



ALBERT BIERSTADT

The Lady and the Mountain Man

She was one of the most widely traveled women of the 19th century. He was a half-wild, one-eyed scoundrel. In the mountains of Colorado, they had a moment.



BY JULIAN SMITH | JAN 7, 2022

It took Isabella Bird three tries to reach Estes Park. It was September 1873, and the British travel writer had heard the remote mountain valley, 50 miles northwest of Denver, was one of the most beautiful places in the Rocky Mountains, if not the entire American West. But it wasn't easy to find.

Finally, after 10 hours of hard riding with a local guide, she came upon a black log cabin with a mud roof covered in animal skins. "It looked like the den of a wild beast," she wrote in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, her popular book about the trip. Its owner stepped out. He was about 45 years old and wore tattered clothes and moccasins, a knife in his belt and a revolver sticking out of his pocket.

The man's face was remarkable. One eye was missing and surrounded by scars, but he was still strikingly handsome. He had tawny curly hair and a thick mustache with the tips curled up. "'Desperado' was written in large letters all over him," Bird wrote.

"Rocky Mountain Jim" Nugent was a mountain man and trapper who was notorious throughout the Colorado Territory for his fierceness. With just his knife and pistol, he had killed the grizzly that had mauled him four years earlier. Mothers were said to warn children that Mountain Jim would get them if they didn't behave.

This article was featured in *Alta Journal's* free Weekend Read newsletter.

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

He raised his cap and asked Bird if she needed any help. “As he spoke I forgot both his reputation and appearance,” she wrote, “for his manner was that of a chivalrous gentleman, his accent refined, and his language easy and elegant.”

Nugent pointed Bird and her guide in the direction of Estes Park. As they rode away at sunset, he said, “I hope you will allow me the pleasure of calling on you.” The request was the spark of a connection as unexpected as it was intense, a collision of opposites that would affect two audacious souls for the rest of their lives. In light of what happened over the next few months, Bird must have wondered later in life what the wisest answer really would have been.

Isabella Lucy Bird was born in 1831 in North Yorkshire, England, the daughter of a clergyman and a Sunday school teacher. For most of her life, she suffered from a litany of health problems: anxiety, insomnia, headaches, back pain. Nothing seemed to help, not even spinal surgery.

Then a doctor suggested she try a sea voyage. That did it: her health and mood soared during her travels, crashing again when she returned home. She sailed to the United States in 1854 and two years later published her experiences as *The Englishwoman in America*. At age 25, she suddenly had a career as a successful travel writer.

In 1872, Bird traveled to New Zealand and Australia, then stopped in Hawaii. At 4 feet, 11 inches tall, with all her ailments and (in her words) “the padded look of a puffin,” Bird was tougher than she appeared. She wrote vivid letters to her sister, Henrietta, about riding horses and climbing Mauna Loa, which became the book *The Hawaiian Archipelago: Six Months Among the Palm Groves, Coral Reefs, & Volcanoes of the Sandwich Islands*. Subsequent letters would become the basis for *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains*.

Leaving Hawaii, she stopped in San Francisco before moving on to the Colorado Territory. Denver was still mostly a blunt-edged frontier town full of gold miners, trappers, Native people, and mountain men. But she was excited, especially when she heard about Estes Park. She set out to find it, wearing Turkish bloomers and carrying a Colt revolver.

“

THIS IS SURELY ONE OF THE MOST ENTRANCING SPOTS ON EARTH. THERE IS HEALTH IN EVERY BREATH OF AIR.

After meeting Nugent, Bird and her guide reached the wide, green valley at 7,500 feet. Covered with pines and streaks of snow, jagged peaks of pink granite rose on three sides. Deer, bighorn, and elk came down to feed in the mornings, and mountain lions, wolves, and grizzlies prowled at night. The only permanent inhabitants were Natives and a few families of ranchers.

“This is surely one of the most entrancing spots on earth,” she wrote in her book. “There is health in every breath of air; I am much better already.” She settled in a small log cabin on a ranch run by a Welshman named Griffith Evans. She explored

the valley and the surrounding peaks and ravines, soaking in the scenery and sleeping under the stars.

Bird kept crossing paths with Nugent, who made a living as a guide and trapper. His background was murky: at various times he claimed to be from the South or Canada, to have served with the fur-trading Hudson's Bay Company, or to have fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. But it was his near-death encounter with the grizzly that had made him famous.

As the self-appointed gatekeeper to Estes Park, he interrogated new arrivals and wasn't above sending those he didn't like down the wrong trails. And he could be terrifying when he had too much whiskey. His trips to Boulder and Denver often ended in drunken fights.

