The Significance of the National Lewis and Clark Commemoration

Robert R. Archibald

The commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of a transcontinental trek that began when Meriwether Lewis met up with William Clark near Clarksville, Indiana, occurs in October 2003 at the Falls of the Ohio. The event will run from October 14 to 26, exactly two hundred years after the explorers rendezvoused at the Falls, where they spent twelve days selecting members of the crew that became the Corps of Discovery. While this, like other events in the two-year-long national celebration of Lewis and Clark’s expedition, will be an enjoyable occasion, in the end the important question will be whether or not it will leave any discernible legacy and, if so, what that legacy will be.

To some extent the answer will depend upon how the commemoration affects the way future historians explain the expedition. Certainly in the past historians have always interpreted Lewis and Clark’s adventure in ways that reflected their own times. For example, William Grimshaw wrote a widely read national history in 1830, in the early years of the first industrial revolution, as steamboats replaced keelboats and sailing ships and locomotives supplanted wagons drawn by horses, mules, and oxen. From his vantage point, resources were unlimited, optimism was unbounded, and there still seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of what people then called frontier. Grimshaw’s narrative placed little value on wilderness and none on Indian people. What was important about the Louisiana Purchase, he said, was that “a new field of enterprise is opened, and new productions are added to the rich variety of their former catalogue.” He viewed the expedition as a commercial enterprise undertaken to “render the purchase of utmost benefit . . . to explore the river Missouri and the contiguous countries, and discover the best communication with the Pacific Ocean.” Grimshaw, who had no interest in the people who inhabited the lands described by Lewis and Clark, also had no interest in the flora and fauna. For him, Indian people and native
animals and plants were temporary impediments to progress: the land was to be settled, farmed, and made to produce. Grimshaw's was the Jeffersonian vision of America.¹

In 1893, eighty-seven years after the expedition's return, Frederick Jackson Turner, a young historian from Wisconsin, told the annual assembly of the American Historical Association that according to the standard definition, based on population density per square mile, the new census proved that the frontier was gone. Americans had already used up the legacy that Jefferson had thought would last for countless generations. In that process Indian people had been either killed or confined to reservations and buffalo and grizzly bears nearly eradicated. In that same year Henry Adams, descendant of the illustrious New England Adamses, in his History of the United States during the Second Administration of Thomas Jefferson, dismissed Lewis and Clark as marginal to American history. "Creditable as these expeditions were," he said, "they added little to the stock of science or wealth. Many years must elapse before the vast region west of the Mississippi could be brought within the reach of civilization." Six years later

¹William Grimshaw, History of the United States from Their First Settlement as Colonies to the Period of the Fifth Census in 1830 (Philadelphia, 1835), 222-23. The first edition of Grimshaw's history was published in 1829, the last in 1855, the year after he died, and there were many revisions in between.
William Cullen Bryant included only one paragraph on the expedition in his *Scribner's Popular History of the United States.*²

But Americans began to lament what had been destroyed. The end of the frontier stimulated the birth of the conservation movement, just as the near-extinction of bison led to federal efforts to protect the animal. The disappearance of the frontier led Americans to ascribe value to wilderness and to wax nostalgic about what they had never seen. The final defeat and confinement of Indian people stimulated feelings of sympathy in some Americans and regret for injustices heaped upon people who once were just in the way. But, despite the work of Indian policy reformers and early conservationists, there were relatively few successful efforts to right those wrongs. Instead, the lament over what was gone led to a romantic nostalgia for times past. By World War I America was an urban nation, and the agrarian ideal was dashed. When Jefferson gave his instructions to Lewis the nation was weak and tenuous; by the end of the century America was a world power. Dazed by the rapid changes, many Americans longed for seemingly simpler times and romanticized the West.

