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Seeing Through the Eyes of Maximilian and Bodmer: Review of *The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied, Volume I: May 1832-April 1833*. Edited by Stephen S. Witte and Marsha V. Gallagher.

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## REVIEW ESSAY

*The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied, Volume I: May 1832-April 1833.* Edited by Stephen S. Witte and Marsha V. Gallagher. Translated by William J. Orr, Paul Schach, and Dieter Karch. Foreword by John Wilson. Introduction by Paul Schach. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xlii + 467 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, addenda, bibliography, indexes. \$85.00.

### SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF MAXIMILIAN AND BODMER

The Lewis and Clark story looms large in American history, tending to crowd other exploration stories off the stage. This has been partly because the journey of the Corps of Discovery was first (1804-06), and partly because it is so rich in primary texts. The contemporary adventures of Zebulon Pike, David Thompson, William Dunbar, and others have suffered, to a certain degree, because there is no easily defined narrative text with an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end to absorb the attention of general audiences. With some exaggeration, Lewis and Clark have been called the writingest explorers in American history.

The primacy of Lewis and Clark is not likely to change, but the near-monopoly of Lewis and Clark in our historical memory now has a serious competitor.

The German prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied (1782-1867) traveled up the Missouri River in 1832-33 to study American Indian culture before it was fatally compromised by the encroachment of Euro-American civilization. Aware of the expansionist and industrial dynamics of the Jacksonian Era in the United States, Maximilian wanted to study what he regarded as the vanishing Indian while there was still time. The idea had come to him during his 1815-17 journey through Brazil. For the publication that followed, *Reise nach Brasilien*

*in den Jahren 1815 bis 1817* (1820), Maximilian had provided his own illustrations. These were criticized, including by his artistically talented siblings. When he ventured to North America in 1832, Maximilian wisely brought with him a professional illustrator, the Swiss-born Karl Bodmer (1809-93). What Maximilian wanted was a body of illustrations of such precision that they would exhibit what we would call photographic fidelity and detail. He got that. What he could not have anticipated is that Bodmer would produce some of the finest art of the Missouri River bioregion and its inhabitants.

Bodmer's artwork has been well known and widely reproduced for decades. In fact, virtually no illustrated book about the Missouri River before the age of railroads fails to include one or more of Bodmer's famous aquatints, particularly those of the bison and White Cliffs country of eastern Montana. Studies of Upper Missouri Indian tribes use Bodmer's portraits of Indians, some posing alone, some engaged in community activities. At the same time, Maximilian's written account of those places and those tribes has been largely ignored, mostly because no complete or easily accessible edition has existed. Reuben Gold Thwaites's volumes in *Early Western Travels* (1904-07) have not been widely available, and their text is imprecise and incomplete.

The University of Oklahoma's remarkable new edition of the journals, in three volumes, will give the Maximilian-Bodmer travels the place they deserve in the history of the Enlightenment and early travels in America. Volume I appeared in 2008. It takes the Maximilian party from Wied to St. Louis, by way of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Bethlehem, and the scientific utopian colony at New Harmony, Indiana. Volumes II and III will appear in due course. The journals are superbly translated, carefully but not obsessively annotated, and briefly but intelligently introduced. Maximilian's interesting drawings and sketches have been reproduced where they belong in the text. When Bodmer produced a sketch or painting of what Maximilian describes, editors Stephen S. Witte and Marsha V. Gallagher have called the reader's attention to it. The best way to read Maximilian's journals is to spread them out on a large table together with the Joslyn Art Museum's outstanding print reproductions of Bodmer's work: *Karl Bodmer's America* (1984) and *Karl Bodmer's North American Prints* (2004).

Maximilian is different from Lewis and Clark in several significant respects. For one thing, he was not so much an explorer as an Enlightenment traveler. He might have studied American Indians in a number of regions of the American West; he chose the Upper Missouri mostly because he could hitch a ride up and down river on the trade boats, including the steamboats *Yellow Stone* and *Assiniboine*, of the American Fur Company. Maximilian took the AFC's boats to the end of the line, Fort McKenzie near today's Fort Benton, Montana, and then declined to venture on foot or canoe beyond the comforts and protection of the company. He was not only traveling in the wake of Lewis and Clark, but with their journals and maps as his guide. He even met the aging William Clark in St. Louis before he began his ascent of the Missouri. Because Maximilian was not opening the wilderness or commanding several dozen enlisted men, he was free to give most of his attention to ethnography. For Lewis and Clark, ethnography was often subordinate

to more pressing demands. Nor did Maximilian have to explain the Louisiana Purchase or the legalities of American sovereignty to the Indians he met. He was there to study Indian culture, not lecture Indian leaders about trade and their relations with the Great Father.

Perhaps for these reasons, Maximilian was a more careful student of Indian culture than were Lewis and Clark, and far more sympathetic about the plight of American Indians in the face of the land-hungry juggernaut of Andrew Jackson's America. Like many others before and since, he was particularly fascinated by the Mandan people, who lived with their linguistic cousins the Hidatsas in today's North Dakota. In his "Introduction to Maximilian, Prince and Scientist," Paul Schach quotes the judgment of Professor Herbert Baldus of São Paulo, Brazil, that what Maximilian "saw . . . he described thoroughly and independently of opinions of his time." Though Baldus was assessing Maximilian's ethnography of the Indigenous peoples of South America, he may well have been characterizing the North American journals, too. In Maximilian we get the least biased, least geopolitically tainted portrait of the Indians of the Missouri River of the nineteenth century.

The editors rightly insist that Maximilian's journals are as important for their natural science as for their portrait of American Indian culture. True, but the ethnography is dramatically more compelling because it was gathered on the eve of the great collapse precipitated along the Upper Missouri by the smallpox epidemic that decimated all of the tribes it touched and nearly wiped out the Mandans, including Mató-Tópe (Four Bears), who emerges in the work of Maximilian, Bodmer, and George Catlin as one of the most extraordinary Indians of the era. Indeed, there is a statue of Mató-Tópe near the Maximilian castle in Wied. Maximilian and Bodmer spent more time with the Mandans and Hidatsas than with any other tribes; Maximilian's Mandan grammar and vocabulary are now critically important in the face of the language's approaching extinction.

Heretical though it may seem in some quarters, the Maximilian-Bodmer expedition is in important respects more satisfying than the journals of Lewis and Clark. Thanks to the painstaking editorial work of Witte and Gallagher, we now, finally, 175 years after the fact, have the opportunity to explore Maximilian's journals comprehensively. What we discover there is a man of deep human

sympathies, a brilliant observer of landscapes and peoples, an Enlightenment exemplar whose encyclopedic field notes were undistorted by America's imperial mission.

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