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REVIEW ESSAY

Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness. By Thomas P. Slaughter. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. xviii + 231 pp. Maps, illustrations, index. \$24.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

Prologue to Lewis and Clark: The Mackay and Evans Expedition. By W. Raymond Wood. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xvii + 234 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide. By Carolyn Gilman. Foreword by James P. Rhonda. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003. 424 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

The Literature of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: A Bibliography and Essays. Essays by Stephen Dow Beckham. Bibliography by Doug Erickson, Jeremy Skinner, and Paul Merchant. Portland, OR: Lewis and Clark College, 2003. 314 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, color plates, bibliography, index. \$75.00

TELLING STORIES ABOUT LEWIS AND CLARK: DOES HISTORY STILL MATTER?

It is obvious that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark are famous men. The story of their expedition and the people who traveled with them, including Clark's enslaved African American York and the Indian woman called Sacajawea, is an iconic narrative of Americana. The fifty-four page annotated list of books, pamphlets, and articles published between 1906 and 2001 in *The Literature of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* attests to a fascination that took hold during the centennial of their great trek and threatens to swamp us all during its bicentennial.

Less obvious is what the fuss is all about. In terms of a ratio of attention to historical significance, the Lewis and Clark expedition is perhaps the most overstudied event in the history of North America. It was hardly a turning point: if Lewis and Clark had never ventured up the Missouri River in 1804 or reached the Pacific Ocean in 1805, the history of this continent would not have been markedly different. Witness the obscurity of their accomplished predecessors. Alexander Mackenzie,

who crossed the breadth of North America a decade earlier, is at best a continental footnote. Scotsman James Mackay and Welshman John Thomas Evans mapped the Missouri Valley during their 1795-1797 expedition, as W. Raymond Wood details in his new book. But Evans died soon after the journey; and while Mackay was rewarded for his services and became a prominent citizen of St. Louis, he is not well-known today. So common were Europeans that Mandans, Sioux, and other Indians expressed no surprise at the appearance of Lewis and Clark. (They were, however, interested in York.) Indeed, from a global perspective the two men and their comrades were only one example of a horde of European and American travelers at the turn of the nineteenth century who journeyed into the interiors of the world's continents and published accounts of their adventures.

Traditionally, scholars justify their attention to Lewis and Clark by locating the expedition within a national narrative. The explorers matter because they constituted an

official party operating as agents of the United States of America and, more specifically, President Thomas Jefferson. Unlike Mackenzie and Mackay, Lewis and Clark worked for a government that not only claimed to own the territory (as a result of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803) but that conquered and transformed it by the end of the nineteenth century. They made the United States a visible presence along the Missouri and Columbia rivers. Carrying full-dress uniforms and flags, the expedition was a continental parade announcing the emergence of a new power. Lewis and Clark were significant not as white men but as a certain kind of white men.

Critics affirm the importance of the national framework by operating within it. Looking at Lewis and Clark from the perspectives of the Indians they encountered as well as postmodern conceptions of colonialism, race, gender, and narrative, scholars see the expedition as an opportunity to examine and reflect on American society in microcosm at a time when its cultural parameters were still in flux. The issue is not so much what the explorers achieved as what they represented, as their behavior as white American males who practiced slavery, exploited women, and heralded the destruction of the Indians and ecosystems of the Missouri and Columbia river valleys. Devotees of the expedition have deflected these criticisms by absorbing them. Carolyn Gilman's *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide*, a gorgeous companion volume to the Missouri Historical Society's *Lewis and Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition*, has chapters on women, landscapes, flora, and fauna. The theme of cultural encounter and misunderstanding runs throughout the text, and Gilman concludes her well-written overview with a selection of contemporary Native American voices.

The appeal of the Lewis and Clark expedition as a window into the character of the United States is minor, however, compared to its appeal as a universal story of human (or rather, male) achievement. In his contribution to *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide*, the

always insightful James P. Ronda identifies four reasons for its continuing popularity. "First, it is a story—or, rather, a series of stories told by many actors and narrators." Second, it "is a story about a journey." Third, the expedition was "a human community, as diverse as any in America today." Fourth, it "is a remarkably accessible story" (47, 48). It is significant that Ronda's list is more literary than historical. Most people probably couldn't care less about the expedition's historical importance; what matters is that it is about men with whom they identify, men who left an abundance of information from which anyone can construct a plausible story about whatever suits one's needs.

Certainly that is what Thomas P. Slaughter seems to be up to in his remarkable new book, *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness*. At first glance, Slaughter's contribution seems to be a collection of essays designed to throw a wet blanket on bicentennial self-congratulation. No doubt aficionados will receive his book as they would an uninvited guest who insists on pointing out things revelers do not want to hear. Slaughter expresses his admiration for the explorers' achievements as well as those of their many historians so frequently that one deduces he is aware that many readers will likely dismiss or denounce the book as contrarian nonsense. More troubling is the fact that his tone is often at war with his intentions. Notwithstanding his subtle understanding of history as constructed and susceptible to many interpretations, Slaughter is given to authoritative declarations (as in the first six pages of chapter 2) that do not invite disagreement.

