the reader can almost picture the unspoiled vista of endless forests and plains. The amazingly descriptive accounts paint a vivid picture of proud Indian tribes at the zenith of their evolution. He had little idea that most of the tribes he met and befriended would be extinct less than a century later. The description of a prairie dog town that he observed would easily serve as an inspiration for Watership Down. Even though he claimed an affinity for the buffalo, this didn’t deter him from arbitrarily and indiscriminately killing them. This book had a number of shortcomings but made up much with color. Most people interested in this time would enjoy this book.

Robert says

An American classic, this is Parkman's personal account of the summer he spent travelling on the Northern Plains, during part of which he lived and hunted Buffalo with a tribe of Oglala Sioux. The book is invaluable for the vivid descriptions of the west. Parkman was on the Plains at a particularly significant moment in American history. He was there in 1846, the first year of the war with Mexico - at a time when troops of regular soldiers and volunteer militia were moving south, riding towards the war. It was a time when mountain men still trapped beaver in the Rocky Mountains, when the Dakota tribes still followed the Buffalo herds, a time when a wagon trains were just beginning to find their way across the plains, some heading to Oregon, others following a prophet to the Great Salt Lake. Parkman encounter all these various people - and wrote about them in descriptions so vivid that his characterizations of them have became their familiar stereotypes - are the foundational iconic images of them - are way they still inhabit the mental landscape of the American West. This is particularly true of the Native Americans. This was a golden sunset moment for them, a transitory moment, a time when their culture, their way of life, was at its height - was only just starting to be influenced by contact with white civilization. Soon it would be changed forever. Parkman describes their culture while it was still pristine - before gold was discovered in California, before their hostility towards the whites, before the Indian Wars, before reservations. Through Parkman's eyes, the reader

sees them as they were, as they had lived for generations. And through Parkman's prose, the reader partakes of their life, eats their meals, sleeps in their tents, rides alongside them hunting Buffalo. His description of the Dakota includes all the mundane details of daily life. Is the major primary source of anthropological/cultural knowledge of the Oglala Sioux. Is foundational for the understanding of the plains Indians. Unfortunately, however, Parkman's observations are flawed by his own limitations. He saw only the surface of Indian lives. Had no interest in their religion, in their rituals, in their ways of thought, their history. He does not write about these things, because he believes that they have no importance, are only the foolish ways of primitive people. He does not respect Indian culture. Does not see them as fellow human beings. Regards them as savages doomed to disappear, to be supplanted by a superior race. This implicit racism also influences his opinions of other people - taints his portrayal of everyone who is from a different ethnic background than his - the Mexican traders, the French trappers, the Irish soldiers, the blacks serving southern officers, etc. And his Anglo-Saxon arrogance is accompanied by a class consciousness that darkens his portraits of everyone lower down on the social scale - the never-do-well settlers on their way to inevitable failure in Oregon, the deluded and uneducated Mormons, etc. These unattractive prejudices are not a surprise. There were endemic to his time and place. He was, after all, a member of a "prominent New England Family", had just graduated from Harvard Law School, and was writing to impress other Brahmins. Condescension was natural to his world - was innate. Still it offends modern sensitivities. Mars his work. Makes those passages of the book difficult, unpleasant, to read. But all is not lost. Some editions of the work come with an antidote to this racial poison. A hero came riding out of the west to the rescue. A 1892 edition of the book was illustrated by Frederic Remington. His line drawings are magnificent - his portraits of everyone, the Native Americans as well as of the frontiersmen, are unfailingly respectful. He ennobles all the people encountered in Parkman's book - transforms them from caricatures into fellow human beings, turns the "savages" into proud people, people who share our common humanity. Rarely has an artist contributed as much value, as much worth, to the book he illustrates, as does Remington to this one. He elevates its tone. Compensates for Parkman's lack of fellow feeling. And the drawings themselves are wonderful. Despite the economy of means used - many are just sketches - they stand at the highest level of the illustrator's art.

KatieSuzanne says

This book was cool as far as people going out exploring the frontier and hanging out with Indians. It gave me a lot of mixed emotions as far as thinking they were awesome men out in the saddle, wondering where the hardy men are like this today, and hearing about Indian ways of life. But then they'd talk about how stupid the Indians were and go out and kill a dozen buffalo just for the fun of it because they were "too ugly to live" and I'd hate them. Plus the title is a little miss leading since they didn't go all that far on the Oregon Trail before they turned around and came back. Apparently I'm in good company since Herman Melville had similar misgivings about the book. I enjoyed it though.