As she got to know him, though, Bird found there was more to "Mr. Nugent." He had a surprising knowledge of literature, an impressive memory, and an undeniable charm. Children loved to climb on his shoulders and play with his curls. "His conversation is brilliant, and full of the light and fitfulness of genius," she wrote. He could also be moody and vain and carefully cultivated his reputation as a renegade.

Bird and Nugent couldn't have been more different, but they were clearly fascinated by each other. He agreed to guide her up the 14,259-foot Longs Peak, and they set out in October with two local youths. She was out of her element, shivering in her thin clothes and borrowed boots. But the scenery was magnificent: "dark pines against a lemon sky, grey peaks reddening and etherealising, gorges of deep and infinite blue," as she wrote.

They made camp in a spruce grove at 11,000 feet, laying blankets on beds of pine shoots and sitting around a huge fire. Nugent sang, recited his own poetry, and told stories of his encounters with Native people. "His manner was certainly bolder and freer than that of gentlemen generally," Bird wrote, but "the desperado was altogether out of sight." They slept with saddles for pillows, listening to wolves howl as the temperature plunged below freezing.

The next day, Bird wrote, Nugent basically had to drag her to the summit on a rope "like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle." They gasped for air as they leapt from rock to rock, scrambling for icy footholds as loose boulders tumbled thousands of feet down the mountain. By the time they reached the peak, one of the young men was bleeding from the lungs, and they were all so parched, they could hardly speak.

Nugent almost had to carry Bird down, offering his shoulders as steps or lowering her with the rope. Back at the campsite, he wrapped her in blankets and laid her by the fire to sleep. As they recovered, Nugent told her stories of his youth and how "a great sorrow...had led him to embark on a lawless and desperate life." As he spoke, his voice trembled and tears rolled down his cheeks.

The intensity of the experience seemed to change things between Bird and Nugent. She had seen firsthand how he could be "gentle and considerate beyond anything." At the same time, she couldn't forget the stories of his drunken rages and wondered how much of his tearful autobiography was true. "Was it semi-conscious acting," she wrote, "or was his dark soul really stirred to its depths?"

In the letters to her sister, Bird included many personal details that were left out of the book. She wrote how captivating she found Nugent's "tempestuous, terrible character" and his "dark fierce proud soul." But he also frightened her.

Nugent apparently fell in love with her. He was unusually quiet during a snowy ride they took in mid-November. "You're the first man or woman who's treated me like a human being for many a year," he told her. Soon after, she wrote her sister, he admitted that after the climb, "he had discovered he was attached to me and it was killing him."

“

I TOLD HIM I COULD NOT SPEAK TO HIM I WAS SO NERVOUS.

Her response probably wasn't what he had hoped for. She was so terrified by this "terrible revelation" that she shook all over and started to cry. Until then, he had been a perfect gentleman—and real gentlemen didn't make sudden confessions of love to people they barely knew. "I told him I could not speak to him I was so nervous," Bird wrote her sister.

A few days later, she wrote Nugent a letter. "There can be nothing but constraint between us therefore it is my wish that our acquaintance shall at once terminate." When she gave it to him, he looked so ill and wretched that "I felt that I had stabbed him."

What she felt more than anything—based on what she was willing to put in writing, at least—was pity. "His life, in spite of a certain dazzle which belongs to it, is a ruined and wasted one," she wrote her sister. In short, he was "a man whom any woman might love but no sane woman would marry."

A week later, Bird heard Nugent was sick and went to check on him. They had a calm talk under a tree. Even if she had been in love with him, she said, his drinking made any long-term relationship impossible. "His answer had the ring of a sad truth in it," she wrote.

"It binds me hand and foot," he said. "I cannot give up the only pleasure I have."

By then, winter had arrived in full. Snow blew through cracks in the wall of Bird's cabin, and the valley's lake was frozen solid enough to hold up a wagon. It was time for her to move on. Nugent gave her a farewell present of a young-beaver skin and escorted her out of the valley. When they parted at the stagecoach stop in Greeley on December 9, he said, "I may not see you again in this life, but I shall when I die."

It happened nine months later. Wyndham Thomas, the Earl of Dunraven, was so entranced by Estes Park that he tried to buy up most of it as a private hunting reserve. Nugent wrote passionate articles opposing the land deal for local newspapers and threatened residents who supported it. One of those was Griffith Evans, Nugent's longtime rival, who had hosted Bird during her stay.

In June 1874, Nugent stopped at a stream near Evans's cabin to water his horse.