Slaughter's close readings of the journals are often brilliant and always interesting and imaginative. But he has a tendency to get carried away and to conclude as definitive what he has initially proposed. In talking about why many scholars reject the oral tradition that Sacajawea lived until the 1880s, he asks, "What is it that leads historians to adopt the rhetoric of certainty at precisely those points where plausibility should be our highest ambition?"

What are the stakes, what is at risk, why has the authoritative voice become the last, unacknowledged and perhaps unconscious, refuge of the evidentially challenged?" (88). These are excellent questions. In answering them, however, Slaughter sometimes hoists himself by his own petard. After suggesting that members of the expedition treated York badly, he states that "It was the time of his life" (121). Because "Indians treated York as a great man and sometimes as *the* great man of the expedition," it "does not take a flight of imagination from these sources to surmise that York's expedition was personally transforming and empowering" (121). Taken together with evidence that York defied Clark upon his return to St. Louis, this is a reasonable conclusion. But it is still an act of imagination, *informed* imagination, to be sure, but imagination nonetheless.

Slaughter's account of why Lewis stopped making entries in his journal in mid-August 1806 is another case in point. The captain and his biographers attributed the sudden change to the discomfort of a wound he suffered when a member of the party accidentally shot him in his buttocks. "As writing in my present situation is extremely painful to me, I shall desist until I recover and leave to my friend Capt. C. the continuation of our journal," explained Lewis, who returned to St. Louis on September 23 (45). Slaughter will have none of this, arguing that Lewis stopped because of a chance meeting with two Illinois hunters who somehow reminded him of his failure as an explorer. This is an interesting idea. But Slaughter is not trying to be suggestive. He is *certain*. "No, the coincidence of meeting up with the white men and Lewis's cessation of writing was cause and effect" (45).

This repeated insistence on one interpretation in a book advocating a multiplicity of interpretations is unfortunate because Slaughter is a smart historian. He is right that too often readers take the journals at face value, assuming they are accurate records of what happened and that Lewis and Clark were reliable transcribers. The journals were revised

numerous times before the expedition returned to St. Louis, let alone before they were published. There is nothing sinister about this process. Lewis and Clark were simply human beings whose writings must be read with caution.

Much more interesting is Slaughter's effort to reorient Lewis and Clark historiography away from American historians' obsession with positivism, chronology, and omniscience. To some extent, Slaughter is championing a form of storytelling in which time is inconsequential, in which stories develop less chronologically than psychologically, in which oral traditions matter as much as written sources, in which emotional truth is as persuasive as factual truth. It is personal storytelling concerned more with a universal nature of human beings than with the usual preoccupation of historians with the peculiarities of time and place.

Slaughter is largely unconcerned with the significance of Lewis and Clark in terms of what European Americans for the past two centuries have commonly called history. *Where* the expedition appears in narratives of the rise of the United States or the conquest of North America, while interesting and important, is not critical. Instead, Slaughter wants us to consider human beings and the stories we tell to explain ourselves to others and, no less crucially, to ourselves. He is interested in understanding the nature not just of explorers but of ambition, tolerance, and the ways in which people define success and failure. His quarry is nothing less than human nature. The journey of Lewis and Clark, like York's, was an intensely personal one that changed them permanently. No one who reads these essays could doubt that the mercurial Lewis's mysterious death was anything but the suicide of a depressed man who thought he had failed to accomplish anything worthwhile.

I profoundly admire what I understand Slaughter to be attempting. This book, like his previous work, *The Natures of John and William Bartram* (1996), makes for exciting reading. *Exploring Lewis and Clark* bristles with

more ideas than those found in a dozen average monographs. Would that more of us had the temerity and the talent to attempt something different, to write innovative history that engages readers in unexpected ways.

Still, I worry about the lack of history in Slaughter's book. By history, I do not mean a linear narrative constructed out of written sources. I do mean a sense of the distinctiveness of different historical times and places. Slaughter made me think about a question that has bedeviled me since graduate school, which is just how different we are from people in the eighteenth century. If the past is indeed a foreign country, how much do we misunderstand it and its residents, not solely because of incomplete and ambiguous sources or our agendas, but because we simply cannot understand it, because it is too different, because its implicit rules defeat our eager efforts to decipher them? It is tempting to see the people we study as sharing much in common with us. No doubt they did. But they also differ from us in important ways that we need to respect as much as we respect the differences between the Americans and the Sioux.