Douglas Dalrymple says

In my little book reviews I’m always coming back to this idea of sympathetic imagination. Sympathetic imagination, for me, is the ability to put oneself in another person’s place, to imaginatively enter into someone else’s mind and perspective. Exercising sympathetic imagination means withholding judgment, extending charity, allowing – either by stepping forward or by not retreating – the gap that separates us from others to close at least a little bit. It’s the stuff of cliché (walking in another’s shoes, seeing through another’s eyes, etc.) but without it life and art are unbearable.

It’s not always easy. Sometimes the effort is exhausting. When it comes to the exercise of sympathetic imagination in reading, it helps when the prose is pleasant and the story a good one. Because characters can disappoint.

Francis Parkman’s autobiographical *The Oregon Trail* is a nice example of what I mean. Fresh out of Harvard, the young Parkman and his friend Quincy Shaw set out in 1846 for the Great Plains. From St Louis they move upriver with a revolving cast of emigrants, trappers, traders and wilderness guides. At Fort Laramie, in what’s now eastern Wyoming, Parkman sets out with a band of Sioux for the Black Hills. He lives with them, hunts with them, eats with them, and smokes with them, for two months.

Parkman explains that he’s had a lifelong fascination with the Indians. As an historian, he would go on to spend most of his career analyzing the story of their relations with the French and British colonists. In order to experience the life of aboriginal Americans in an uncivilized state, he’s travelled halfway across the continent. It’s remarkable, then, how little curiosity he exhibits. To him, the Sioux in whose company he’s living are (for the most part) unenlightened savages. He frankly considers them stupid, cruel, stubborn, backward. He doesn’t ask, or doesn’t think worth reporting, much of what they have to say about the world and their place in it. What does the universe look like to the Sioux in the summer of 1846? Parkman doesn’t explore the question deeply. By the time he’s making his retreat to St Louis at summer’s end, you get the idea that he’s sick to death of Indians and will cheer on their eventual genocide.

That’s probably putting it too strongly, but the fact is that Parkman’s sympathetic imagination utterly fails him. And not only with regard to the Indians. The white man (preferably Anglo-Saxon and Protestant) he considers the paragon of creation. The Indians he places lower; but lower still (he explicitly states), are most of the unlettered French Canadian mountain men, the Mexicans with whom the United States has just entered into war, and the Mormon “fanatics” on their way over the mountains where, Parkman speculates, they’ll try to forge a Californian empire.

(The perfect vermin of the earth for Parkman, however, isn’t human at all. It’s the buffalo. I’m not going to suggest that he owes the beasts the same debt of sympathy he owes his fellow man, but his unrelenting campaign of bloodlust against the buffalo – especially on the return trip – gets hard to stomach.)

Herman Melville, reviewing the book a couple years after its publication, gives Parkman a righteous chastisement for his lack of curiosity and fellow-feeling. Melville in his own masterpiece goes to some length (especially considering the era) to avoid the same pitfall. His Tashtego and Queequeg are fully realized and fully sympathetic men, equal heirs and possessors of earth and sea with Ishmael himself.

However, as Melville says once he’s put away the stick, Parkman’s book is nonetheless successful, wonderfully so, full of fascinating observations of frontier and wilderness life, hilarious and pitiful anecdotes and vignettes, gritty character sketches and reportage. Parkman is a good writer and the story he tells is utterly fresh and bracing. Despite its flaws, *The Oregon Trail* is a real “treasure” of American letters and history. There’s less sympathy than we might have hoped for, yes, but thankfully there’s even less sentimentality.

In the end, Parkman’s limitations don’t let us off the hook. It becomes necessary for us to exercise our sympathetic imagination, as readers, for the benefit of Parkman, who so frequently fails to exercise his own for the benefit of his subjects.

Fredrick Danysh says

Parkman wrote of the 1846 experience of traveling the California and Oregon Trails across the Great Plains and through the Rocky Mountains. A telling look at life on the frontier as it moves westward.

Richard says

In 1846 the author traveled on the Oregon Trail as far as Fort Laramie where he then spent many weeks with some of the friendly Indian tribes in the area, the Dakota, the Ogala. He describes buffalo hunts, Indian traditions, the terrible terrain, the food, the lack of water, the many hostile Indian groups that liked nothing better than to kill whites when they found them. Almost all the things a person would wonder about living in the time period. There is some early mention of the “dreaded Mormons” as they encounter a few advance parties who have been sent out to scout. The author travels down toward present day Pueblo Colorado and hooks up somewhere on the Santa Fe trail on he way back to the “settlements” in Missouri and Kansas. His group encounters the Mormon battalion as they are on their way to Mexico. I really liked this book. It gave me a great appreciation for what it was like to live in that time period. It made me appreciate even more the trek of the Mormon Pioneers and what they obviously had to endure on their way west. Brigham Young was bold to have undertaken the trip across such a terribly barren area on the way to the Great Basin.

