

maintain that historical generalizations need to be analyzed and tested through the interdisciplinary approach of comparative studies. This may be so, but comparative study, at least at this point of development, appears of limited utility. It is not truly comparative. There is too little common ground. This volume indicates that each discipline remains largely isolated, enmeshed within the structure of its own perspectives, methodology, and terminology.

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Jefferson's Nephews: A Frontier Tragedy. By Boynton Merrill, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976. Pp. xv, 462. Maps, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$16.50.)

The story of the Lewis family is indeed tragic, but the tale is more gothic than classical. The connection with Thomas Jefferson was real enough, but it is of doubtful significance because Jefferson avoided his Lewis relatives as much as possible. Both families lived in Albemarle County, Virginia, and in the familiar pattern of southern gentry intermarried through several generations. Charles Lilburne Lewis married his first cousin, Lucy Jefferson, while two of his sons married second cousins and a daughter married a double first cousin known as Thomas Jefferson, Jr., a nephew of the Sage of Monticello.

This widely praised book is the work of a Kentucky attorney who currently owns part of the Lewis lands. His richly detailed story is the account of the rise and tragic fall of a family who possessed pride, land, slaves, and great dreams which were always exceeded by their debts. Jefferson struggled for a lifetime to make a living from the red soil of the piedmont, but the Lewises admitted their failure and moved to Kentucky in 1808, a journey taken by many fellow Virginians. They purchased several thousand acres along the Ohio River in Livingston County, land enough for speculation as well as for farming. Merrill describes Virginia and Kentucky society in sometimes excessive detail, largely from secondary works, but his account of the Lewises is drawn from an exceptionally close study of family papers and legal records. His story advances at a leisurely pace, and the fateful crime does not come until chapter twenty-five.

The doomed protagonist is Lilburne Lewis. Widowed and newly remarried, he was troubled by the death of his beloved

mother, imminent financial ruin, and poor health throughout the family. The year 1811 was one of strange omens, from heavy flights of passenger pigeons to Halley's Comet, and the troubled Lilburne began to show a strain of madness that led to heavy drinking and frequent abuse of his slaves. He turned on a seventeen year old slave named George and, with the help of his ne'er do well younger brother Isham, tied him on the floor and attacked him with an ax while his horrified slaves were forced to watch. The corpse was dismembered and the pieces thrown into the fire when suddenly the first shock of the great New Madrid earthquake brought down the chimney on the terrible scene. The slave's remains were hidden in the rebuilt chimney. Later shocks tumbled it again, however, and a neighbor discovered the head.

Lilburne and Isham Lewis were indicted for murder, and Lilburne's new wife abandoned him. Faced with total ruin and utter disgrace, Lilburne talked Isham into a suicide pact. They went to the family graveyard, and Lilburne dropped his unwitting will and some last words on the ground near the grave of his beloved first wife, describing himself as "a victim to my beloved but cruel Letitia. I die in the hope of being united to my other wife in Heaven" (p. 295). The brothers prepared to shoot one another, but Lilburne paused to show how a survivor could dispatch himself in the event of a misfire. While demonstrating how to fire a rifle with a stick, Lilburne shot himself through the heart, and Isham ran from the scene. He was arrested and jailed, but he somehow made his escape and vanished without a trace.

The Lewis tragedy is a fascinating counterpoint to the more familiar story of frontier success. Indeed, this contrast between success and failure provides a subtle moral for this gruesome tale, an essential reminder that frontier hardship did not inevitably lead to the democratic prosperity imagined by uncritical readers of Frederick Jackson Turner and John D. Barnhart.

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Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies: The Expeditions of 1838-39 With Journals, Letters, and Notes on the Dakota Indians. Translated and edited by Edmund C. Bray and Martha Coleman Bray. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1976. Pp. 294. Maps, notes, illustrations, appendixes, index. \$14.50.)