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# A National Epic—The Journals of Lewis and Clark: A Review Essay

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WILLIAM H. GOETZMANN

Volumes II, III, and IV of the *Journals* of the Lewis and Clark expedition represent the first modern effort to produce a definitive edition of the writing that stemmed from that famous crossing of the North American continent. Elliott Coues, basing his effort primarily on the holdings of the American Philosophical Society, produced in 1893 a three-volume edition remarkable for its time. Rueben Gold Thwaites, that indefatigable editor of western travel accounts, produced *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806* in eight volumes in 1904 and 1905, the one-hundredth anniversary of the expedition. These editions have served us well, as has Ernest S. Osgood's *The Field Notes of Captain William Clark, 1803–1805*, based on new material found in an attic in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1953. Since that time the single most important work regarding the expedition has been Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783–1854*, published in two volumes by the University of Illinois Press. Jackson's all-important spadework in these splendid volumes was in fact one of the catalysts of the present project.

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William H. Goetzmann is the Dickson, Allen, and Anderson Centennial Professor in American Studies and History in the University of Texas. Among his many publications is *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West*, which won both the Joseph Pulitzer and Frances Parkman prizes in 1967. His most recent work includes *New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery* and *The West of the Imagination*, co-authored with his son, William N. Goetzmann, a film-maker and art historian.

Gary E. Moulton, Editor

# The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition

Volume

2

August 30, 1803–August 24, 1804

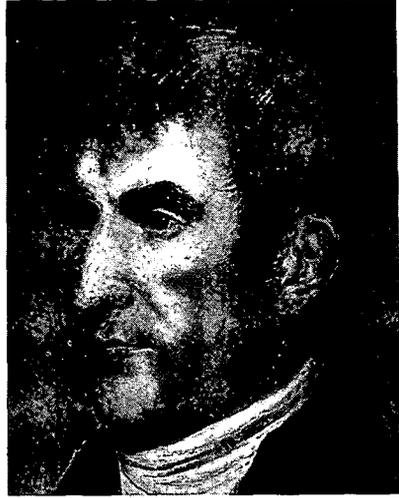
*The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, August 30, 1803–August 24, 1804.* Vol. II. Edited by Gary E. Moulton. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. x + 612 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, tables, appendixes, notes, index. \$40.00.)

*The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, August 25, 1804–April 6, 1805.* Vol. III. Edited by Gary E. Moulton. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. ix + 544 pp. Illustrations, charts, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.)

*The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, April 7–July 27, 1805.* Vol. IV. Edited by Gary E. Moulton. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. ix + 439 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.)



William Clark.



Meriwether Lewis.

This new edition of the *Journals* of Lewis and Clark, edited by Gary E. Moulton and published by the University of Nebraska Press, is clearly the most comprehensive work on the Lewis and Clark Expedition ever published or even contemplated. The project includes the intended publication of all the maps connected with the journey, the existing field notebooks by both Lewis and Clark, a series of red-covered journals possibly worked up from the field notebooks, miscellaneous papers, tables, lists, and even the herbarium sheets preserved by Lewis and now at the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences. In addition, editor Moulton also intends to publish annotated editions of the journals kept by Charles Floyd, John Ordway, Joseph Whitehouse, and Patrick Gass—in short, every scrap of information connected with the famous expedition, except perhaps any surviving Native American pictograph views. In this age of revisionist scholarship in Western history, the latter omission must give us pause, despite James P. Ronda's excellent book, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*. Will we ever really know what the residents of the plains and the Rockies thought about this tough, whiskey-dispensing crew tramping across their front lawns and back yards in a kind of "trick and treat" operation? As of now we have only Lewis and Clark and their company's complete words on the subject, and these suggest that the Sioux or Dakota, a tribe of consistent "troublemakers," were not very happy with the white man's penetration of their territory.

Still, in Moulton's splendid edition, no pains have been spared to note and footnote everything that could be discerned through the eyes

of the white discoverers and to bring to bear, for the first time, archaeologists and anthropologists to work on the problem. Moulton's efforts have been aided by seven institutions and some sixty-seven specialists, not counting those who worked on the *Cartographic Atlas* that forms Volume I of the series. This massive undertaking is indeed a modern team effort in meticulous scholarship. As Ernest Osgood once put it, the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition were the "writingest crew" of explorers in history. Moulton and his people are perhaps the "editingest crew" in the history of exploration—surpassing even J. C. Beaglehole's British edition of Captain Cook's voyages.

Thus far, Moulton and his staff have produced a monumental work, especially the atlas that forms Volume I. These first two journals (Volumes II and III) follow in the same awe-inspiring tradition. Beginning with Lewis' departure from Pittsburgh on August 30, 1803, they record, through journals and notebooks, every detail of the journey as far as the winter and spring of 1805 at Fort Mandan, fifteen hundred miles up the Missouri River, where the party paused to regroup and send specimens and notebooks back downriver to an anxious President Thomas Jefferson.

