A Forgotten Hero Remembered, Revered, and Revised: The Legacy and Ordeal of George Rogers Clark

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Perhaps because writing a biography of George Rogers Clark may be hazardous to one's health, no writer since 1957 has undertaken the task. Of the five serious candidates for such an undertaking before 1890, three died unexpectedly. One was killed in the Battle of Tippecanoe, another in a quarrel over abolition in 1842, and the last and most famous, Lyman C. Draper, suffered a stroke in 1891 and died shortly thereafter. The other two became disillusioned with the project and gave up. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Clark lacked a biographer. Not until the 1890s did biographers both consider Clark worthy of attention and survive to write about him.

This essay first examines and critiques the historians who restored Clark to national attention by writing biographies that reflected Draper’s approach to the war hero: “I have long learned to reverence him as I never have any other public character.” Second, it offers a new interpretation of Clark’s life. Incorporating recent research on the Revolutionary frontier and the early nation, this second part presents Clark as a frontier republican. As a republican, he believed in disinterested gentry leadership, shared some of the founding generation’s estrangement from American society, and spent his last years pursuing enlightened intellectual interests and informing the East about the West.

Clark was born on November 19, 1752, in Albemarle County, Virginia. He and his family later moved to Caroline County, where he spent the next fourteen years. With little formal education, he was hired as a surveyor in 1771, and for the following three years surveyed Kentucky lands. He served as a captain in Lord Dun-

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more's War, and in 1777 he secured Virginia Governor Patrick Henry's approval to attack the British and Indians in the Ohio Valley. Clark captured the French towns of the American bottom in 1778, lost Vincennes, then undertook his famous winter march through the flooded Wabash region to recapture Vincennes in early 1779. Although he wished to attack Detroit and was commissioned brigadier general in Virginia's militia to that end, he lacked the men and munitions to do so. He repulsed British and Indian assaults on Spanish, French, and American posts along the Mississippi River in 1780, and his last major battles were against the Shawnees in 1780 and 1782.

After the war, Clark worked briefly as a surveyor and as an United States Indian commissioner. But, for drawing goods on Virginia's name, he was constantly hounded by creditors when the state refused to pay its debt on the grounds that his receipts were fraudulent. In part to acquire lands to satisfy these debts, on four separate occasions he intrigued with foreign nations and adventurers about the possibility of seizing Louisiana and the Yazoo lands and establishing American colonies. Clark spent his final years living in a cabin built opposite Louisville on the Ohio River until a stroke and amputation forced him to live with his sister in Louisville, where he died on February 13, 1818.

The first attempt to describe and evaluate Clark came from the general himself, despite some initial reluctance. At the urging of Kentucky Congressman John Brown, Clark wrote his memoirs, probably in 1791. In addition to his recollections, Clark drew information from his diary and journal and the journal of one of his captains. Unfortunately, he did not use a forty-page letter he had written to George Mason in 1779, a letter in which he had described his Illinois campaign. The memoirs never saw publication during Clark's lifetime, and extracts began to appear only in the 1830s.3

One may read the memoirs in three related ways. First, the manuscript is a "life document," in which Clark described what he considered the key events of his life. While occasionally factually unreliable, the text displays the author's understanding of himself. For Clark, the Vincennes campaign was his defining moment, and his memoirs end abruptly there. Second, the document represents Clark's attempt to establish his credentials. When he wrote the memoirs, his character had already suffered sustained attacks on account of his debts and land schemes. He wrote to salvage his reputation and remind the republic of his service to it. He also expected to establish the terms of future debate on his contributions to the

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region's history by reminding posterity of his achievements and selfless service. "I believe, that through myself," he wrote to Brown, "every thing past, relative to this country may be known." Given his later biographers' filiopietism and favorable assessment of the importance of his Revolutionary War service, he succeeded.

In the 1890s, historians William Hayden English and Consul Wilshire Butterfield began research on Clark. Both were midwesterners who hoped to stress their region's importance for national history, and both set the major themes of Clark's life for future biographers. The former—distant relative of Clark through marriage, lifelong admirer, politician, and president of the Indiana Historical Society—issued his book in 1896 in an effort to describe the "conquest" of the Old Northwest. Butterfield completed his manuscript in the same year, only to find that English had beaten him to the press. Rather than publish his work, Butterfield continued to tinker with it, and it did not appear in print until after his death.

English heaped accolades on Clark and other Revolutionary Americans throughout his book. Clark fought in the Revolution, English wrote (clearly following the memoirs) because "he could best serve his country by leading a force against the enemy's posts in the Illinois and on the Wabash." Clark was undoubtedly one of "the first men" of his time, "if not, indeed, of any time," and the general's troops represented "the highest type of a hardy and patriotic citizen-soldier." English even managed to smooth over Clark's flirtation with treason in his acceptance of Edmond Genêt's commission as a major general in the French army: Clark had joined the French only to "open the Mississippi to American use."

English's discussion of Clark's actions and motives and those of the Indians leaves much to be desired. He interpreted Clark's campaign in the Illinois country as an attempt to close "the open door by which the hostile Indians raided the white settlements" at the instigation of the British at Detroit, Vincennes, Kaskaskia, and Cahokia. English (and all future biographers) did not know that the attacks came from the Shawnees, Delawares, and Mingoes living in

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5 William Hayden English, Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778–1783, and Life of General George Rogers Clark (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1896), I, 9, 10, 11. (Since the two volumes are paginated consecutively, further references will be page numbers only.)

6 See W. H. Hunter's biographical notes on Butterfield in Consul Wilshire Butterfield, History of George Rogers Clark's Conquest of the Illinois and Wabash Towns, 1778 and 1779 (Columbus, Ohio, 1904), ix-xix.

