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Review of *William Clark's World: Describing America in an Age of Unknowns* by Peter J. Kastor

Thomas P. Slaughter  
*University of Rochester*

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*William Clark's World: Describing America in an Age of Unknowns.* By Peter J. Kastor. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. ix + 344 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

This book, though not a biography, is biographical. It considers William Clark's attempts to describe the American West within the context of other descriptions during his lifetime (1770–1838). Peter J. Kastor explores the conscious agendas of writers and mapmakers that supported their particular political and cultural goals. He addresses problems that grew from describing the unknown and the ambivalence that inspired many of the attempts. He aims for a subtle and less valedictory analysis than is traditional, while avoiding a flip of that view into a simple indictment of empire-building and ethnic cleansing on the American frontier.

According to the author, Clark's perspective was that of a surveyor, not a poet, which no one who has ever read Clark would dispute. The implication is that Clark "banished" his personality to the periphery of his descriptions. That implication is open to debate, and

the argument would be about how successful anyone ever is in such an endeavor. Clark's journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition would be "technical" and dispassionate, and not about his "feelings," Kastor tells us. The expedition's political agenda dictated landscape description in order to contest boundaries with European nations. Knowledge of the various Indian tribes would help the government's diplomatic and military preparations. The author is less interested in the two explorers' "differences of expression" than in their shared efforts to provide "accurate representation of the landscape" without ever engaging the "metaphysical implications" of unique perspective and idiosyncratic analysis. Their goal was objectivity, and Kastor engages them on their own terms. As always, Clark's goals were "practical." The author will get no argument there, except about the meanings and implications of such an observation.

The book does not provide a close reading or deep probing of texts. What Kastor seeks is closer to the surface. Similarly, although the book is all about context, it is not always clear how the specific contexts explored are relevant to the subject (e.g., Clark's marriage). There is less about the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition than I expected, little about Clark's editorial eye, and the author's approach contributes to the traditional blending of Lewis and Clark into one voice and the journals into a seamless narrative. Kastor presumes an obvious common sense reading of texts, both those written by Clark and the one provided by this book. If we have learned anything over the centuries of writing history, I think it should have been that history is all about perspective and that no one—the subject, the author, the reviewer, or the reader—shares the same common sense. As the title of a recent book suggests, everything is obvious, but only after you know the answers.

THOMAS P. SLAUGHTER  
Department of History  
University of Rochester