Historians too expressed these views. Ralph Henry Gabriel's *The Lure of the Frontier,* published in 1929, elevated Lewis and Clark to heroic stature. The book included Charles Russell's romantic images of valiant explorers and "noble savages." Gabriel's biographical sketches of expedition members included one for Sacagawea, who was portrayed for the first time as a heroine, a major figure in the saga. The country had enfranchised women a few years earlier, and now the public was ready for female (and Indian) heroism. Gabriel's portrayal of nature was also romantic; he saw it as inherently beautiful—not threatening and not something to be overwhelmed and tamed.³

Since 1929 thousands of Americans have been fascinated by this quintessential American adventure story, the epic "foundation myth" of the West. Since 1969, when they formed a special organization, the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, hundreds of scholars and amateurs have examined every detail of the expedition. There is a rich bibliography of scholarly historical work analyzing the expedition; novelists have written about it; film makers have dramatized it; museums exhibit collections of its artifacts; and even environmental organizations lay claim to the legacy.⁴

So, has all of this attention resulted in finding out something significantly new about Lewis and Clark or discovering an enormous treasure trove of documents? It has not. The journals, the main source


The National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition will open at the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis in early 2004 and later travel across the country; information about the exhibit is online at <www.lewisandclarkexhibit.org>. The Lewis and Clark Bicentennial also has a website, <www.lewisandclark200.org>, which has a comprehensive listing of events, programs, and other information.
of information about the expedition, have been available to every
generation for almost two hundred years. Lewis and Clark have not
changed, but Americans have.

For my own part, I have rediscovered Lewis and Clark in these
years leading up to the bicentennial. I used to think this was just
was one more among the hundreds of western civilization's discovery
stories—from Odysseus to Marco Polo, Magellan, and Columbus—in
which the western heroes encounter (and often subdue) the exotic
Others.

But preparing for this commemoration has taught me that this
story can be different. When Indians from tribes along the trail still
say, “this is where we met Lewis and Clark,” it suggests that the old
stories have the potential for new meanings. They remind us, for
example, that Indian people lived in all the lands traversed by Lewis
and Clark. They were at home. If we imagine ourselves living in the
Mandan villages or along the Clearwater or Columbia rivers two
hundred years ago, then Lewis and Clark were interlopers rather
than explorers. My object here is not to throw out traditional notions
of Lewis and Clark as explorers but to tell a story about these events
that incorporates both the perspective of the Corps of Discovery and
that of the Indians whose land was intruded upon and without whose
help the enterprise would have failed.

The map William Clark drew of the Lower Columbia revealed
dozens of Indian villages in the fertile valley of that river, showing
that this was a heavily populated land; in fact it was home to thousands
of people, more heavily populated than many of the United States to
the east. So in what ways does it make sense to say that Lewis and
Clark “discovered” this place? How could they have described this
land as wilderness? What Lewis and Clark meant was that they were
the first United States citizens to have described the place officially.
In the Enlightenment mentality that pervaded the worldviews of the
expedition’s leaders, Indian land was wilderness because it was not
inhabited by people like themselves, by people who were civilized
according to their definitions. Lewis and Clark could not escape the
boundaries of their own culture and view this encounter as a meeting
between human beings who were equal, though profoundly different.
Of course, Lewis and Clark were not alone in being blinded by
convictions of their own superiority. We, too, often see the world that
way. Our own culture, our patterns of seeing and explaining the
world, remain the norms against which we judge all others. But two
hundred years after the fact, perhaps we can attempt to regard the
cultural differences the expedition and the Indians discovered as
indications of the variety and potential of our species.

One key to exploring these differences might be a yellowed map
in the collections of the Missouri Historical Society that was drawn
for or by Clark according to instructions provided by a Nez Perce
guide. Before the expedition Lewis had been sent by President Thomas
Jefferson to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia to learn to use navigational instruments, including the sextant, in order to be able to determine his exact position on the globe during his travels. Jefferson wanted maps based on measurements taken by compass, laid out according to latitude, longitude, mileage, altitude, and distance. This vision is apparent to anyone who flies over the midwestern plains. There, imprinted conspicuously on the land, is the idea of measurement, the very core of the Enlightenment's approach to understanding the world. The land was divided into thousands of rectangular plots, and the pattern was superimposed on the landscape by roads that neatly followed section and township lines. The design was uninterrupted by rivers and landforms; it simply ignored them and repeated its identical rectangular patterns forever. It was a way of preparing land for consumption, and it directly reflected white Americans' ideas about land ownership, which require precise descriptions of location.