7 English, Conquest of the Northwest, 87, 89, 158, 818-19.
LAND WAS SOMETHING TO SETTLE UPON

the Ohio country. By making the general's mobilization a defensive tactic, any ulterior motive became irrelevant. English held nothing but disdain for the Indian-British alliance, and he condemned Hamilton for the “wrong” of employing Indians, whom he described as “more savage than beasts.” English avoided the question of Clark’s own barbarism by dismissing as “unsupported” Lieutenant General Henry Hamilton’s claim that his adversary had ordered the tomahawking of four Indians at the gates of Fort Sackville. Finally, English contradicted himself in assessing Clark’s achievements. He claimed that Clark’s 1782 raid on the Shawnee towns convinced them “that they had nothing to gain by continuing the contest with the Americans” and “ended forever all formidable Indian invasions of Kentucky.” Forty-one pages later, English admitted that the attacks continued and resulted in an unsuccessful and illegal effort by Clark in 1786–1787 to subdue the warring Indians, who now also included those along the Wabash.*

Butterfield’s account of the war in the West is quite similar to that of English. Like English, Butterfield gushed praise for Clark and his heroic success “in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles,” and he denounced Hamilton for using Indians. Likewise, Butterfield took Clark’s motives as expressed in the memoirs at face value. Clark undertook his campaign of 1778–1779 “to punish the savages of the west for their bloodthirsty marauds.” The Indian raids on Kentucky appalled Butterfield, but he refused to believe that they were of any consequence, because the Indians came in parties of less than fifty, hit “suddenly and quickly disappeared.”

*Butterfield, Clark’s Conquest, v, 534-37.

*Ibid., 82, 157, 222, 343-44, 759, 796-803.
Apparently Clark had little more to do than discipline pesky gnats. Although he drew upon British sources, Butterfield used them to focus narrowly on troop movements. The British themselves were as nondescript as the Indians.

In retrospect, one could not expect English and Butterfield to give much attention to the Indians and British. Literary Americans in this era were far more interested in their country's explosive territorial and economic growth. Few historians in the United States gave much attention to European history generally or English history specifically until around the time English and Butterfield were writing. Most opted instead for the interrelated themes of American exceptionalism and isolation. The English did not play an important role in American historiography (except as oppressive overlords) until the 1880s, when scholars began to focus on the transplantation of Teutonic institutions from Europe via England to America.10

Although ignored like the British, the Indians had the additional misfortune of being the apparent losers in the struggle for North America. From the point of view of white Americans at the end of the nineteenth century, the Indians were inevitably disappearing before the superior Anglo-Saxon race, a fact confirmed by the so-called Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890. In such a context, it is unsurprising that few historians paid attention to Indian history. Frederick Jackson Turner's doctoral dissertation, "On the Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin," was one of the few available historical works incorporating Native Americans. Until at least the 1920s, when cultural pluralism began to replace Social Darwinism as the dominant theory of racial interaction, the Indians remained nonentities for historians. As late as 1952, Bernard DeVoto lamented that "American historians have made shockingly little effort to understand the life, the societies, the cultures, the thinking, and the feelings of Indians, and disastrously little effort to understand how all these affected the white men and their societies."

Clark's biographers may have slighted the British and Indians, but the general's heroic individualism did not escape them. One hoped to transmit some of Clark's "dauntless spirit" and supreme "self-reliance" to his audience. Another saw in Clark an example of rugged individualism: a "sturdy, forthright" pioneer, "calloused under the lash of hardship" but who ultimately came to

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the frontier for "freedom," "solitude," and "peace." These were not empty exhortations. Clark's biographers wrote at a time when individuals increasingly seemed irrelevant to powerful, impersonal forces such as industrialization, mass culture, international economics, and politics. Many Americans at the turn of the century developed a crisis of self, a haunting suspicion that political and sociological factors beyond their control directed their lives. This era also saw the closing of the American frontier, which for Frederick Jackson Turner signaled the end of the democratizing West that had ensured American individualism and muffled social unrest. In this anxious time, frontier history offered a way to transmit the value of heroic individualism to Americans who could no longer experience the frontier firsthand.

As part of the emergence of frontier history, interest in the Old Northwest and Clark increased in the early decades of the twentieth century. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote and edited material on Clark and the Revolutionary West for the American Historical Association Review and Reports. A host of similar materials from Turner's students and colleagues followed. In the Midwest, the sesquicentennial of Clark's capture of Fort Sackville inspired parades and pageants in the general's honor, newspaper essays retelling his achievements, and two editions of the memoirs. In 1928, the federal government appropriated nearly $2 million for a memorial to Clark and an educational program about the Revolution in the West at Vincennes, and the next year Indiana Governor Harry Leslie urged Americans to measure themselves against


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Clark’s measure of “fearless patriotism and service.” Reflecting on the public’s outpouring of gratitude, five authors produced biographies of Clark in the 1920s.

Temple Bodley undertook his biography of Clark as a labor of love. A descendant of Clark, Bodley was convinced that his ancestor had been unjustifiably maligned by Theodore Roosevelt in *The Winning of the West*. Roosevelt had portrayed Clark as “an old man who had squandered his energies and sunk into deserved obscurity.” Bodley aimed to rehabilitate the general’s reputation by detailing “the record truth about him.” The “record truth” meant identifying Clark’s contribution to American history and his region’s importance. Bodley began by stating: “both the winning and the value of American independence hung upon the successful conduct of the war in the West, as well as along the Atlantic seaboard.” Without Clark’s victories over the British in the West, “American democracy,” lacking a frontier, “would have come into the world still-born.”