Jennifer Zartman says

Francis Parkman writes with incredible style in these memoirs about his "tour of curiosity and amusement to the Rocky Mountains." He wanted to learn about the Indians, to "live in the midst of them, and become, as it were, one of them." He spent weeks among the Ogallala, and even though he suffered from dysentery he embraced every adventure that came his way. His descriptions included vivid word pictures like "cacti were hanging like reptiles at the edges of every ravine." I particularly enjoyed his understatement in his description of riding a mule. "If one is anxious to place himself in a situation where the hazardous and the ludicrous are combined in about equal proportions, let him get upon a vicious mule, with a snaffle bit, and try to drive her through the woods down a slope of 45 degrees...His mule, if she be a true one, will alternately stop short and dive violently forward, and his position upon her back will be somewhat diversified and extraordinary." This book provides wonderful insight into the thinking of the 1840's and a good picture of the true wild west.

John says

For some reason I had the impression that this was some scholarly study of the mass migration of Americans from the midwest to Oregon country in the mid 1800's. But it's not. It is more of a "what I did on my summer vacation" essay. In 1846 at the age of 23 Parkman and his friend Shaw went from St Louis to Ft Laramie, Wyoming more or less on a whim. They had various adventures with frontiersmen, Indians, and buffalo, and then came home.
Paints a good picture of the Great Plains before they were settled. How time flies.

Glen Pekin says

I don't know much about Francis Parkman - New England upper crust. I suppose he would like you if you were one as well. The guy goes west and all is ugliness to him. The ugliness unfortunately is being spoiled by all the ugly people moving west and dispossessing the ugly natives. He helped by killing as many ugly buffalo as possible. He also saw a lot of ugly mountains. Oh, as he tells you over and over - he is sick all the time. He is disturbed by all the other sick people - they are ugly and useless. It was all just ugly - how nice to get back to boring Massachusetts. By the way, the book is considered a classic.

Marti says

There are apparently several versions of this story in existence as the author made multiple revisions over the next 40 years after its initial publication. The edition I read is the first published version which retains material that the author later removed. Most of the removed passages are politically incorrect, though it seems that's not why he removed them.

Although the author believes almost everyone to be his inferior, the story is quite entertaining and laugh-out-loud funny in parts precisely because he is so snarky. Unlike most of the other whites he meets along the way who are motivated by economic necessity to flee their homes, Parkman is a privileged Boston elite who is looking for adventure as well as hoping to write a book about "savage" tribes. Because the author is highly educated, this is a much more literary endeavor than most accounts of the overland journey which are usually written in a journal format by non-writers.

Claudia says

I was disappointed in this book. I had highly anticipated reading this book for several years. I had the impression it was about a journey from Missouri to Oregon or California on the Oregon Trail.

The author only traveled perhaps half of the trail and did not comment or even mention the iconic landmarks like Chimney Rock. Or what it felt like to ride in a Conestoga Wagon.

Rather the author regaled us with reasons why the "white" man was so superior. Indeed he ranked in order men of the prairie thusly: 1. Whites 2. Indians. 3. Mexicans. Gave a biased snap shot of life on the prairie and demonstrated why there are no buffalo left: they were all shot- some for sport and trophies; some for food. The Native Americans depended in them to live. The book shows the beginning of the destruction of the prairie and the beginning of the displacement if the Native American.

Jay says

This surprised me in a number of ways. First, the author doesn’t make it much farther down the Oregon Trail than Wyoming due to ill health, running out of good weather, and an opportunity to do some travelling with

an Indian band. Second, the writing holds up well. To me this read more modernly than many of the books I've read from the turn of the century, some 50 years later. Parkman's goal was to describe what he saw and did, and he does this with vigor but not an overwhelming amount of Victorian-era flourish. And there was a good amount of humor, especially on his return trip taking along an oafish "soldier". He writes about the Indian tribes, but also of the fellow travelers of the trail, the occasional soldiers, the French trappers turned trail leaders that manage to keep his group mostly alive, the bad guys and the good, buffalo, and quicksand. You also got a good idea for Parkman's personality – at times Parkman focuses on his illness, at times he expounds on how races should be ranked. I found the writing interesting, but at times it felt a bit lengthy. It became repetitive fording rivers, killing buffalo, and meeting up with people of questionable intents. On reflection, there were so many ways Parkman and his fellow travelers narrowly escaped death that it is a wonder they returned. That is the allure of this book to young adventurous types. It reads like a more recent Western, with lots of action, and lots of description. I'll be reading more Parkman.

Mary Soderstrom says

For this nebulous book about roads I'm working on, I picked up American historian Francis Parkman's The Oregon Trail this week. My

experience this summer in what was the Oregon Territory started me think about the routes that settlers took going West, and I wanted to refresh my memory.

