ESSAY REVIEW

"The Writingest Explorers":
The Lewis and Clark Expedition
in American Historical Literature


On September 26, 1806, just four days after returning from the Pacific coast, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark settled into a rented room at Pierre Chouteau's and "commenced wrighting." Journal entries, scientific observations, ethnographic notes, and detailed maps—a virtual encyclopedia of the West—needed to be examined, catalogued, and arranged for further study. Surveying the literary remains of their expedition, Lewis and Clark surely would have agreed with historian Donald Jackson that they were the "writingest explorers" the West had yet seen. The struggle to understand the meaning of what Clark once called a "vast, Hazardous and fatiguing enterprize" began in that St. Louis room and continues into our own time.

I wish to thank James Axtell, Kay Graber, Gary Moulton, and the late Donald Jackson for their comments. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Donald Jackson.

3 Clark to Lewis, July 24, 1803, ibid., 1:112.

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Both the explorers and those who followed them sensed that the expedition occupied a special place in American history. But the exact character of that place has often proved elusive. Confusion and ambiguity about the meaning of the venture surfaced no more than two days after the party's return. St. Louis townspeople, bent on celebrating the homecoming, hosted a grand dinner and ball at William Christy's city tavern. Those festivities included a round of toasts. Such expressions were an indicator of the expedition's public image, a kind of initial evaluation of what the explorers had accomplished. And if the drinking at Christy's meant anything, merchants and traders were not quite sure what Lewis and Clark had done. The toasts that night praised the nation and the Louisiana Territory, memorialized Christopher Columbus and George Washington, and lauded "the fair daughters of Louisiana—May they ever bestow their smiles on hardihood and virtuous valor." Once Lewis and Clark withdrew, as custom required, they were cheered for "their perilous services" to the nation.4

The exuberant townspeople of St. Louis were not alone in their confusion about the expedition's significance. Was the great trek nothing more than a grand adventure at public expense? When a group of citizens at Fincastle, Virginia, sent their congratulations, the testimonial emphasized daring against terrible odds. "You have navigated bold and unknown rivers, traversed Mountains which had never before been impressed with the footsteps of civilized man, and surmounted every obstacle, which climate, Nature, or ferocious Savages could throw in your way." A passing mention of extending geographic knowledge was overwhelmed by a burst of patriotic rhetoric comparing Lewis and Clark to Columbus. Fincastle residents were ready to predict that the explorers would enjoy "pure and unsullied" fame. But the reasons for that reputation seemed hard to define.5

St. Louis merchants and Fincastle well-wishers could be excused for their uncertainty about the journey. They had seen nothing of the journals, maps, and specimens brought back from the West. Yet the public confusion about the expedition was shared by Lewis and Clark as well as Jefferson. Had the undertaking achieved its central purpose? From its inception the enterprise had one goal. As the president put it to Lewis in June 1803: "The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream[s] of it, as, by it's [sic] course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregan [sic], Colorado, or any other river may offer the most direct and practicable water communication

4 Western World, Oct. 11, 1806.
across this continent for the purposes of commerce." When Lewis appeared to stray from that objective, Jefferson reined him in with a sharp reminder that "the object of your mission is single, the direct water communication from sea to sea formed by the bed of the Missouri and perhaps the Oregon." Whatever else his Corps of Discovery might accomplish, whether in science or diplomacy, Jefferson was intent on tracing that passage to India.

Sitting in their St. Louis rooms, the president's men had to face an unpleasant reality. They had failed to find that "direct water communication from sea to sea." Indeed, what they had come upon were mountain barriers that made such a passage virtually impossible. Torn between accurate reporting and the desire to satisfy their patron, the explorers sought to put the best face on failure. Writing to Jefferson just one day after the end of the journey, Lewis assured the president that the expedition "penetrated [sic] the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean, and sufficiently explored the interior of the country to affirm with confidence that we have discovered the most practicable rout[e] which does [sic] exist across the continent by means of the navigable branches of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers." But what the explorer gave with one hand he snatched away with the other. Lewis admitted that the passage, while valuable for the fur trade, was hardly a plain path across the continent. There was no direct water communication and the northern overland route charted by the captains would never take the place of sea lanes around the Cape of Good Hope. As Lewis delicately put it, the overland path was useful only for goods "not bulky brittle nor of a very perishable nature." Clark walked the same tightrope. Writing a letter he knew would be quickly printed in many western newspapers, the explorer pronounced the venture "completely successful." But there was the inevitable hedge. Clark had "no hesitation in declaring that such as nature has permitted it we have discovered the best rout[e] which does exist across the continent of North America in that direction." But what nature had permitted was not quite what Jefferson had in mind.

The president's own understanding of the expedition proved equally selective. Jefferson's initial reaction—"unspeakable joy"—at the safe return of the party was reflected in his December 1806 annual message to Congress. Legislators were told that the expedition "had all the success which could have been expected." The measure of that success came as the explorers
"traced the Missouri nearly to its [sic] source, descended the Columbia to the Pacific ocean, ascertained with accuracy the geography of that interesting communication across our continent, learnt the character of the country, of its [sic] commerce and inhabitants.""10 By the time Lewis got to Washington in January 1807, Jefferson must have begun to realize that his "interesting communication" was still more hope than reality.

When the expedition was in its earliest planning stages, Attorney General Levi Lincoln warned Jefferson about the high price of failure. Lincoln evidently had seen an early draft of expedition instructions, a draft containing little about ethnography and natural history. Lincoln suggested that "some new aspects be usefully given to the undertaking, and others made more prominent." As Lincoln saw it, the expedition ought to pursue scientific objectives so that if the passage to the Pacific proved illusory there would still be much to claim.11 The Attorney General's suggestions were both politically astute and strangely prophetic. By the summer of 1808 Jefferson was busy reshaping the meaning of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Writing to French naturalist Bernard Lacépède, he asserted that "the addition to our knowl[e][d]ge, in every department, resulting from that tour, of Messrs. Lewis and Clarke [sic], has entirely fulfilled my expectations in setting it on foot."12 As the hope of a water passage faded, the image of the expedition as a great scientific enterprise grew brighter. Jefferson's correspondence with Bernard McMahon and Charles Willson Peale pointed to that new understanding of the expedition's central mission. Levi Lincoln had been right. Science, the shape of strange animals, exotic Indians, and useful plants might rescue the whole venture from oblivion.