Bodley’s work is marred by several problems. His main sources were Clark’s memoirs and the lengthy letter to George Mason. He cited other manuscripts rarely, and published edited works available at the time appear nowhere in his footnotes. In addition, Bodley often forsook prose for lengthy block quotes, some covering three-fourths of entire chapters. His treatment of the British and Indians was simplistic at best. Hamilton was characterized as simply “ruthless,” and the Indians were “savages” blocking the expansion of frontier democracy. Finally, the author explained little about Clark’s life beyond the Revolution, and the general’s final twenty-five years received only sixteen pages.

Two years later, James A. James, a professor of history at Northwestern University, published his biography of Clark. James based his book largely on his two-volume edition of the *George Rogers Clark Papers*. James wrote sympathetically of Clark, but not hagiographically. Still, James fell into some of his predecessors’ traps. He glorified and overstated the importance of the frontier and the meaning of Clark’s campaigns. He did little with the British and Indians, assuming instead ceaseless racial conflict. He also assumed that the Indian attacks came from the Illinois country. James’s biography, however, is preferable to Bodley’s (and is

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17 Bodley, *George Rogers Clark*, vii, xvii, xviii.
still one of the two standard accounts of Clark's life) because of James's extensive sources and detailed treatment of Clark's post-Revolutionary life.  

The war on the frontier, James believed, began with the death of the Shawnee chief Cornstalk inside Fort Pitt in 1777. The Shawnees, portrayed as British lackeys, then raided the Kentucky settlements, where they committed "savage barbarities" against the "heroic band of defenders" who lived in the frontier stations. In response, Clark devised a plan to seize the British-garrisoned French towns in the American bottom, securing the Revolutionary frontier. This decision was the key to Clark's success and "must always stand out as epochal in the history of our nation."  

According to James, Clark's post-Revolutionary life was that of a bitter general, forsaken by his countrymen. Fleeing creditors, Clark transferred most of his property to his brother William (later of the Lewis and Clark expedition) and was forced to live with him for a time. He became involved in several incidents that destroyed his reputation: French plots to seize Louisiana from the Spanish and a dispute with the notorious intriguer, James Wilkinson, who slandered Clark to the national government. In his last years, "life was at best lonely for him."  

In the same decade, three popular biographies by Ross Lockridge, Frederick Palmer, and Lowell Thomas were published. All of them denigrated Indians, ignored or demonized the British, and proudly saluted Clark. For the most part, these biographies are useless for any intelligent modern audience seeking to understand the region and its peoples. Lockridge, father of the prize-winning novelist of the same name, lauded his subject as "a genuine American hero" and ascribed Clark's motives accordingly. Frederick Palmer went even further and compared Clark favorably to Wellington at Waterloo, Caesar in Gaul, and Washington at Yorktown. Unable to understand anything but warfare, Lockridge claimed, Indians supposedly admired Clark, as they did all great white American military leaders, including Andrew Jackson! Lowell Thomas even debated whether or not the Indians were humans (after a chapter surveying the evidence, he concluded they were). Also, Clark's successes in the Illinois country ended the Indian threat and marked "the conquest of the West," which Lockridge described as the "conquest of the red children of the forest."  

For the next twenty-one years, Clark returned to historiographical obscurity. In that time, however, two works appeared that should have been clarion calls for future biographers. Ran-
dolph Downes and John Barnhart both questioned existing evaluations of the general. In 1940, Downes, in his *Council Fires on the Upper Ohio*, characterized Clark's march into the West as a brief episode in a forty-year struggle between European Americans and Indians for control of the Ohio Valley, a struggle which climaxed at Fallen Timbers. From this view, Clark conquered nothing. Contradicting all Clark biographers, Downes pointed out that “few ‘conquests’ have been followed by such a sudden and complete disappearance of the power of the ‘conquerors’ and of any respect of them among the ‘conquered.’” Heavy-handed in their dealings and unable to serve as adequate trading partners, the Americans drove the Indians into an alliance with the British.23

A decade later, Barnhart further questioned Clark’s achievements in a brief article and in the introduction to his edition of Hamilton’s journal. Barnhart suggested that Clark had several advantages over Hamilton: he actually outnumbered the lieutenant governor at Vincennes; the fort at Vincennes was a poorly supplied blockhouse manned by French Canadians who had little interest in fighting for Great Britain; the residents of the French towns were American sympathizers; and Britain’s western policy

23 Randolph Downes, *Council Fires on the Upper Ohio: A Narrative of Indian Affairs in the Upper Ohio Valley until 1795* (Pittsburgh, 1940), 229.
was in disarray, as a result of London’s lack of interest in the region. Barnhart also indicated that James ignored or forgot evidence to make the capture of Vincennes more impressive than even Clark viewed it. He recommended limiting “some of the excessive adulation of Clark,” especially since his “victory was not by any means a miracle.”

Despite Downes and Barnhart’s work, two biographies aimed at a general readership appeared in the 1950s that recast Clark as a war hero triumphing over incomprehensible odds. Both authors reflected their era’s dominant trend in American historiography: a consensus history stressing broad agreement on individualism and voluntaristic action within socially acceptable norms. In this historiography, conflict between Americans was either demonized as sedition or marginalized, and American historians tended to present historical personalities as uniformly selfless men patriotically establishing, protecting, and revering democratic liberalism. The increasing popularity of American Studies programs, which probed an ostensibly organic society in search of a national character, also encouraged historians to deemphasize conflict and heterogeneity. For volunteering to lead a frontier expedition to protect American liberties, Clark won the highest acclaim from his biographers in the 1950s. In these two biographies of Clark, the Indians and British are not so much treacherous as invisible.