Volume IV, the most recently published of the series, is perhaps the most interesting and, in places, the most exciting. It begins on April 7, 1805, with the expedition's departure from the Mandan village winter encampment and concludes on July 27, 1805, with Lewis and Clark standing at the Three Forks or headwaters of the Missouri River, according to Lewis, "several hundred miles within the bosom of this wild and mountainous country." Lewis had correctly discerned that the Three Forks was "an essential point in the geography of this western part of the Continent. . . ." He had no way of knowing that he and Clark had just traced the longest river system in the world. Instead, they both looked anxiously, in the heart of the Blackfoot country, for signs of more Indians who would guide them the rest of the way across the continent.

The leg of the journey that they had traversed since Fort Mandan required the critical use of Lewis and Clark's geographical sensitivity on several occasions. Most importantly, they had to decide whether or not the Marias River, which runs west, but far north, near the present Canadian border, was the main channel of the Missouri. Its lower reaches were bordered by "one continued garden of roses," as if to beckon the explorers to choose its path. The Great Captains, however, after a time, correctly determined the main channel of the Missouri, thus avoiding a mistake that would have aborted their mission. Other geographical problems included determining the way around the Great Falls, which Lewis described as "sublime" and "beautiful," and deciding

which of the Three Forks at the headwaters to ascend. Today, all of this seems obvious with modern maps, but to read these journals is to be set down with Lewis and Clark in the midst of a vast, unknown and confusing wilderness, only previously described by conjecture on Peter Fidler's British map of 1802 drawn for Aaron Arrowsmith, the primary British commercial map publisher of his time.

In frequent passages the explorers describe this wilderness with real aesthetic appreciation. They note with awe "the wild and fertile valley" of the Yellowstone River, their first view of the Rocky or "Shining" mountains with the sun really glistening off their white-capped peaks, and the strange castle-like formations along the Upper Missouri that artist Karl Bodmer was to paint so brilliantly in 1833. For the first time one senses the romantic wonder of Lewis and Clark's journey. They are now in the great unknown, nursing a desperately ill Sacajawea back to health. Somehow they seemed to know that upon her survival would depend relations with the Shoshones and the location, across the high mountain ranges to the west, of a path to the Pacific Ocean.

The question inevitably arises, or should arise in the minds of historians, and even lay readers, what makes the already well-known experiences of the Lewis and Clark Expedition worth such an extensive and expensive publication effort? Are such passages as Clark's note on Monday, June 18, 1804, "Some rain last night, and Some hard Showers this morning which delay our work very much, Send out Six hunders in the Prarie on the L.S. they kill 5 Deer & Colter a Bear, which verry large & fat, the party to wok at the oars, make rope & jerk their meat all Day. . . . The misquiter verry bad," something we need to know? Do they even *conceal* a great deal of the "realities" of the expedition that Lewis and Clark did not see fit or important enough to print? This is a philosophical question that historians and even philosophers must ponder.

Meanwhile, this reviewer thinks that what the great captains and their subordinates did publish is remarkably important. The journals provide insight into the attitudes of the explorers toward the great West. They reveal the enormous patience, courage, and ability to endure hardships displayed by the men, and they also reveal some of their less than perfect conduct as human beings. Members of the expedition are punished severely for misconduct and are constantly evaluated by Lewis and Clark who, however, casually dispense whiskey to the Indians with predictable results. The Sioux grew offensive and warlike with respect to the trespassers, while the Arikara disdained the firewater with all the conviction of a fundamentalist preacher. It was, at this early pre-corruption time, beneath their dignity.

We also learn a great deal about the plains country as it was in its



A lush landscape greeted Lewis and Clark in their trek westward, according to Thomas Burnham's impression in this 1850 oil painting, titled, "The Lewis and Clark Expedition." Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

unspoiled state—teeming with wild animals and the rivers stocked with thousands of “new” species of fish. The word most used, and most often spelled correctly by William Clark, was “beautiful.” It must have been an important emotion to him because he took the trouble to get it right, whereas he spells Sioux no less than twenty-seven different ways, perhaps subconsciously indicating that he was most disturbed by that tribe.

Lewis and Clark, in comparative terms, did not bring a great many natural history specimens back with them, and what they did bring back were dispersed among various institutions, unlike those of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes’ U.S. Exploring Expedition, which turned the Smithsonian into a museum. Instead of specimens, Lewis and Clark gave us incomparable maps, journals that record the weather, the topography, the ecology (in a primitive way), details of the fur trade, and so much information about tribes and individual Native Americans of their day that it is almost time now to write a Native American history of the Missouri River and its peopling in the early nineteenth century. But beyond all this, as Ernest Osgood put it so eloquently some time ago:

Such documents are often of far greater import than a mere narrative of travel. . . . They record the moves in the great game of empire that was being played out on the North American continent. Lewis and Clark and their men were counters on the chessboard of international politics; every scrap of information on the initiation, progress, and completion of their memorable expedition is significant.

Thus, from the everyday human details of weather and human endurance or tedium in the vast western interior of the continent, to the ever larger international consequences of their expedition, Lewis and Clark’s journey is fascinating and important. It is one of our national epics. Long ago, in 1814, Nicholas Biddle and Paul Allen in *The History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark* . . . recognized it as such. This present, modern edition of the great adventure, splendidly edited by Gary E. Moulton, does this epic journey full justice. Let us hope the project can sustain this quality to its projected end. It will be of incalculable interest to historians and the American people.

# Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition Volume 5

July 28–November 1, 1805

Edited by Gary E. Moulton

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