The emphasis on scientific accomplishment fit Lewis's personal conception of what he always called his "tour" of the West. Although he once told guests at a Washington dinner that the establishment of an American trading post on the Columbia would prove the expedition's greatest attainment, that bit of geopolitical fortune telling was not at the heart of Lewis's writing.13 In the spring of 1807 Philadelphia printer John Conrad issued a prospectus for Lewis's proposed three-volume expedition report. Lewis intended that the first volume be "a narrative of the voyage, with a description of some of the most remarkable places in those hitherto unknown wilds of America ... together with an itinerary of the most direct and practicable rout[e]

11 Lincoln to Jefferson, April 17, 1803, ibid., 7:35.
12 Jefferson to Lacépède, July 14, 1808, ibid., 2:443.
across the Continent of North America." Here was the tale of adventure sought by an enthusiastic public. But in keeping with the new emphasis on expedition science, Lewis promised two full volumes packed with ethnography, botany, zoology, and "other natural phenomena which were met with in the course of this interesting tour." In many ways this prospectus was the formal announcement of the new wisdom about the expedition. Jefferson's desired passage and the failure to find it was lost in glowing promises of memorable scientific advances.

The success of this new interpretation depended on the timely publication of Lewis's history of the expedition. By mid-1807 he had made preliminary arrangements for printing the work. Plans were also underway for engraving maps and plates. The only thing lacking was a completed manuscript. Nearly a year later an impatient Jefferson prodded Lewis for news. "We have no tidings yet of the forwardness of your printer." The president could only hope that "the first part will not be delayed much longer." A full year after administering that polite scolding, Jefferson admitted that "every body is impatient" for the great work.

Word of Lewis's suicide at Grinder's Stand on the Natchez Trace in 1809 was shocking enough. Almost as stunning was news that Lewis had made virtually no progress on his literary project. In late 1809 Lewis's publishers wrote Jefferson with the sorry news that "Govr. Lewis never furnished us with a line of the M.S. nor indeed could we ever hear any thing from him respecting it tho frequent applications to that effect were made to him." Lewis's failure as an author and his untimely death now set off a complex series of events that finally led William Clark to obtain the services of Philadelphia lawyer and littérateur Nicholas Biddle. What Biddle finally brought to press in 1814 was essentially what Lewis had proposed as his first volume. Here, in an edition of only 1,417 copies, was the story of the expedition as a glorious western adventure. Readers would find a powerful story but no science. As Jefferson lamented to Alexander von Humboldt, "the botanical and zoological discoveries of Lewis will probably experience greater delay, and become known to the world thro other channels before that volume will be ready."

14 The Conrad Prospectus (Philadelphia, c. April 1, 1807), in Jackson, ed., Letters, 2:395. Although the prospectus was printed by Conrad, it was written by Lewis while the explorer was staying in Philadelphia.
15 Jefferson to Lewis, July 17, 1808, ibid., 2:445; and Jefferson to Lewis, Aug. 16, 1809, ibid., 2:458.
16 C. and A. Conrad to Jefferson, Nov. 13, 1809, ibid., 2:469.
17 Jefferson to F.H. Alexander von Humboldt, Dec. 6, 1813, ibid., 2:596.
Publication delays, omission of the vital scientific data, and poor sales all conspired to produce an expedition record with little public appeal. Stripped of its intellectual achievements, the Lewis and Clark expedition was increasingly viewed by Americans as a great national adventure. Jefferson's bold western thrust had been transformed into a symbol for a westering nation. But the symbol lacked substance. No wagon trains followed the expedition's overland track. American diplomats caught up in the Oregon question used the voyages and travels of Captain Robert Gray and the Astorians to justify Yankee claims on the Columbia. An occasional eastern promoter might call up the captains' ghosts but even those appearances were few and far between. Americans had not lost a national fascination with exploring the West. Lewis and Clark simply could not compete with the much-publicized exploits of John Charles Frémont and other pathfinders. Jefferson's Corps of Discovery had been eclipsed by Frémont and explorer-scientists like John Wesley Powell, Clarence King, and F.V. Hayden. Eliminated from the scientific lists, Lewis and Clark fared poorly against popular heroes like Jesse James and Kit Carson. By the late nineteenth century the expedition had almost disappeared from the historical landscape.  

The struggle to recover the expedition and its meanings for American history began in June 1891 when New York publisher Francis P. Harper wrote naturalist and ex-Army surgeon Elliot Coues asking if he would be interested in editing a new printing of the Biddle narrative. What pushed Harper to make such a suggestion has never been clearly explained. Harper and Brothers had obtained copyright to the Biddle edition in 1842 and had over the years issued printings of an abridged version of the narrative. In 1891 Harper evidently intended no more than a reprint of Biddle with some explanatory notes. Whatever Harper's motives and plans, the choice of Coues was an inspired one. During the 1860s Coues served as an Army surgeon at a number of frontier posts. That western exposure and later work for the Northern Boundary Commission and the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories gave Coues's lifelong interest in ornithology a wider field. Here was a man who knew much of the Lewis and Clark West from personal experience and was ready to appreciate the expedition's scientific labors.