Whoops! To my surprise I found that I'd not read Parkman's book, although it has been sitting on my shelf for probably 20 years. The historian was in his 20s when he set out with a friend in 1846 to travel across the continent. He didn't make it to the Pacific, but his account of his travels has all the exciting immediacy of the very best travel writing, as well as the weight of an historical document.

His health, never all that good, was ruined on the trip. Nevertheless, despite the fact his illness several times rendered him blind so that he had to have documents read to him, he went on to write a series of about New France and its relations with the British that have no peer in English--and some would say, not in French either.

They are:

Conspiracy of Pontiac (1851)

The Pioneers of France in the New World (1865)

The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century (1867)

La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West (1869)

The Old Régime in Canada (1874)

Count Frontenac and New France under Louis XIV (1877)

Montcalm and Wolfe (1884)

A Half Century of Conflict (1892)

But The Oregon Trail is in a different register. There are moment when I gnashed my teeth about his snobbism, but I was found myself being carried away just as I was by Darwin's The Voyage of the Beagle journals, and Bruce Chatwin's quite different but similarly thought-provoking The Songlines. Great reading when Fall begins to settle down around us, but wanderlust persists.

The book is available in several editions, and also as an e-book at Project Gutenberg.

Karen says

Free Audiobook - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjH60...

Jorvon Carter says

Thoughts.

Maybe I wasn't paying attention, but while reading the book, I forgot why Parkman was in the wilderness in the first place. His purposes are often buried within his prose, so I often asked myself questions like "why is he staying with this tribe?", "Why is he killing this random buffalo?", "Where is he even going?"

Disappointingly and misleadingly by the title, Parkman did not travel the length of the Oregon Trail. As a privileged college-educated WASP, he visited the trail because he was bored or something.

Parkman does not die of dysentery.

The prose is somewhat...intumescent. (In 19th Century fashion, he uses words like that to show off his education.)

This is not a problem with the book, but I don't like how he killed bison for trivial reasons. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how American bison nearly became extinct.

It is interesting to see how the Native Americans lived.

Cliff Harrison says

This is an illustrated true story by Francis Parkman, an American historian who takes you over the Oregon Trail breaking new frontier in the early American West. Parkman went on a 2,000 mile journey through the wilderness of the American West that would take him six months to reach the end of his trail, Fort Laramie. He wrote several historical books as a result of his journey, including "The Oregon Trail".

Readers should beware, Parkman never went to Oregon as the title inspires. His goal was to meet and study the Indians. Coming West to meet the Indians is why he made the trip, not to go to Oregon. Fort Laramie was his destination and turn-around point where he headed back East after his mission was complete.

The Oregon Trail is an easy-to-read, young adult type book that reads like a Western novel complete with illustrations. But it's not fiction, it is the historical recording 23-year-old Parkman, a recent Harvard College student, wrote during his journey from the East to the great American West.

A gifted writer who captured history as his wagon train travels across the Great Plains, the American prairie, through Indian land and buffalo ranges. He was fascinated with the Native American people and that was his primary motivation factor in heading West into untested wilderness territory, to meet these people and write about them.

Parkman's book makes a great read for anyone who wants to escape the modern world and venture into the wagon trails of the Old West where danger and risk are an hourly part of life, and death. Parkman wasn't only a historian, he was a good writer who wrote good ol' stories. It's a book that you don't want to close the back cover on, you want it to keep on going. Unfortunately, it does not. And the greatest let down to most people is the title was a bit deceiving since the wagon train that moved slowly up the Oregon Trail never arrived in Oregon. Still, it was a good read with a great little story.

Andrew says

Parkman's book is often cited by historians as a first-hand story of the western frontier at the time of the Mexican-American War (1846-47). It is colorful and includes historic characters whose path he and his traveling partner would cross, including the Donner Party (though this wagon train wouldn't become led by the Donners until after Parkman met them) and Gen. Steven Kearney, who he met at Fort Leavenworth. Kearney would then become famous (and get the promotion to general) for his march on California during the war.

Parkman's accounts are personal and colorful, benefitting from months spent with Sioux tribes along the frontier of the Rockies. The author, who would later write several histories of the U.S. and Canada, would become a horticultural professor at Harvard. Little of his horticultural interests emerge in this book and his profound disdain for Indian lifestyles is prevalent. It is interesting that critics as early as Hermann Melville critiqued this book, Melville saying that the title was misleading, as Parkman never travels into the Rocky Mountains but comes down the Front Range. The portions of the trail that Parkman covered were the flat first 1/3 of the Oregon Trail.

I read this in the Kindle edition, which is well formatted (unlike many Kindle books). However, it suffers greatly from the lack of the most rudimentary maps.