Both Walter Havighurst and John Bakeless had previously written popular histories of the Old Northwest before they turned to Clark. Their knowledge of the region, however, was colored by their romantic views of it. Havighurst made Clark into a desperado, sacrificing all for the new nation. Flying against the evidence, Havighurst’s Clark knew his campaign “could never be a logical campaign. . . . Let it then be unreasonable—let the odds be overwhelming. He knew his case was desperate, but the more he realized his weakness, the more he relished the struggle to come.” Likewise, one wonders if the birth of Clark was not foretold in ancient prophecies, for, according to Bakeless, “on the day George Rogers Clark was born, the man and the hour met.”

There is little difference between Bakeless’s child of destiny and Havighurst’s desperado, although Bakeless provided more thorough coverage and is thus the other standard account of Clark’s

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Both say little about the Indians and British beyond describing Clark's campaign as an attempt to defend settlements from attack. Bakeless even goes so far as to claim that the French Canadians opposed him. While Bakeless compiled an impressive bibliography, his historical imagination occasionally prevailed over the documentation: a card game between captured American captain Leonard Helm and Hamilton occupied the lieutenant governor enough in the early stages of the battle for Fort Sackville to give Clark the edge, and British artillerymen were so intimidated by American marksmen that they would not look out their portholes to fire. In the end, both Bakeless and Havighurst lament the injustices inflicted upon Clark after the Revolution by his ungrateful countrymen.28

No new biographies have appeared since the 1950s. Lowell Harrison, however, has provided probably the best work on Clark. Harrison's book, in just over one hundred pages, covers topics ranging from the settlement of the Virginia backcountry to Clark's "painful" life after the Revolution. Harrison also avoids the embellished prose of earlier writers. Harrison suggests that Clark's tactics were less militarily brilliant than psychologically pivotal. By playing on the emotions of British officers who feared a cruel death at the hands of the Americans should they lose Fort Sackville, Clark exposed the timidity of several of Hamilton's officers. Unfortunately, the standard laments—the Indians being British lackeys, Clark's singular motive of curtailing Indian attacks by marching into the Illinois country, and the use of the inaccurate term "conquest"—can also be applied to Harrison's work.29

Since the publication of the last biography of Clark, scholars have produced a wealth of material on the political, military, social, and ethnic contexts of Clark's life. Much of this work promises to provide the basis for a new interpretation of his achievements, ordeals, and legacy. The marriage of anthropology and history has produced ethnohistory, which has been rapidly redefining frontiers and broadening the understanding of native responses to colonization and American expansion. The British have had their colonial policies extensively reevaluated. Work on colonial backcountry settlements has begun to answer who moved beyond the Appalachian Mountains and why. Scholarship on Revolutionary ideology, especially the republican synthesis, has provided insights into the mentalities of eighteenth-century American whigs.30 Synthesizing this

27 Bakeless's biography has been reissued recently by the University of Nebraska Press with an introduction by James Ronda (1992).
29 Lowell Harrison, George Rogers Clark and the War in the West (Lexington, Ky., 1976).
30 For review essays of some of the most important work in these areas see James Axtell, "The Ethnohistory of Early America: A Review Essay," William and
scholarship can provide a more complex view of Clark and his time than has heretofore been written.

Clark shared much with the republican gentry of tidewater Virginia, in particular their enlightened political thought and intellectual and pecuniary pursuits. In a crucial way, however, Clark deviated from existing typologies of a gentleman. His life and fortune were tied to the frontier, an arena of cultural contact and political struggle between several independent societies. That struggle neither began nor ended with the Revolution. Clark's world was the Ohio-Mississippi Valley, a region inhabited and claimed by several Indian groups, three European nations, and one fledgling republic. For much of his life, Clark was at the center of events in the struggle for the interior of North America. Moreover, his geographical, political, and social location made him one of the early republic's important sources of leadership and information (though not necessarily accurate) on the West. Clark supplied accounts of the land, its inhabitants, their past and prospects, and western politics.

Like many of the revolutionary generation, Clark subscribed to a republican ideology, a social and political philosophy that held that those of the first rank would selflessly and virtuously lead the polity. These men, members of what Jefferson called the "natural aristocracy," were set apart from all others and would naturally be deferred to because of their superior abilities, achievements, education, and vision. Such men believed that serving the commonweal was the highest good to which one could aspire. The rest of society would happily follow the enlightened, disinterested, benevolent direction of its best men. Gordon Wood has recently explained the deference republicans expected from the masses: "If the political rulers were men of merit and talent and governed only in the public interest, they would naturally command the affection and respect of the people."32

Clark considered himself one of the natural aristocracy. When he arrived at the frontier station of Harrodsburg in 1777, he immediately assumed leadership and began organizing its defenses. Like many minor gentry who moved into Virginia's backcountry, Clark

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31 For this reinterpretation of a "frontier" see Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, "Comparative Frontier History," in Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, eds., The Frontier in History: North America and South Africa Compared (New Haven, 1981), 4-13.

George Rogers Clark expected the deference due a man of his social status and public service. Serving the common good with conviction, he began planning an expedition across the Ohio River against the Shawnees, Mingoes, and British because “I was determined to loose my Life rather [than] we should submit” to the enemy's attacks. Once in Williamsburg to explain his counterinvasion, the republican-minded Clark refused to accept offices and assistance from men whom he supposed had selfish, pecuniary, or political motives, not making “use of Interest for my promotion.” He explained in language suggesting his faith in the people to recognize ability, “to merit it is such a fixed principal with me that I never could, and I hope never shall ask for a Post of Honour, as I think the Publick ought to be the best Judge whether a Person deserves it or not, if he did he would certainly be Rewarded according to the Virtue they had.”