Coues's "discovery" of the original Lewis and Clark journals at the American Philosophical Society and his cavalier treatment of those docu-
ments is a familiar story. What is important is the refurbished image of the expedition that emerged when the Biddle-Coues edition appeared in 1893. Coues centered his extensive annotations on three subjects. The eighteenth century had defined natural history in the broadest terms, encompassing everything from botany to zoology. Coues found that definition congenial to his own scientific method and busied himself annotating expedition observations on western plants and animals. Lewis had once promised a full accounting of western Indian life and material culture. Little of that ethnography made it into the Biddle narrative. The late nineteenth-century frontier had seen valuable work done by soldier-ethnographers like John Bourke and John Wesley Powell. Influenced by those examples, Coues spent considerable annotation space commenting on native customs, behavior, and objects. Finally, Coues sought to identify as many Lewis and Clark campsites as possible. He did this neither from an antiquarian passion nor a boosterism that shouted "Lewis and Clark slept here." Rather, he wanted to place Lewis and Clark at the center of western exploration. More than Fremont and the post-Civil War surveys, Lewis and Clark had scientific primacy. As Paul Cutright observed some seventy years after Coues's work first appeared, that new edition "focused attention for the first time on the vast amount of unpublished and virtually unknown scientific data in the original journals and, thereby, on the salient roles played by Lewis and Clark as outstanding pioneer naturalists." 19

Any significant reassessment of the Lewis and Clark expedition required publication of the original journals. Coues's annotations might suggest new directions, but they were no substitute for the captains' own words, maps, observations, and specimens. In 1901, with the twin centennials of the Louisiana Purchase and the expedition at hand, the American Philosophical Society decided to seek publication of its treasured expedition records. Negotiations with Dodd, Mead and Company followed as did a search for an editor. Reuben Gold Thwaites, then superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, was eventually chosen for the task. Thwaites had just completed a massive edition of the Jesuit Relations and enjoyed a growing reputation as a documentary editor. Equally important, he had at Madison a skilled staff of research associates, including Louise Phelps Kellogg and Emma Hunt Blair. Thwaites's work on the Lewis and Clark manuscripts is well known and has received careful commentary in Paul Cutright's comprehensive History of the Lewis and Clark Journals. Thwaites predicted that his edition would prompt "a new view of Lewis and Clark." He was

especially sanguine about prospects for a thorough evaluation of expedition science. "The voluminous scientific data here given—in botany, zoology, meteorology, geology, astronomy, and ethnology—is almost entirely a fresh contribution." But Thwaites had more than science on his mind. Like his friend Frederick Jackson Turner, he believed that explorers were the vanguard in the steady westward march of the young republic. Thwaites and Turner shared the notion of sequential development on the frontier. Lewis and Clark were at the head of an irrepressible American advance to the Pacific, an advance that promised political democracy, economic prosperity, and civilized values. For Thwaites, the expedition represented "that notable enterprise in the cause of civilization."21

The Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, published by Dodd, Mead in 1904-1905, quickly found its place on library shelves and in private collections. But the volumes did not spark a substantial reevaluation of the expedition. In fact, Thwaites's own writing about Lewis and Clark remained traditional in narrative style and emphasis on high adventure. In 1904, while still working on the journals, he wrote A Brief History of Rocky Mountain Exploration, with Especial Reference to the Expedition of Lewis and Clark. The book offered a chronological treatment of the journey, spiced with quotes from the then unpublished journals. Perhaps Thwaites thought reading those lines would be reward enough since the Lewis and Clark chapters never rose above simple storytelling. Thwaites claimed that the expedition was "the most important and interesting of Rocky Mountains explorations" but let readers struggle to define that import and interest.22 Several years later Thwaites had another opportunity to explain the expedition to a wider audience. In collaboration with Calvin Noyes Kendall, he wrote A History of the United States for Grammar Schools. Here was a chance to give young students a glimpse of that "new view of Lewis and Clark" promised some seven years before. But it was a promise largely unfulfilled. Seventh- and eighth-graders got a meager outline of the expedition's progress across the continent. Thwaites's own Turnerian interpretation came to the surface when students were instructed about the venture's larger meaning. "The path having now been broken by Lewis and Clark, wandering fur traders soon thronged into the Far West. Many American settlers also opened farms in what became known as the Oregon Territory, and their

21 Ibid.
22 Thwaites, A Brief History of Rocky Mountain Exploration, with Especial Reference to the Expedition of Lewis and Clark (New York, 1904), 187.
presence furnished a basis for our later claim to the Northwest Coast.\textsuperscript{23} Thwaites’s new view ended up as nothing more than a vision of the expedition as an agent of a triumphant manifest destiny.

In the four decades that followed publication of the Lewis and Clark journals, American historians paid little attention to the West in general and Jefferson’s explorers in particular. Edward Channing, the first professional historian to use the Thwaites edition, saw the expedition as a scientific venture. But the dimensions of that science eluded him, and he quickly fell back on the expedition-as-great-adventure approach, concluding that the journals “read like a romance.”\textsuperscript{24} The standard school text for the period, David S. Muzzey’s \textit{American History}, gave one scant paragraph to the expedition. Like Thwaites, Muzzey saw Lewis and Clark as part of an inevitable American conquest of the West.\textsuperscript{25}

While textbook writers and some historians continued to believe that the expedition had some significance—however hard to define—others were beginning to doubt that Lewis and Clark were anything more than adventurers. Frederic L. Paxson’s influential \textit{History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893} argued that the expedition produced neither lasting scientific results nor the basis for future settlement. Paxson insisted that “the results of the Lewis and Clark Expedition were not commensurate with the effort or the success that attended it.”\textsuperscript{26} Other frontier historians tended to agree. What really mattered in the history of the West was land, cattle, railroads, and the Indian wars. Dan Elbert Clark, a prominent western historian in the 1930s, found that the expedition failed to publish its findings, findings that had no lasting significance.\textsuperscript{27} But no scholar in those years fashioned so negative an image of the expedition as did Walter Prescott Webb. In his \textit{The Great Plains}, Webb insisted that the Lewis and Clark journals were “meager and unsatisfying.” Pressing his indictment, Webb maintained that a reading of Lewis and Clark revealed a “lack of specific detail, a vagueness, an absence of names of persons and places in connection with episodes related.” Webb was convinced that neither explorer knew anything about geology, botany, zoology, or ethnography. “Why a man of Jefferson’s philosophical and scientific turn of mind,” Webb wondered aloud, “should

