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Book Review of *Venereal Disease and the Lewis and Clark Expedition* by Thomas P. Lowry

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Venereal Disease and the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

By Thomas P. Lowry. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xvi + 117 pp. Map, illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$21.95 cloth.

Although Lewis and Clark literature has proliferated in the last decade, few works have added scholarly discourse to this field of study. The highly focused *Venereal Disease and the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, however, will likely stand out on the Lewis and Clark bookshelf as an important contribution.

Thomas Lowry, a retired psychiatrist and clinical associate professor at the University of California, San Francisco, assisted by Beverly Lowry, his research partner and wife, has penned a succinct, laudable text that provides an

in-depth look at the sexual mores and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) that were part of the experiences of the expedition's members and of many Natives with whom they had contact. Using an unblushing, nonjudgmental approach, Lowry addresses these topics in a style easily accessible to the lay reader.

In the extensive literature about the expedition sexual relationships are often acknowledged but rarely examined. In contrast Lowry “de-Puritanizes” sexuality and traces the history of venereal diseases—especially syphilis. Sexual liaisons and subsequent syphilis were anticipated by Lewis when he planned the expected two-year voyage with an entourage of young army volunteers. Besides an estimated 1,500 doses of laxatives for use as the mainstay of depletive therapy for a host of illnesses, 15% of the medicine and some of the instruments purchased were for treating STDs.

Did the enlisted men avail themselves of the sexual customs of the Natives, and did some contract syphilis? As Captain Clark wrote of his charges in the spring of 1805 from Fort Mandan, “they are helth. except the—vn. [venereal]—which is common with the Indians and have been communicated to many of our party at this place—those favores bieng easy acquired.” Hence, the captains administered mercurial medicines at the Great Plains’ first STD clinic.

Lowry further assesses the short- and long-term effects that syphilis and its treatment may have had upon the Corps of Discovery and Sacagawea. Although neither of the captains hinted at sexual interactions themselves with the Natives, published speculations have raised the possibility that the tragic death of Lewis in 1809 could have been a consequence of tertiary syphilis or its treatment. In a balanced analysis Lowry weighs this conjecture against conspicuous postexpedition pathologic conditions of depression and the alcohol and opium abuse Lewis experienced. Fairly, he concludes that we will never know the cause of death of this brilliant, heroic young man.

Lowry writes with historical honesty. He uses primary documents—namely, the written journals—as the basis for facts and analyses and avoids speculation to suit any presumed theory. Packed with contextual information and historical and social insights, this small entertaining volume makes the expedition’s epic venture appear all the more remarkable. **Ronald V. Loge**, *MD Southwestern Montana Clinic, Dillon, Montana, and University of Washington School of Medicine.*