Clark had placed much faith in the people—toot much, as it turned out. A persistent postwar theme among the republican Revolutionary leaders was a profound disillusionment with the world that had emerged. Deference worked only so long as inferiors followed their superiors, a habit that quickly broke down after the Revolution. Instead of deferring to the most talented and disinterested men, democratic ideologues, small merchants, laborers, farmers, artisans, and rural politicians attacked members of the founding generation as self-interested. What soon emerged following the Revolution was an aggressive, acquisitive, assertive society in which intense competition marked every aspect of life, and the public arena became a forum in which separate interests jockeyed for special consideration and social distinctions were levelled.

In such a setting, Clark’s conviction that he had extended himself disinterestedly for the good of the republic had little force, and his claims to merit and deference quickly became outdated.

Like many of his contemporaries, Clark became disillusioned with the world the Revolution had created. He destroyed personal documents pertaining to his role in the Revolution. Believing the new Americans to be ungrateful, crass predators, he resolved to bury “the Rise and progress of the War in this quarter in oblivion” as revenge against the acquisitive new society. It took several letters and much encouragement from Kentucky Congressman John Brown before Clark could rekindle enough of his “affectin for the people I had so much suffered for” to begin work on his memoirs.

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35 Clark to Brown, January 20, 1789, *GRCP*, I, 621.
The biographers cited above have often picked up on Clark's own rhetoric of unselfish behavior in explaining his counteroffensive across the Ohio. The young Virginian at Harrodsburg, after all, had simply claimed to be defending the settlements. But Clark also had his own financial interests in mind in coming to Kentucky. As deputy surveyor in 1775, Clark earned an annual salary of £80, in addition to "the privilege of Taking what Lands I want." His brother Jonathan, deputy clerk of Dunmore County, patented those lands immediately, and Clark envisioned a handsome profit speculating in real estate, as "this Country Setsels very fast."  

Clark's invasion must also be understood in the context of Virginia's rivalry with Pennsylvania over possession of the region. Clark had been employed as a surveyor in 1775 by the Ohio Company of Virginia, a group of speculators who claimed lands south of the Ohio also claimed by Pennsylvania's Indiana Company. This interstate rivalry was a source of contention until both states surrendered their claims after the Revolution. To strengthen its claims to land north of the Ohio, Virginia expected to award Clark's men with at least three hundred acres of land each. The rivalry over land hampered Clark's recruiting in Pennsylvania and his attempts at procuring supplies from Fort Pitt. Clark's campaign into the contested territory, undertaken by Virginia's militia and supported by Virginia's money, would considerably strengthen the state's claim to the region.

If helping Virginia's land claims was more important than punishing the hostile Indians, it would make sense for an invasion to be launched where there was the least likely resistance. Clark headed west among the neutral Kickapoos and Pickawillanies along the Wabash River and among the decimated Illinois instead of north against the feared Shawnees and Mingoes. This was probably a conscious choice by the Virginian. He prided himself on the reliability of his information on the Ohio Valley, and he knew that the Shawnees were the Indians most offended by the presence of the Kentuckians. The Kickapoos, on the other hand, were considered less threatening. Moreover, Clark encountered considerable opposition from some Kentucky settlers who thought that his expedition would accomplish little and that the troops should only be

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36 Clark to Jonathan Clark, April 1, 1775, ibid., I, 9, 10; John Clark to Jonathan Clark, August 12, 1776, ibid., I, 17.
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used for defense. Presumably, these dissenters knew the expedition would not ease the depredations.  

Most of Clark's biographers have portrayed the general and his men as heroic desperadoes overcoming incredible odds. The challenges faced by the Virginians, however, may not have been so daunting as often supposed. For instance, the Virginians received a considerable amount of help from the French, Spanish, and some Indians. Clark knew before his campaign began that most of the French "already disliked their Master," the English. The French from Cahokia raised two companies of volunteers to join the Americans, while their counterparts at Kaskaskia surrendered food-stuffs. Father Pierre Gibault, the priest at Kaskaskia, went to Vincennes and won over the town for Clark before the Americans had even departed for it. Francis Vigo, a Spanish merchant who escaped from Vincennes after being detained by Hamilton, informed Clark of the possibility of the country, the neutrality of various Indian villages, the strength and number of regulars at Fort Sackville, the condition of the fort, and Hamilton's lack of "suspicion of a Visit from the americans." Finally, a minor Piankashaw chief named Tobacco's Son allied with Clark. The Virginian believed the chief was the "Grand Dore to the Ouabache" and had influence over all other chiefs in the region. That belief was unfounded, but it at least allowed Clark and his men psychological security. All of this assistance gave Clark a decided advantage over Hamilton.  

Kaskaskia was an easy first target. Although there is no evidence that Clark used a map in his campaign, one available to him at the time would have informed him that its French fort had burned in 1766, leaving the town without defenses. Clark likely knew the fate of the fort, because he was highly duplicitous in one letter as regards its location. On one hand, he called it "a small but elegant stone fort" located near "the centre of the town." Later, he placed it "a small distance below the town." According to the map, its ruins were three miles to the east. Fernando de Leyba, the Spanish commandant at St. Louis noted that the British headquarters there were nothing more than a house. Regardless of the existence or location of the fort, two spies Clark sent there in June, 1777, reported an absence of soldiers in the town.  