There are different versions of what happened next—they may have argued over the land deal or Nugent’s alleged interest in Evans’s daughter. By some accounts, Dunraven was there and goaded Evans on. Whatever happened, Evans ended up shooting Nugent in the head with a shotgun. Nugent lingered for three months, claiming that Evans had shot him with no warning for “British gold.” When he died in September, the total value of his possessions was \$4. Evans was acquitted after pleading self-defense.



Isabella Bird started her writing career at 25.

GETTY IMAGES

Bird’s book about her trip included long descriptions of Nugent and their time together and eventually became widely read. It inspired visitors from both sides of the Atlantic in search of breathtaking scenery populated by the ghosts of legends like Mountain Jim.

Today, Estes Park is a tourist town of western-themed souvenir shops, camping grounds, and historic buildings. While the entrance to Park Mountain National Park

stores, and ice cream parlors. It's the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, founded in 1915 in large part because of the attention Bird's book brought to the area. Over four and a half million people visited in 2019.

Bird became one of the most widely traveled women of the 19th century, publishing accounts of her journeys from Tibet to Morocco, Persia to the South Pacific. She helped set up mission hospitals in Kashmir, Korea, and China and became one of the first women ever elected as a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. She eventually married, briefly, but she never forgot the wild man who made her time in Colorado so unforgettable.

It's impossible to know the truth about other people's relationships, especially when you have only one side of the story. Bird's version of Nugent is the most detailed that survives, but it's plainly colored by emotion and a writer's instinct for drama. It swings between gushy romance and, ironically, the prim Victorian attitude that she rebelled against in her travels and writings.

Bird made Nugent into a classic bad boy, both enticing and frightening. (After his confession of love, she dreamed he shot her with his revolver.) Her pity for his "wasted life" sounds patronizing to contemporary ears, and her account of the relationship makes it sound one-sided. "Don't let anybody think that I was in love with Mountain Jim," she wrote a friend six years after her trip.

In the end, it's almost impossible to imagine Bird, one of the freest women of her age, settling down in Estes Park as a trapper's wife, much less Nugent accompanying her on her travels around the world. Maybe Bird truly believed that it was Nugent who had fallen for her, and that regardless of what anyone felt, the connection was doomed from the start. Maybe, in the end, their love for Estes Park was the only one they shared.

“

I HAVE COME, AS I PROMISED.

But relationships are never simple. Bird obviously cared deeply for Nugent. In September 1874, she was at a hotel in Interlaken, Switzerland, when Nugent suddenly appeared out of thin air to say goodbye. "I have come, as I promised," she recalled him saying. Then he said, "Farewell," bowed, and vanished.

Twelve years later, after the death of her husband, Bird contacted the Society for Psychical Research—a paranormal-investigation group in Britain that still exists today—and asked its researchers to find out the date and time Nugent had died. They wrote to the editors of the *Fort Collins Express* and eventually concluded that the apparition had appeared on the same day, although not at the same hour.

Whether Nugent's spirit returned to her or not, the mountain man haunted Bird's thoughts long after she left Estes Park. Perhaps it wasn't just pity she felt, but something more like regret. The memories, she said later, "came between me and the sunshine, sometimes, and I wake at night to think of them." •



The Confounding Case of Sir St. George Gore



The \$2 Million Treasure in the Rocky Mountains

BY JULIAN SMITH

Julian Smith is an award-winning nonfiction journalist specializing in history, science, and travel.

MORE FROM DISPATCHES



Trailblazer: Nicole Martin



Who Knew?

INTRODUCING

A NEW KIND OF BOOK CLUB

JOIN NOW FOR FREE



Claudio Mariani, an Old-World Sage



Journals That Will Get You Writing



Five Men, Six Days, and 34 Miles



The Woman Who Turned Orange County Blue



A Dangerous Rescue in the Trinity Alps



Buried Histories



Choosing the Right Time to Become a



Living Treasures of the American West



INTRODUCING
A NEW KIND OF BOOK CLUB

JOIN NOW FOR FREE

Alta



[DISPATCHES](#)

[CALIFORNIA BOOK CLUB](#)

[ABOUT](#)

[JOIN US](#)

[CULTURE](#)

[NEWSLETTERS](#)

[MASTHEAD](#)

[MEMBER SUPPORT](#)

[BOOKS](#)

[EVENTS](#)

[CLUBHOUSE](#)

[CONTACT](#)

Alta Journal participates in an affiliate marketing program with Bookshop.org in order to support independent booksellers. *Alta Journal* does not receive any commissions on books purchased from our site. All commissions are distributed to our bookstore partners.

©2022 SAN SIMEON FILMS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

[Privacy Policy](#) [Your California Privacy Rights](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Site Map](#)