\textsuperscript{23} Thwaites and Calvin Noyes Kendall, \textit{A History of the United States for Grammar Schools} (Boston, 1912), 236.
\textsuperscript{24} Edward Channing, \textit{The Jeffersonian System, 1801-1811} (New York, 1906), 94.
\textsuperscript{25} David S. Muzzey, \textit{American History} (Boston, 1911), 210.
\textsuperscript{26} Frederic L. Paxson, \textit{History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893} (Boston, 1924), 137.
\textsuperscript{27} Dan E. Clark, \textit{The West in American History} (New York, 1937), 405-8.
have been unable to select more capable men for the enterprise, keen observers with trained minds, is hard to understand."^{28}

In the midst of cliché-ridden textbooks and professional historians either indifferent or openly hostile to the expedition, the 1930s saw two scholars offer serious studies of the journey. John Bartlett Brebner’s carefully researched and well-written *Explorers of North America* was a thoughtful narrative history of the major expeditionary probes from coastal margins to interior plains and mountains. Brebner defined his geographical arena as North America, breaking from the parochial limits of the United States. He argued persuasively that French Canada, Russian Alaska, and the Spanish Southwest were essential parts of the wider story. Brebner saw the Lewis and Clark expedition as the conclusion of imperial conflicts that had shaped the history of the continent since the age of Columbus. More important, he portrayed the expedition as the beginning of professional, scientific studies of the West. “It is impossible,” he asserted, “not to feel that the Lewis and Clark expedition opened a new era in North American exploration.” Brebner’s Lewis and Clark were hard-eyed pragmatists supported by the best available technology and a national treasury. There was no romance here, no chasing after myths of Welsh Indians or elusive Northwest Passages. Lewis and Clark were wholly “unlike the daring dashes of the French and the Canadians or the grand cavalry marches of the Spanish.” In the end, Brebner offered an expedition suited to a rational, technological society. “Its success,” he wrote, “was a triumph of the elaborate co-ordination of geographical and technical knowledge and of the expenditure of public money without interest in material return.”^{29}

Brebner’s evaluation of Lewis and Clark was based on reading the Thwaites edition as well as a broad knowledge of North American exploration. No scholar had yet undertaken the sorts of specialized studies Thwaites envisioned in 1905. Those studies might have begun with botany, zoology, or ethnography. That the first specialized expedition monograph was in linguistics proved a considerable surprise. In the 1930s Elijah H. Criswell came to the University of Missouri to pursue graduate studies in English. At Missouri Criswell fell under the influence of Professor Robert L. Ramsay. Ramsay, one of the foremost scholars of American regional language, suggested that Criswell study the Lewis and Clark journals as a

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means to probe "what is truly American in our language.?" Challenged by Ramsay, Criswell began a thorough study of the language in expedition records. This was no narrow undertaking. Criswell and Ramsay defined language in the broadest terms. Scientific names, nautical phrases, military commands, medical jargon, frontier slang, and geographic descriptions all drew Criswell's attention. Employing the advice of several professional botanists and zoologists, he compiled the first comprehensive list of Lewis and Clark flora and fauna. Perhaps most valuable, the dissertation contained an extraordinary "Lewis and Clark Lexicon." From aborigines to Yellowstone, Criswell defined words as they were used in the period and gave the necessary Lewis and Clark references.

Published as part of the University of Missouri Studies in 1940, Criswell's *Lewis and Clark: Linguistic Pioneers* drew scant notice from historians. But its achievement should not be measured by that lack of attention. At a time when few scholars were studying the expedition, Criswell produced a book of genuine range and imagination. With little support from historians and no models on which to pattern his work, Criswell defined a crucial aspect of the expedition and wrote about it with grace and skill. That the book has never been reprinted suggests that its accomplishment has yet to be fully appreciated.

Brebner's technocrats and Criswell's pupils of American English seemed remote from the West Bernard DeVoto sought to chronicle. Journalist, novelist, and magazine editor, DeVoto was also a passionate student of those lands beyond the Mississippi. His trilogy—*Year of Decision: 1846* (1942), *Across the Wide Missouri* (1947), and *The Course of Empire* (1952)—remains required reading on subjects as diverse as the Rocky Mountain fur trade, the conquest of California, and Jefferson's vision of an American empire. In the 1930s DeVoto was primarily interested in Mark Twain and western literature but Lewis and Clark were never far from mind. When the Christmas 1936 issue of the *Saturday Review* lacked a lead essay, editor DeVoto decided to write a Lewis and Clark piece. Titled "Passage to India: From Christmas to Christmas with Lewis and Clark," it tracked the expedition from Fort Mandan's bountiful holidays to the lean celebrations at Fort Clatsop. Here was DeVoto at his storytelling best, filling the reader's mind with images of firelight and shadow. But behind the dancing language was a real idea, what he would jokingly call years later an important

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31 Cutright, *History of the Lewis and Clark Journals*, 208. See also a brief biographical sketch of Criswell by Cutright in *We Proceeded On* (February 1979), 6-7.
"Historical Idea." The expedition touched "a crisis of world polity." Jefferson's dream of an American passage to India meant something central about the imperial destiny of the young republic. In 1936 DeVoto was not quite sure how the fabled Northwest Passage, Jefferson's imperial vision, and a band of tattered soldiers all fit together. Making the connections would take another decade and a half.

More than once in the years that followed DeVoto gave thought to writing a full narrative history of the expedition. But other books kept getting in the way. Manifest Destiny, the Mexican War, and California all seemed more compelling. Those events and places came together in *Year of Decision: 1846*, a book that sought to "realize the pre-Civil War, Far Western frontier as personal experience." That book forced DeVoto to confront the origins of empire in the West. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Jefferson and his captains were at the heart of that powerful drive west. In the mid-1940s DeVoto seemed ready to write his book on Lewis and Clark. He confidently told Henry Steele Commager that he was "eyeing" the explorers. And there was ample evidence of DeVoto's growing Lewis and Clark interest in a 1945 essay for *Harper's Magazine* on the meaning of the expedition. He was increasingly convinced that Lewis and Clark's wilderness errand said something fundamental about the history of North America, perhaps even the history of the world. The expedition was, he asserted, "conceived by the earliest, most farseeing of American geopoliticians, Thomas Jefferson, as a necessary step in the defense of the United States against expanding, rival empires in the Western Hemisphere." But as chance had it, Lewis and Clark were shouldered aside by the Rocky Mountain fur trade. What began as a simple assignment providing captions for recently discovered paintings by Alfred Jacob Miller blossomed into a masterful book. *Across the Wide Missouri* was DeVoto's evocation of the western fur trade. Lewis and Clark had gotten lost in the presence of Jim Bridger, Black Harris, and Tom Fitzpatrick.