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38 John Clark to Jonathan Clark, August 12, 1776, GRCP, I, 17; Petition from the Inhabitants of Kentucky, June 15, 1776, ibid., 15; Clark to Mason, November 19, 1779, ibid., 118.  
39 Clark to Mason, November 19, 1779, ibid., 116, 122, 152; Bowman's Journal, ibid., 156; Clark to Patrick Henry, February 3, 1779, CVSP, I, 118.  
SLOW, CRUEL, INCREDIBLE IT WAS—THAT MARCH

Vincennes and Fort Sackville also presented easy targets. As noted earlier, Clark knew the strength and condition of the fort before he set out to reduce it. Clark’s talent, therefore, lay in his ability as a strategist and his possession of a superb intelligence network. Clark’s overland march to Vincennes caught Hamilton while he was still vulnerable.

Fort Sackville was anything but a secure structure. After December 18, 1778, when the British retook the fort, Hamilton’s men labored to repair it. Yet there was much to be done to what Hamilton called “this miserable picketed work . . . [with] scarce anything for defense.” After three months, a blockhouse neared completion and a cannon was mounted, but the defenders still remained vulnerable. By the time of Clark’s surprise attack on February 22, 1779, the picketing had yet to be lined, and the stockades still had openings between them large enough “that a man might pass his closed fist between several of them.” Also, houses surrounded the fort and provided cover to Clark’s men. While the Americans were hardly marksmen, the pathetic condition of Fort Sackville and its poor location made defense from heavy fire undesirable and left its defenders vulnerable to small arms fire. In addition to structural problems, roughly one-half of Hamilton’s men were French Canadians who refused to continue to fight for the British against Clark and the French who had joined them. The
battle was so lopsided that Hamilton surrendered after only one
night of occasionally heavy but sporadic exchanges.\textsuperscript{41}

The physical condition of Fort Sackville reflected the state of
British military administration in Canada. All of the northern In-
dian department's outposts were sparsely manned and undersup-
plied, and virtually every official harbored some animosity toward
at least one other. No consensus could be reached even on whether
or not to use Indian allies in the war. As a result, the only strategy
the British could agree upon in the West was defensive. Moreover,
Governor Sir Guy Carleton frequently reassigned the meager
troops in the West to the St. Lawrence River forts. Funds were also
scarce, and little could be done to supply adequately the remaining
troops with munitions. Carleton even went so far as to forbid
Kaskaskia commandant Philippe de Rocheblave to use crown
money to give Indians gifts.\textsuperscript{42}

Commanding only a few British regulars and French Canadi-
ans of questionable loyalty, Hamilton attempted to forge alliances
with Indians of the Detroit area and Ohio country. By June 16,
1777, he received permission from Secretary of State Lord George
Germain to use Indian allies against the Pennsylvania and Virginia
backcountry settlers. On October 26, 1778, he exhorted the
Shawnees in council “to act with [their] usual spirit upon the Front-
tiers.” He hoped to cultivate an alliance with the powerful but anti-
British Miamis, and he counted the Wyandots, Ojibwas, and
Ottawas as his allies, at least until the end of 1778. The lieutenant
governor claimed that by September, 1777, fifteen British-led Indi-
an raiding parties had left Detroit and that more than 1,100 war-
rriors “are now dispersed over the Frontiers.” In the absence of a
strong British presence, maintaining Indian support was essential
to prosecuting England’s war in the West. Without Indian allies,
there was little Hamilton could do.\textsuperscript{43}

Fortunately for Clark, Hamilton could not maintain Indian
support. Britain’s feeble presence in the Northwest affected its rela-
tions with the Indians. Several English allies considered siding
with the Americans. Most natives, however, were neutral. In the
fall of 1778, Hamilton held several councils with various members
of the Miami confederacy, during which he alienated many of these
Indians by refusing to follow protocol. In part, this stemmed from

\textsuperscript{41} Hamilton’s Journal, in Barnhart, \textit{Hamilton and Clark}, 149, 185.
\textsuperscript{42} George M. Waller, \textit{The American Revolution in the West} (Chicago, 1976), 47-
51; Jack M. Sosin, \textit{The Revolutionary Frontier, 1763–1783} (New York, 1967), 104-
105; Paul L. Stevens, “To Invade the Frontiers of Kentucky? The Indian Diplomacy
of Philippe de Rocheblave, Britain’s Acting Commandant at Kaskaskia, 1776–1778,”
\textit{Filson Club History Quarterly}, LXIV (April, 1990), 205-46; Paul L. Stevens, “To Keep
the Indians of the Wabache in His Majesty’s Interest”: The Indian Diplomacy of
Edward Abbott, British Lieutenant Governor of Vincennes, 1776–1778,” \textit{Indiana
\textsuperscript{43} Barnhart, \textit{Hamilton and Clark}, 29-34; Hamilton’s Journal, in \textit{ibid.}, 115.
Hamilton’s unwillingness to be as free with rum and presents as was custom, a condition probably forced on him by Carleton’s tight purse strings and fear that drunken Indians would attack unarmed settlers. Also, rumors that Detroit had fallen led some Indians to favor the Americans as trading partners. Ultimately, Hamilton could count on only the Shawnees, Mingoes, and some Delawares and only then because they felt the immediate pressure of American land hunger.44

The Indians who remained British allies, however, continued to attack the Kentucky settlements even after the American invasion. Clark’s campaign did not end the Indian war. As will be seen, he did not expect that result. Indeed, unlike his biographers, Clark did not envision his foray into the Wabash as a “conquest.” Instead, he saw it as the first and necessary step toward the capture of Detroit. He believed that the French towns could serve as bases and support for the main attack. Any actual conquest would have to include wresting Detroit from the British. As Jefferson predicted at the end of 1780, if Detroit were to “be reduced we shall be quiet in [the] future on our frontiers.”45