Lewis and Clark were sons of eighteenth-century British America who grew up in an era of global republican revolution. As their journals demonstrate, they were men for whom self-restraint was the ultimate virtue, men not given to self-revelation. Far from pouring forth their souls either in person or with pen, they worked to repress emotion and to record in a relatively dispassionate fashion. The world, which acquired meaning through the slow, deliberate accumulation of data into recognizable patterns, was a wondrous place that human beings could eventually understand and control. "Mastery," a word with pejorative connotations in our society, connoted the triumph of human power after centuries of subjugation to the forces of monarchy, superstition, and barbarism. To trade and talk rather than fight and deceive was a marvelous development, a sign of the progress of humanity. Much as Thomas Jefferson was committed to the ultimate removal or absorption of Indians,

he wanted to treat them well, to avoid brutality and savagery, or at least to assure himself that he had *tried* to do so. Indeed, it is critical to any understanding of this period to accept that Jefferson and Lewis were trying to be civilized, even if that meant exercising naked power politely.

It should not surprise us that Lewis and Clark's journals appealed to few people in nineteenth-century North America. The explorers operated in the tradition of an eighteenth-century European enlightened sensibility embodied in the life and mind of Jefferson. They were part of a culture that assumed the possibility of progress, that attempted to bring order to perceived chaos through the accumulation and classification of data, that was driven by a genuine fascination with the rich diversity of the earth's peoples. Wildly ethnocentric, they nonetheless conceived of the world's population as a great family that could be understood and improved into a mirror image of idealized European models of human behavior. Thus the impulse to travel, record, and disseminate what they saw and heard and touched, and above all to exchange information, ideas, and goods. Reciprocity in commerce and conversation was the key to realizing their vision of harmony and stability.

But Atlantic civilization was changing in dramatic ways that made the scientific recording of data and impressions anachronistic. More and more people were embracing a darker view of the world, a world neither benign nor controllable, a world of sublime beauty and horror whose workings were on some level beyond human ken. A great many chose to put their faith in a Christian God, to whom it somehow must all make sense. Others, including the contemporary novelist Charles Brockden Brown, confronted the failure of the Enlightenment to bring order to the whole. Landscapes might be rearranged and reforms proposed. But human nature was human nature, and it would play out its passions and its discontents and its fears in tumbrils clattering into the Place de la Concorde and the screams of dying Creeks on the killing fields of Horse-

shoe Bend. It is easy enough when we focus narrowly on Lewis and Clark to forget what rough, unrefined, and savage places London and New York were in the early nineteenth century. Lewis and Clark's world was not Monticello writ large. Indeed, one might argue in the manner of Thomas Slaughter that the insistence on civilization was a reflection of the fragility with which Jefferson and company regarded it. Violence was easy; civility was work.

Lewis and Clark had the distinction of working on the cusp of a turn from rationality into irrationality, from enlightened self-control and discovery to an acceptance of Romantic notions of racial predestination and emotion, from secular salvation through the reorganization of visible or external landscapes through rational means to the reorganization of internal landscapes through conversion. It was a movement from Jefferson to Jackson, from *Candide* to *Heathcliff*, from a world in which the cause of America was the cause of all mankind to a world in which the cause of America was, well, the cause of America, and white male Americans at that. The sheer curiosity and patience of Lewis and Clark would soon enough be in short supply in the United States. By the 1860s, Americans would kill each other with abandon, leaving their melancholy president to wonder whether the Civil War was a divine plan of expiation for their collective sins.

We see this shift vividly in our obsession with the fate of the unhappy Lewis. Hard as it is to believe that a man of such talent and achievement may have killed himself, it is even harder to accept that we will never know exactly what demons tormented him. Our struggles with Lewis's death are, like his death

itself, a tribute to the failure of the larger enlightened enterprise of which his expedition was a shining example. Historians, too, can gather data, organize it into narratives, and classify behavior. But at the end of the day, some things refuse to bend to our will and remain defiantly unknowable.

All of this is by way of suggesting that we not throw out *all* of what we learned about history. I fear that Lewis and Clark are as impossible to decipher internally as York or Sacagawea, in part for historical reasons. Had they lived a generation or two later, they would have inundated us with personal reflections. Time and place do matter; cultural context can be decisive. Yes, we can read their texts ethnographically, looking for clues or shards of clues as to what they thought, and make educated guesses. But it is next to impossible to get at what they were feeling without making that extra jump into the realm of the imagination, into the realm of fiction. It was not for nothing that novels became to the nineteenth century what histories had been in the eighteenth, for novels allowed authors and readers to contemplate psychological life, to consider feelings and motivations, something ultimately (and sadly) off limits for historians.

Exploring Lewis and Clark is well worth reading because it challenges old assumptions and offers new ideas. I will assign it to students in an effort to shake them out of their acceptance of tired clichés, to get them to think anew. In the end, alas, I found the book more provocative than persuasive, for what Slaughter most successfully stimulated me into thinking about was the limits of his approach.

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Plains Song Review

exploring sense of place in the Great Plains



Photo/art by J. Lynn Batten, winner of the 2004 Christine Pappas Award for Best Work, is from the cover of volume 6 (2004).

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