The mountain men and their wild Green River rendezvous only temporarily overshadowed Lewis and Clark. By late 1946 DeVoto was busy "filling his tank" for a book about the expedition. That tank was getting

33 DeVoto, *Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston, 1943), xi.
far more than readings of the Lewis and Clark journals. DeVoto now believed that a simple narrative could not do justice to the larger history of the expedition. Garrett Mattingly, DeVoto's closest historian friend, once wrote that "American history was history in transition from an Atlantic to a Pacific phase." DeVoto’s problem was to trace that transition without becoming mired in the travels of every explorer from Columbus and Cabot to Pike and Frémont. Lewis and Clark were important, but DeVoto now knew that they were at the end of the transition, not at its beginnings.

What had started as a traditional history of the great expedition became DeVoto’s most important and most complex book. The Course of Empire was dominated by two powerful, interconnected ideas. Struggling to find meaning in that Atlantic to Pacific shift, DeVoto settled upon the search for the passage to India as his unifying theme. But he was not interested in following a Northwest Passage through Arctic waters. DeVoto’s route was the Missouri River, Marquette’s “Pekitonoui,” the river of the big canoe. He had once told Catherine Drinker Bowen that American history was “the most romantic of all histories.” That romance meant leading the reader through all the myths, dreams, and mad schemes that drove everyone from the Sieur de la Vérendrye to Lewis and Clark into “the Northwestern Mystery.”

But The Course of Empire was far more than a fascinating catalogue of geographic delusions. DeVoto wanted the book to explain how the United States had become a continental nation, how it had come to occupy what Abraham Lincoln called a “national homestead.” DeVoto had been thinking about continentalism since the 1930s. His Lewis and Clark research convinced him that geographic realities—river systems and mountain ranges—shaped American expansion. Here DeVoto danced with a dangerous idea. Geographic determinism, the likes of which had been proposed earlier in the century by Ellen Churchill Semple and Albert P. Brigham, reduced history to mathematical precision. DeVoto always affirmed the primacy of individuals in history. His continentalism, rooted in a sure sense of western geography, focused on Thomas Jefferson. DeVoto had been saying for years that Jefferson was the first American geopolitician, and in The Course of Empire he set out to prove it.

Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and William Clark occupied a mere 170 pages in a book of well more than 500 pages. But those concluding chapters were the crucial ones. Here was the culmination of a three-century

37 Mattingly's memorable phrase is recorded in DeVoto to Mattingly, Nov. 1, 1945, ibid., 273.
38 DeVoto to Bowen, n.d. but probably 1946, ibid., 285.
quest for the Northwest Passage. Those pages made plain the first move by the United States to dominate the continent. Recounting Jefferson’s 1803 message to Congress proposing a western expedition, DeVoto found a president bent on making the United States a Pacific power. Challenged by Anglo-Canadian moves carried out by Alexander Mackenzie and driven by his own understanding of western geography, Jefferson fashioned an enterprise that would wrest an empire from rival hands. The explorers were engaged in an “imperial necessity,” a “heavy national responsibility.” In the midst of writing *Course of Empire* DeVoto told Mattingly that he wanted to “chock up American history on blocks, turn it around and give it a new orientation.” The Lewis and Clark expedition was a grand adventure and DeVoto related it with zest and delight. But he knew that Jefferson and the captains meant to achieve more than a daring western tour. The expedition made the United States a continental power, a force in world history.

*Course of Empire* gave the Lewis and Clark expedition context and meaning. DeVoto had succeeded in making the expedition into something more than a company of soldiers bound for the Great Western Sea. The book brought its author critical acclaim but most academic reviewers missed its central message. Accustomed to a literary DeVoto, scholars found it easy to dismiss or ignore the book and its themes. Historians in the 1950s did not have the West on their research agendas. The Western History Association was years away. *Course of Empire*, the book that might have revitalized studies of Lewis and Clark, had the misfortune to fall into a vacuum. Praised and purchased, *Course of Empire* had no immediate heirs.

DeVoto’s grand sweep of western history excited little interest in the 1950s. John Bakeless certainly found nothing compelling about such a synthesis. Drawn to the expedition as a way to write biography, Bakeless began his research in 1939. Wartime service interrupted his progress, and it was not until 1947 that *Lewis and Clark: Partners in Discovery* was finally published. This was the descriptive history of the expedition DeVoto had once assayed. Bakeless wrote traditional narrative largely untouched by larger questions of meaning and interpretation. His readers got a rattling good tale but remained innocent about questions of science, Indian relations, geography, and international politics. Bakeless’s version of the expedition

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fit the optimism of post-war America, an America confident about its place in the world. DeVoto’s disturbing questions about imperialism seemed as out of place as did his spirited defense of wilderness and conservation issues.\(^4\)

Perhaps more than fresh ideas, the study of the expedition needed new evidence. There had been important documentary discoveries including the publication of Sergeant John Ordway’s diary and Lewis’s Ohio River journal in 1913.\(^5\) More dramatic was the 1953 discovery of Clark’s field notes covering the period from December 1803 to April 1805. After extended litigation the Clark materials were published by Ernest S. Osgood in 1964.\(^6\) At the same time New York’s Antiquarian Press reprinted the Thwaites edition, bringing the journals back into print for the first time in some forty years. Here was fuel enough to rekindle expedition fires.