The fall of Vincennes failed to ease the pressure on the Kentucky settlements. Beginning in early 1780, Kentuckians sent Clark “Repeated & Spirited Petitions for an Expedition against the Shawnee Towns.” Murders, scalping, theft, and abductions by the Shawnees, Mingoes, and now some Delawares continued south of the Ohio River. Meanwhile, Clark spent the winter of 1779–1780 organizing the French towns under Virginia’s jurisdiction and planning his Detroit expedition. The situation became so bad that Jefferson recommended turning other Indians against the three native raiders, or, failing that, sending an American expedition against them by summer, 1781. In March, 1780, Clark admitted that the absence of “some speedy Check may prove Fatal to Kentucky and the Total loss of the West[w]er In Cuntrey on the Mississippi.”46

The continuing Indian war forced Clark to balance his goal of taking Detroit with the need to protect Kentucky. While he struggled to secure enough men and supplies from Virginia and the Continental Army for his next invasion, Shawnee attacks forced him to launch retaliatory raids against the principle Shawnee towns. During May and June of 1779, Colonel Joseph Bowman, Clark’s second in command, led an ineffectual raid against the Shawnee town of

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45 Jefferson to Clark, December 15, 1780, GRCP, I, 480.
46 For Clark’s attention to the French towns, see the documents in GRCP, I, 303-36; for the Indian raids, see Clark to William Fleming, April 4, 1780, ibid., I, 407; Jefferson to Clark, January 29, 1780, ibid., I, 390-91; Conditions in Kentucky, March 10, 1780, ibid., I, 396-98; Petition from Inhabitants of Boonesborough to Clark, March 10, 1780, ibid., I, 398-400; Petition of Bryan’s Station to Clark, March 13, 1780, ibid., I, 401-402; Clark to John Todd, March, 1780, ibid., I, 404.
George Rogers Clark

Chillicothe. In the fall of the following year, Clark himself led 1,200 men against the same town. After a series of skirmishes and a pitched battle at Piqua on the Mad River, the Shawnees disengaged. While Chillicothe and much of the Shawnees' winter corn were destroyed in the fight, Clark's was hardly a decisive victory. The Shawnees relocated to the Great Miami Valley and continued their raids the following spring.

Indian warfare continued to haunt the Kentucky settlers throughout 1781. Hoping that a new assault could be preempted, many called for another campaign against the Shawnees. Clark opposed the idea and insisted instead that by marching to the head of the Wabash and thence to Detroit, he could secure the entire country north and west of the Ohio. Nothing would end the Indian war "but the Reduction of the British Indian Posts and the possession of Lake Erie..." Singling out the Shawnees would do little for the long-term security of the Kentucky settlements. Convinced that the Indians were being spurred on by the British, Clark reasoned that victory in the Northwest meant evicting the British.

Clark never launched the final stage of his Detroit campaign, although he doggedly clung to the idea throughout the Revolution. Such a march required more men and supplies than Colonel Daniel Brodhead at Fort Pitt, the Virginia government, and even the Kentuckians were willing to allocate. Clark was left to prepare the defenses of the counties for anticipated Shawnee attacks, one of which defeated a contingent of Clark's men in 1781. The raids became an onslaught in February of the next year. One resulted in the embarrassing disaster at Blue Licks, twenty-five miles into Kentucky. Although Clark counterattacked with an invasion of the Miami country in 1782, he failed to humble the Indians. The Delawares and others along the Wabash, themselves smarting from white depredations, joined the Shawnees. This Algonquian confederation (or Miami confederacy, named after the tribe that later played the dominant role) proved such a formidable enemy that white frontier residents called Clark to lead an illegal campaign in 1786–1787. In that campaign, one-half of his troops deserted, and he accomplished nothing more than further antagonizing the Algonquians. At no point did Clark conquer the Northwest. Indeed, the frontier remained fundamentally unchanged until General Anthony Wayne defeated the Algonquin confederation at Fallen Timbers in 1794. Clark had admitted as much in May, 1783, when


48 Clark to the Kentucky County Commissioners, September 5, 1781, GRCP, I, 598, 596.
he wrote that all Indians north of the Ohio "are generally at war." Clark's service in the Revolution and afterward, then, amounts to one episode in a long struggle for control of the Ohio Valley. Historians notwithstanding, he can hardly be credited with a conquest.

Much of Clark's life after 1787 can be categorized as a postscript to the Revolution. Having purchased munitions on Virginia's credit, he faced a mountain of debt when that state declared most of his purchases fraudulent. With the prospect of endless litigation before him, Clark deeded to his family all of the several hundred thousand acres of land he had acquired through surveying and war service.49

As a result of his financial problems, Clark became deeply disillusioned with the America he had helped create. Disgusted, he solicited a commission from the French in February, 1793, for a Vincennes-like surprise attack on Spanish Louisiana. Clark's biographers have long asserted that he was only acting patriotically by trying to open the Mississippi River to American commerce. This interpretation stems from a claim Clark made in 1795 when he faced the possibility of treason charges.50

Two years earlier, he had felt no deep love for his country. "My country has proved notoriously ungrateful, for my Services," he bitterly complained to the French minister early in 1793. With nothing to lose, he offered to "expatriate" himself from the United States to avoid an international incident between that nation and Spain. Clark had been following the French Revolution and knew France to be at war with Spain. For a commission, a "small" amount of cash or credit, and the permission to raise his own men, he promised to deliver to the French all of Spanish Louisiana and perhaps New Mexico as well.51

On April 8, 1793, Citizen Edmond Genêt arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, as the new French minister to the United States. At the time, he was unaware of Clark's offer to lead an expeditionary force, but he was soon told of the idea, which conveniently fit into French plans to regain the trans-Mississippi West. He quickly commissioned Clark major general of the "French Revolutionary Legion on the Mississippi," and by October Clark had devised a campaign that closely resembled his march across

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50 James, Life of Clark, 417-18.


