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**Review of *North American Exploration: A Continent
Comprehended* Edited by John Logan Allen**

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North American Exploration: A Continent Comprehended. Edited by John Logan Allen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. vii+656 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, references, index. \$75.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8032-1043-4).

A Continent Comprehended is the final volume in a trilogy on North American exploration that began with the publication in 1997 of *A New World Disclosed* and continued with *A Continent Defined*. Disclosure, definition, and comprehension announce a conceptual approach appropriate to furthering the retrospective understanding of geographical exploration at the time of the Columbian Quincentenary, the event the volumes were originally planned to commemorate. Historiographers are unlikely to find much evidence of these or other essentially cognitive concepts in the exploration histories that celebrated the Quadcentenary one hundred years before. Yet here they are, more or less overt, but not for the first time. Isolating first appearances in any branch of scholarship is notoriously difficult, but these and related conceptual approaches to exploration were certainly heralded twenty-two years before the trilogy in the editor's first and seminal book, *Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest*.

In the late 1980s, with the assistance of a large and august editorial board, Allen shrewdly commissioned and then gently guided a team of mainly historians and geographers to help him present more than four hundred years of North American exploration—not as adventure on the geographical fringes of white experience but as the consequence of a complex interplay of processes. Many of those chosen emanated from the establishment centers of eastern North America and western Europe, external to the scenes of action but vital nevertheless.

Volume three is concerned with nineteenth-century exploration in the western United States and western and northern Canada. William H.

Goetzmann, in a brilliantly conceived and wide-ranging concluding chapter, defines exploration as “fundamentally a mental process, institutionalized in Euro-America and governed by increasing knowledge, new methodologies, shifting values, and the literal institutionalizing of exploration.” Goetzmann’s definition is reflected in the index. As might be anticipated in a work spanning the nineteenth century, “Mandan Indians,” “missionaries,” “Mormon Trail,” and “mountain men” are all there. But so, too, are remotely-based institutions as varied as “Royal Canadian Institute,” “Smithsonian Institution,” and “Board of Trade (London).” Numerous personages are indexed who never visited North America, let alone crossed the Mississippi River or passed beyond the Great Lakes, such as Louis Agassiz, Charles Darwin, and Immanuel Kant. And books are indexed that make no mention of places, conditions, or events in the West or North. Indeed, in some cases they were published before their exploration began, such as “*The Wealth of Nations* (Adam Smith).”

This is certainly not a book for readers who seek pleasure in accounts of sweat, bravery, and killings or who hope for additional details about the lives of long-romanticized frontier characters. Neither will it satisfy those who seek updated and chronologically-arranged narratives of exploration within conventionally-recognized regions. The Great Plains region, for example, is not a focus; neither does it emerge as an entity. Each chapter embraces a period of several decades, a vast, loosely-defined space, and a distinctive process. It is process that gives chapters their distinctiveness and authors their scope for new insights. Within a short review an attempt to consider all the processes would trivialize rather than illuminate. Hence, allow me to choose one chapter to illustrate the approach.

In her examination of British North America during the first seven decades of the nineteenth century, Suzanne Zeller focuses on scientific exploration. She does not, however, highlight such traditional aspects of exploration as routes, modes of travel, and trafficability. There are not, for example, specially-compiled route maps. Instead, Zeller isolates, discusses, and evaluates the factors that initiated the process (e.g., Britain’s need for more and new natural resources during and after the Napoleonic Wars), the conditions that facilitated it (e.g., redundant army and naval officers with appropriate skills, many of whom had grown up in a tradition of amateur field science), the ideas that motivated it (e.g., those stemming from the Scottish Enlightenment), the institutions that encouraged it (e.g., the Royal Society), other institutions created to implement it (e.g., the Geological Survey of Canada), and finally the qualities of the individuals given the

responsibility to conduct it. This approach, at its best, presents events on the edges of Euro-American *terre incognita* as parts of a global dynamic; but an almost inevitable consequence is a loss of spatial perspective.

Well produced, adequately illustrated, fully referenced, and with a detailed index, this volume, like its two predecessors, will stimulate the next generation of exploration scholars. Among geographers, the editor has made a contribution to our understanding of North America's past equaled in the Quincentenary era only by Donald W. Meinig's *The Shaping of America* and the editing by Richard Cole Harris, R. Louis Gentilcore, and Donald Kerr of the three volumes of *Historical Atlas of Canada*. If John Allen has fallen short of their achievements, it is in failing to obtain as much integration. But diversity can be a virtue, especially when the overall intent is to stimulate and not merely to inform. What a pity, therefore, that Goetzmann's consummate, highly original, and in places provocative chapter on the meaning of exploration comes at the end of volume three. As a mere reviewer I had the good fortune to begin there. It should have appeared at the beginning of volume one—for all to see, none to ignore, and brilliantly to illuminate the whole. **G. Malcolm Lewis**, *Department of Geography, Sheffield University, England*.