One person was largely responsible for fanning that flame. In the mid-1950s Donald Jackson was editor at the University of Illinois Press. While busy shepherding other authors’ manuscripts through publication, he had also done considerable research and writing on his own. Custer’s 1874 Black Hills reconnaissance and the early history of Fort Madison in present-day Iowa captured his attention. When the press decided to re-issue the autobiography of Black Hawk and could find no one eager to edit the book, Jackson took it on. Lewis and Clark drifted through this and other projects, more as federal officials than as explorers. Jackson knew that the expedition had produced a large body of documents beyond the party’s official journals. While Thwaites had printed some of those letters, many more awaited discovery. By November 1958 Jackson’s Lewis and Clark letters project had taken shape and direction. Jackson defined his task as compiling and annotating “an edition of all letters pertaining to the expedition and to the production of the original Biddle edition and transfer of the journals to the American Philosophical Society.”\(^7\)

When the University of Illinois Press published *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854* in 1962, the hefty volume contained 428 documents, well over half previously unpublished. A two-volume, revised edition, issued in 1978, added 29 more documents. Perhaps no documentary find both revealed more about Jackson’s pain-


\(^7\) For a full discussion, see Donald Jackson, *Among the Sleeping Giants: Occasional Pieces on Lewis and Clark* (Urbana, 1987), 55-74.
staking scholarship and proved more valuable to later scholars than his discovery of the Biddle Notes. In April 1810 Nicholas Biddle travelled to Virginia to interview William Clark. Those conversations amounted to a post-expedition debriefing. Biddle asked about everything from Indian linguistics to botany and geography. Those questions and Clark's answers were all duly recorded in Biddle's peculiar, hard-to-decipher handwriting. Working through Lewis and Clark manuscripts at the American Philosophical Society, Jackson came upon those notes. With an acute eye for handwriting, he quickly recognized the author. Equally important, Jackson grasped the significance of his discovery. Here was William Clark being queried by an intelligent scholar about major expedition matters just four years after the venture's end. Every student of the expedition, whether probing Indian relations or geography, soon came to recognize the Biddle Notes as a major source.45

Jackson's Letters proved far more than a skillfully presented collection of documents. The items themselves, their arrangement, and the editor's masterful annotations amounted to a scholarly transfusion for Lewis and Clark research. More important than any single monograph, the collection expanded the Lewis and Clark horizon. As Jackson put it, "it is no longer useful to think of the Lewis and Clark expedition as the personal story of two men." Jackson's documents portrayed "an enterprise of many aims and a product of many minds."46 Those many minds were reflected in letters from Jefferson, Albert Gallatin, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Smith Barton, and a host of lesser-known scientists, politicians, army officers, and frontiersmen. Here were letters and reports on botany, zoology, ethnography, and physical geography. Knowing that Jefferson had planned other western exploring ventures before 1803, Jackson presented a full range of documents detailing those enterprises. Diplomacy and international relations were not ignored. Spanish reactions were traced in a number of important letters. Jackson's collection urged scholars to get beyond the great journey itself to see its consequences in the wider worlds of science, Indian relations, politics, and diplomacy.

Donald Jackson once wrote that "an editor's work is meant to be pillaged."47 That pillaging began almost at once. In the 1950s DeVoto had complained that "it is still impossible to make a satisfactory statement about

45 Jackson, ed., Letters, 2:497-545; Jackson, Sleeping Giants, 71.
46 Jackson, ed., Letters, 1:v.
Challenged by both DeVoto and Jackson, a qualified scientist began such studies. Paul Cutright, a professor of biology at Beaver College, took up the task. Although Criswell and Jackson had compiled fairly complete lists of plants and animals encountered by the explorers, Cutright undertook a comprehensive examination of expedition science. His work, published as *Lewis and Clark: Pioneering Naturalists*, made plain the substantial achievements of the expedition. Cutright noted each plant and animal found by the explorers, recorded the names used by the expedition, and identified each by its modern binomial. Other writers had given expedition science an obligatory mention. Cutright did more. He clearly demonstrated both the depth and range of those accomplishments.

Cutright's book fueled the blaze sparked by Jackson. The Lewis and Clark bonfire got fresh wood in 1975. Today Lewis and Clark each wear the title "explorer," a word neither man used to describe himself. No student of the expedition had carefully examined the nature of the exploratory process. Equally telling, there had been no systematic analysis of expedition cartography. Those gaps were filled when John Logan Allen completed his doctoral dissertation at Clark University in 1969 and subsequently published that work in revised and expanded form as *Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest*.

Allen's ambitious and provocative book probed the nature of exploration by looking at field decisions made by the captains. At the same time he examined the geographical images that shaped the expedition. But the book was neither a simple catalogue of choices made at this river or that mountain pass nor a study of disembodied "landscape images." As a historical geographer, Allen brought the two topics together by posing three vital questions. Following ideas set out by John K. Wright, Allen examined in great detail the ways knowledge—"lore" was Wright's word—from previous travellers fashioned an image of western geography. Here Allen provided an illuminating discussion of conceptual geography, the notions of river systems and mountain ranges that formed Jefferson's mental picture of the West. Allen then took that image and tracked it along the Lewis and Clark trail. As he envisioned it, the expedition was guided by geographic images con-


stantly tested, modified, or discarded. Finally, Allen devoted considerable space to the role of Lewis and Clark as creators of new geographic imagery. Passage through the Garden was an extraordinary book. Allen had not only discovered new cartographic evidence but he also had put Lewis and Clark in the mainstream of geographic thought. The emphasis on exploration as a "programmed enterprise" gave meaning to daily decisions about course and distance. Deeply influenced by DeVoto, Allen paid tribute to Course of Empire as "the major conceptual foundation" of his own work. Jackson's Letters had an importance, Allen wrote, "readily apparent" throughout his book. Passage through the Garden was proof that the Lewis and Clark renewal sought by DeVoto and Jackson was now in full flame.