52 Clark to French Minister, February 5, 1793, ibid., I, 968-70.
the American bottom. He planned first to establish a rearguard base at St. Louis, which would serve him much as Kaskaskia had in the Revolution. After taking St. Louis by surprise, he would rumble through the countryside, wooing inhabitants as he went. As he had done at Cahokia, Kaskaskia, and Vincennes, he would make “friends of the people there” and add them to his army, which he calculated would number 1,500 men. He was supremely confident and speculated: “There is no knowing where our career will stop...[T]his kind of warfare is my element[,] I have served a long apprenticeship to it.”\(^53\) Lacking much American popular and French financial support, however, the plot fizzled out, and Clark’s already tarnished image was blackened.

On the basis of his success in 1778–1779, Clark had assumed that he was the pivotal personality in the West. He constantly advertised his “possession of every means of intelligence,” information he had been gathering since before the Revolution.\(^54\) After the Revolution, the trans-Appalachian West became a place of fascination for Americans and visitors to the new republic. As the Indians and much of the natural environment—the two were indistinguishable to enlightened Americans of the late eighteenth century—vanished in the East, the need both to describe and place their counterparts in the West into the hierarchy of species grew corre-

\(^{53}\) Clark to Genêt, October 3, 1793, *ibid.*, I, 1008.

\(^{54}\) Clark to the French Minister, February 5, 1793, *ibid.*, I, 970; for similar claims, see Clark to Mason, November 19, 1779, *GRCP*, I, 116, 117.
spondingly. Clark played a significant role in promoting this interest by supplying unearthed remains, flora and fauna, and speculation on the origins of the massive earthworks that lined the Ohio and Mississippi valleys.55

In August, 1782, Clark wrote to Thomas Jefferson that he would be able to supply several specimens of bones that he had found in the West, including mammoth remains. An elated Jefferson responded: “a specimen of each of the several species of bones now to be found is to me the most desirable object in Natural history. . . . Elkhorns of very extraordinary size, petrification, or any else uncommon would be very acceptable.” Jefferson also told Clark that “any observations of your own on the subject of the big bones, or their history, or on any thing else in the Western country, will come acceptable to me, because I know you see the works of nature in the great, & not merely in detail.” He further requested “descriptions of animals, vegetables, minerals, or other curious things, notes as to the Indians, information of the country between the Mississippi & waters of the South sea [Pacific Ocean]”—anything that might strike Clark as noteworthy.56

About one year later Jefferson received from Clark a shipment of shells and seeds along with a letter keeping “alive the hope of getting for me as many of the different species of bones, teeth & tusks of the Mammoth as can now be found.” Jefferson also suggested to his source in the West a plan that undoubtedly appealed to Clark: a possible reconnoitering expedition to the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson had learned that the English were planning to explore the trans-Mississippi West. While “they pretend it is only to promote knoledge,” Jefferson feared they also intended to colonize the region. He inquired of Clark: “Would you like to lead such a party?” Not only would such a trek have important strategic benefits, but it would also provide a chance to catalogue “the Natural productions and Curiosities of those Regions,” always an exciting possibility for natural philosophers. While much talk of such an excursion circulated in the 1780s, the expense proved prohibitive.57

By virtue of his firsthand knowledge of the Indians and the region, Clark was considered an authority on the West’s natural history. Several naturalists and travelers through the interior also found him a ready source of information on the region’s natural peculiarities. John Pope and John James Audubon spent time with him discussing plant and animal life, and Merriweather Lewis and William Clark probably spent an evening with their frontier prede-

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56 Jefferson to Clark, November 26, 1782, *GRCP*, II, 155.
successor before embarking on their expedition. Clark also provided Allan Bowie Magruder with an interpretation of the Indians of the Ohio Valley and John P. Campbell with evidence on the origins of the Moundbuilders. In fact, he occasionally became irritated when writers without firsthand knowledge of the region speculated on the origins of the mounds without consulting the experts on “the Geography and Natural History of the back Cuntry.”

Clark was one of the few Americans who credited the ancestors of contemporary Indians with building the mounds before the theory of a Moundbuilder race was demolished at the end of the nineteenth century. He named the Kaskaskias, Peorias, Kahokias, Piankashaws, Chickasaws, Cherokees, “and such old nations” as the builders. These nations were formerly large, according to a tradition relayed to Clark by the Kaskaskia chief Baptist Ducoign. “But affronting the great spirit, he made war among the nations and they destroyed each other.” Clark saw little reason to doubt the authenticity of the Indians’ story. “This is their Tradition and I see no good reason why it should not be received as good History, at least, as good as [a] great part of ours.”

Awareness of Clark has run in cycles. He was rescued from obscurity at the turn of the century, and no less than nine biographies appeared between 1896 and 1957. All these writers admired Clark and produced highly favorable accounts, even to the point of contradicting themselves and ignoring evidence that would have lessened Clark’s historical significance. The American Bicentennial aroused some interest in the general, but no new full biography appeared. Of late, he seems to have slipped back into obscurity. One widely used undergraduate textbook even confuses him with his brother, William Clark.

A new biography is needed, one which incorporates elements of the recent scholarship on British policy in the West, Indians, republicanism, and the settlement of the backcountry. Portraying Clark as a man of destiny or hero of the frontier may well have pleased the man, but it does not satisfy present-day historians. Clark’s life was almost entirely consumed in western issues: exploration, Indian wars, war debts, land speculation, surveying,
foreign intrigues, and natural history. A fresh interpretation of Clark must make him part of his frontier, not the romantic hero who supposedly conquered it.