The Indian map, by contrast, did not include notations of latitude, longitude, compass directions, or mileage. The map was changeable. Time of year was a crucial element in showing routes from one place to another, especially when there were mountains between the traveler and his destination. There was no point in showing a route over the Bitterroots in April, because such a route would have become a death march. So the Indian map was chronological, time sensitive, and it portrayed interrelationships between the land and the people who lived and traveled on it. The map showed Clark's River, which is not even a river in the conventional sense but instead consists of tributaries of several rivers that can be followed to a destination. In this map the landscape is linked to people and animated by narrative, instead of being an assortment of passive resources to be dominated, transformed, and exploited.

Clark actually used the Nez Perce map as his guide—by 1806 he could read it and imagine the world through Indian eyes. In this small but significant way his understanding of the world had changed from what it had been two years earlier when he and the party shoved off from the Falls of the Ohio. Yet in the maps in the field journals and in the maps that were finally published, this Indian view of the world was rejected and obliterated from the official record. In those maps Lewis and Clark gave Jefferson and the country what they expected to see: a wilderness that had no history, that was measured, located, and ready for the settlers who would soon come like a whirlwind from the East, changing the land and decimating the people whose home it was. Lewis and Clark and the corps members saw many things, but some things they apparently did not see.

It is tempting to speculate about what might have been if America had taken a different course, if its leaders had adopted the Indians' view and redefined land as sacred. How might our ancestors have treated land differently if they had seen it as animated and sacred
instead of as an inert resource? What if the maps had been Indian maps, storied maps? Although this was not possible for them, perhaps this bicentennial commemoration can lead us to recapture an opportunity lost so many years ago. The United States' approach to the land has been costly. The scientific evidence for adverse human impact on the earth is unequivocal: the decline in biodiversity is alarming. Global warming threatens us all. Human populations continue to soar. To understand what needs to be done to heal our relationship with the land, we need to learn to make and read Indian maps.

Meanwhile, the Lewis and Clark story offers a model of both tenacity and respect. The Indian people and Lewis and Clark represented worlds that were profoundly alien to one another, but their difference was mostly overwhelmed by amity and gestures of friendship. In an insecure world, a world in which airplanes become missiles and sabres rattle around the globe, Sacagawea is an inspiration. She was a woman between cultures, not just translating words but attempting to make alien societies mutually intelligible, a skill desperately needed today. When Meriwether Lewis dressed in the clothing of the Indian Cameahwet, he made a powerful gesture of common friendship across a vast cultural abyss. The Indian people who refrained from annihilating the few dozen starving interlopers showed generosity and forbearance in the face of provocation.

The Nez Perce map has embedded in it a different way of imagining human relationships with the earth, one that may hold the key to human survival in the future. The challenge in our time is to learn that we are temporary trustees of our places and that we are obliged to hand them on in better condition than we found them.

The expedition also reminds us that our species is an adventurous one. Certainly the Corps of Discovery was seeking the elusive (and illusory) water route across the continent that like the fountain of youth had beckoned to explorers for centuries, and Jefferson's instructions compelled them to be good observers and recorders of information about native people, flora, fauna, and landforms. Undoubtedly, too, as Jefferson told Congress, the expedition members were to ferret out commercial possibilities. Considering these practical reasons for the venture, it is easy to overlook the human attraction to the lure of the unknown; we want to see what is around the bend, over the mountain, down the river, up the river, across the ocean, or in the heavens. The journey into the Louisiana Territory demonstrates the risk people will endure to go where they have not gone, see what they have not seen, and return to tell the tale. This adventure appeals to us even now in part because it reflects this powerful human impulse.

This bicentennial commemoration is an opportunity for members of this generation to join the journey, to imagine the next chapter in an unfinished story about American encounters with the natural world and alien cultures, a chapter that we must write. Remembering
the Lewis and Clark expeditions, both as a cautionary tale and as a model for learning from Indian people, we can acknowledge our intimate relationship with this earth. Above all we can recognize our personal obligation to leave our places in better condition than we found them, to be good stewards. We may even discover that what is good for humans—less consumption, for instance, and expanded perspectives—is good for the planet as well. Responding to these opportunities, we will make the bicentennial well worth the effort, and we will be changed for the better by the celebration.