The course of historical research is often guided by lucky chance, and nothing was more serendipitous than the way Allen's work prompted the next major Lewis and Clark book. In 1976 Ohio History asked James P. Ronda to review Passage through the Garden. Ronda had previously written ethnohistorical accounts of Indian-missionary relations on eastern frontiers. Impressed by Allen's book, Ronda set out to write what he called "exploration ethnohistory." Lewis and Clark among the Indians, published in 1984, used a wide variety of historical and anthropological sources to reveal the full range of relations between the expedition and its Indian neighbors. As Ronda imagined it, the expedition was one human community moving through and living among other human communities. Lewis and Clark traversed a crowded West already explored and settled by many native peoples. The story of the expedition could not be told apart from the lives of scores of Mandans, Shoshonis, Nez Perces, and Chinookans. Lewis and Clark among the Indians probed everything from diplomacy and ethnography to trade and sexual relations. The book argued that the expedition was a shared enterprise, one that united different peoples with the bonds of common experience. Ronda's book offered two new interpretive directions for the study of the expedition. The traditional telling of the voyage had a small cast of characters. Ronda increased that cast and expanded the stage. He urged readers to listen to Indian voices and watch native people as active participants in the venture. Equally important, the book suggested that the expedition was a microcosm for the larger world of cultural relations in North America.

Books by Cutright, Allen, and Ronda filled major gaps in Lewis and Clark literature. At the same time it was clear that a modern edition of the journals was needed. Discoveries of new manuscript materials and more

51 Ibid., xv-xvi.
52 James P. Ronda, Lewis and Clark among the Indians (Lincoln, 1984), xii.
exacting annotation standards made Thwaites increasingly out-of-date. At the 1967 centennial meeting of the Missouri Historical Society, Donald Jackson issued a public call for such a new edition.\textsuperscript{53} Jackson’s prompting and suggestions from others finally caught the attention of Stephen F. Cox, Executive Editor at the University of Nebraska Press. Jackson was engaged as a consultant to prepare plans for a multi-volume edition sponsored by the University of Nebraska Press, the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska, and the American Philosophical Society. Professor Gary E. Moulton was selected as the new editor for the journals. The first volume, a Lewis and Clark atlas, was published in 1983 and three journal volumes have appeared thus far.\textsuperscript{54}

Now that a substantial portion of the new edition has been published it is important to step back and evaluate what has been accomplished. Perhaps that evaluation might begin with a common-sense question. What does it mean that these are the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition? Questions about what to include determine later decisions about presentation and annotation. As Moulton explains in his introduction, the new edition will eventually print “the journals of Lewis, Clark, Charles Floyd, John Ordway, Patrick Gass, and Joseph Whitehouse (all the extant journals associated with the expedition); and a volume of the expedition’s natural history materials” (vol. 2, p. viii).

How that intention works out in practice can best be judged by looking at a sample day in the life of the expedition. On July 30, 1804, the explorers made camp at Council Bluff along the Missouri River some fifteen miles north of present-day Omaha, Nebraska. There Lewis and Clark prepared for their first Indian conference, a meeting with Oto and Missouri headmen. The new edition prints entries made by both captains. In addition there is the entry from Clark’s field notes (vol. 2, pp. 428-30). But the reader who assumes that this was the whole sum of writing done by the expedition that day will be wide of the mark. Sergeants Ordway and Floyd as well as Privates Whitehouse and Gass commented on the day’s events. Their observations have been put off to be printed in a later volume. Although Moulton probably made a wise decision not to clutter each day with too many documents, the neglect of Ordway is a real loss. Ordway was the only member of the expedition to pen a journal entry every day. Ordway’s importance lies not only in his comprehensive coverage but in his keen eye


\textsuperscript{54} See headnote for bibliographical details on the Moulton volumes.
for detail. The young soldier could capture a scene or event with colorful, memorable language of the sort that often eluded his superiors.

The canons of documentary editing demand accurate transcription and clear printing of the original. Thwaites and his associates produced a reasonably clean reading of expedition journals. There were some errors, as when the phrase "cut my hand" was rendered as "cue my hare" in Clark's November 13, 1805, entry. The new edition locates and corrects those errors. At the same time the integrity of the originals, with all their delightful spellings and peculiar punctuations, has been honored. What readers are given is a reliable transcription. The chapter divisions, while not in the originals, are retained from Thwaites as they have become a useful research convention. Important scientific matter, relegated to volume six in Thwaites, is placed at the appropriate date and place.

No historical document can stand by itself. Obscure words need definition, little-known individuals require identification, and remote places demand location. Annotation provides that essential context. Documents without annotation are little more than disconnected fragments from a dark past. A generation ago documentary editors believed that their mission was to write long learned footnotes. While some still cling to that tradition, the tide has turned toward a more restrained approach. Thanks in large part to the example of Donald Jackson in his Lewis and Clark, Pike, and Frémont editions, editors now annotate and avoid essay-length notes.

Moulton's annotation method can best be understood by returning to the events of July 30, 1804. An alert editor will surely find much to comment upon for that day. Thwaites wrote one note; Moulton has seven. A voyage of discovery is all about place and location. Any Lewis and Clark scholar must have a sure sense of place. Using both contemporary and modern maps, Moulton tells readers just where the expedition was on that July day. Locations throughout the edition are done by state, county, and closest present-day town. Unique terrain features that might further pinpoint a particular campsite are also included. One of the central reasons for this edition is the renewed emphasis on expedition science. Moulton has used a whole corps of specialists in botany, geology, and zoology to make his scientific annotations both informative and accurate. When Clark mentioned the "coffeenut" among a number of well-known trees, Moulton identifies it as the Kentucky coffee tree, *Gymnocladus dioica* (L.). Throughout the edition plants and animals, especially those discovered by Lewis and Clark, are carefully identified by both common and scientific name. When Joseph Field killed and brought to camp an animal the French engages called a *Brárow*, the critter quickly drew Lewis's attention. Moulton identifies the badger and tells the reader something about the French and Pawnee derivations of its name (vol. 2, p. 431).
Mention of the Pawnee word *cuhkatus* for badger raises the question of linguistic and ethnographic annotation. Expedition journalists filled their notebooks with important observations on native cultures as well as hundreds of Indian words and names. One of the lasting contributions of this edition is that it takes seriously those ethnographic and linguistic contributions. The entry for August 3, 1804—the day of the Oto-Missouri conference—is a good example of Moulton's Indian annotations. Here the editor briefly discusses Indian-Spanish relations, the protocol of Indian diplomacy, and the proper meaning of Oto and Missouri personal names listed by Clark. Moulton draws on the best recent anthropological and archaeological information to make these annotations of real value (vol. 2, pp. 438-44).

In 1905 Reuben Gold Thwaites confidently predicted that "we shall henceforth know Lewis and Clark as we never knew them before." With this new edition of the journals, that prophesy edges toward reality. What the Moulton volumes offer is not so much a new image of the expedition as a refurbished one. Donald Jackson once observed that the editor's task was like that of a specialist seeking to restore a fine painting. Generations of dirt, abuse, and misunderstanding had to be peeled away to reveal the splendid original. The new edition brings readers back to Jefferson's conception of the venture. Here is an expedition with many missions. Readers now see more clearly Lewis and Clark's diverse roles as advance agents of empire, geographic explorers and cartographers, federal Indian diplomats, ethnographers, and scientists. Almost two centuries after the fact, we are beginning to comprehend Jefferson's western vision.

What might justly be called the golden age of expedition scholarship began in 1962. Is the new journals edition the conclusion to that burst of scholarly creativity or will these handsome volumes advance Lewis and Clark research into uncharted territories? Simply put, what remains yet unexplored? In recent years much emphasis has been placed on the expedition as a scientific reconnaissance. Cutright has gone so far as to insist that Lewis had scientific attitudes "more consistent with scientists of the twentieth century than those of his own." While the expedition did make important botanical and zoological discoveries, its science was firmly rooted in eighteenth-century Enlightenment and natural history traditions. "Scientist" has become a convenient label to hang on the captains without much examination of the meaning and techniques of science in the Lewis and Clark years. As John C. Greene makes plain in his recent *American Science in the Age of Jefferson*, the expedition moved in an intellectual world quite

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Unlike our own. Now that scholars properly appreciate the natural history contributions made by the explorers, it is time to place those achievements in their historical context.

For all the public interest in the lives of expedition members, the shelf of biographies is indeed short. The captains themselves have suffered from a remarkable scholarly neglect. All too often students of the expedition have fallen into the habit of writing about that composite personality called "Lewis and Clark." Richard Dillon's 1965 biography of Lewis is a fairly straightforward account but one that hardly fulfills the demands of modern biography. Lewis was a person of extraordinary complexity, and too many writers have spilled ink on the circumstances of his death while ignoring larger and more important issues. William Clark, whose career went well beyond the expedition, has fared no better. Jerome Steffen's brief William Clark: Jeffersonian Man on the Frontier looks only at Clark's post-1806 career and tends to submerge him in Steffen's own theory about frontier politics and social change. Clark's slave York has done better at the hands of the biographers than either of the captains. Robert Betts's In Search of York is a sensitive treatment of the man Indians called "Big Medicine."

Meriwether Lewis once described the expedition as a family. Indeed, the Corps of Discovery was a community. We need to know much more about the life of that community. Eldon G. Chuinard's Only One Man Died suggests the medical dimension of that common life. More remains to be said. How did a racially and culturally diverse group become a harmonious body ready to bend all energies to reach a common goal? Where did that remarkable social cohesion come from? Historians busy examining frontier communities might well study this expedition for clues about what Robert V. Hine has called the western tension of "separate but alone."

58 Richard Dillon, Meriwether Lewis A Biography (New York, 1965)
59 Jerome W Steffen, William Clark Jeffersonian Man on the Frontier (Norman, 1977)
60 Robert B Betts, In Search of York (Boulder, 1985) Two other members of the expedition also have received biographical treatment Burton Harris, John Colter (New York, 1952), and M O Skarsten, George Drouillard (Glendale, 1964). The literature on Sacagawea is large and often uncritical. It is summarized in Ronda, Lewis and Clark among the Indians, 256-59
61 Eldon G Chuinard, Only One Man Died The Medical Aspects of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (Glendale, 1979)
62 Robert V Hine, Community on the American Frontier Separate but Not Alone (Norman, 1980)
Lewis and Clark moved through lands claimed by others. Expedition relations with native peoples have been given a broad-brush treatment by James Ronda. But there is much room left for deeper study of the complex interactions between explorers and individual villages, bands, and tribes. Equally important, some scholar fluent in Spanish and knowledgeable about Iberian and Mexican archives must undertake a thorough study of Spain’s reactions to the various American expeditions in the Jeffersonian period. A.P. Nasatir has gathered some important documents in his *Before Lewis and Clark*. Warren Cook’s *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819* makes some preliminary evaluation of Spanish attempts to halt the Lewis and Clark expedition. In his most recent book, *Among the Sleeping Giants*, Donald Jackson speculates about the consequences of a successful Spanish interdiction of the expedition. Because Jefferson had pinned so many personal and national hopes on the expedition, he might have reacted with considerable fury had Spanish forces arrested the man they called “Captain Merry.” Jackson’s thought-provoking “what if” points to the need for a major study of Spanish efforts to defend threatened borderlands.

Jefferson’s explorers have found their place in the history of North America. They have yet to be put in the wider context of eighteenth-century exploration. Lewis and Clark lived in the age of Cook, Vancouver, Lapérouse, and the incomparable Sir Joseph Banks. Enlightenment science and imperial power pushed voyagers to fill in the map of mankind. Recent books by David Mackay, Richard Van Orman, and P.J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams all reveal important aspects of that worldwide exploration enterprise. Lewis and Clark need to stand in company with Cook and Mackenzie if we are to gain a fuller understanding of both the American explorers and their European counterparts.

What remains to be written about the Lewis and Clark expedition suggests that DeVoto was right. The expedition was a turning point in world history. Here are the beginnings of an American empire. That westering would

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64 Jackson, *Sleeping Giants*, 12-16.

transform the political and cultural boundaries of North America and eventually the wider world. Fresh readings of the Lewis and Clark journals, readings with new eyes, guarantee a continuing exploration of what Lewis once called his "darling project." What Lewis and Clark began in that rented room shows no sign of losing power and fascination.

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