William Clark’s World
Describing America in an Age of Unknowns
By Peter J. Kastor

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William Clark’s World opens with a provocative question: “How do you describe a continent?” (p. 1). In reply, the book examines the ways in which maps—and other modes of landscape description—functioned both to describe and to delineate the American West during the transitional period between the early Republic and the antebellum era. The book is not a biography of William Clark (1770-1838)—best known as one of the leaders of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806)—but instead uses the arc of Clark’s career as a baseline for examining how “the United States changed from a country in which most forms of print and visual culture expressed a profound ambivalence toward territorial expansion to an aggressively expansionist country which by the 1840s was spewing claims that its survival depended on the acquisition of new land” (p. 2).

In the midst of this process, Clark’s 1810 Master Map of the North American West—produced to accompany the History of the [Lewis and Clark] Expedition—represented, in Kastor’s view, a critical production in the cartographic creation of the West, coming at “the very moment when maps and travel narratives reached their own zenith in American culture” (pp. 20-24). Clark’s map, argues Kastor, also contributed to a broadening American conception of the Far West, and effected a shift toward a more pronounced use of maps as tools of federal policy in the region. In other words, Clark’s map was instrumental in creating the modern geographical form of the continental United States.

Clark was born into a large family of Virginia slave-owning lesser gentry. They relocated to the Kentucky district after the Revolution and witnessed its transformation into statehood. Following his older brothers, William entered military service and built his reputation during campaigns in the Indiana and Northwest Territories. Clark kept journals and took stock of the physical and human geography around him—his outlook indirectly shaped, Kastor emphasizes, by the descriptive works of Thomas Jefferson, John Filson, and Jedidiah Morse. In the wake of the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis enlisted Clark to explore the Missouri River watershed as part of a larger effort to secure specific and unambiguous knowledge of this vast, mysterious region. Lewis’s 1809 suicide greatly complicated the gargantuan project of synthesizing information for the “multi-media” published History, but Clark saw it through by persuading the gifted writer Nicholas Biddle to handle the text while he oversaw production of the map.

One of the themes underlying Kastor’s book concerns the social and
cultural functions landscape description played, not only in reifying newly defined territories into objects of political capital, but also in advancing the careers of the describers. After the expedition, President Jefferson appointed Clark as Indian agent at St. Louis (1807); he became territorial governor of Missouri in 1813 and was named as Superintendent of Indian Affairs by President James Monroe in 1822 after a failed gubernatorial campaign in the new state of Missouri. As Kastor puts it, describing the West “transformed [Clark]…from an anonymous man with declining prospects into a trusted federal official and the leading citizen of Missouri” (p. 11). In this respect, Clark exemplified similar men of limited technical, artistic, and literary skills who nonetheless acquired a mark of perceived expertise by virtue of their portrayals of the West. By the time of Clark’s death, new generations of western landscape describers imposed ever more precisely defined boundaries on their maps, and policymakers increasingly utilized these tools in debates about Indian removal, white settlement, and the place of slavery in the new states. Tentative attitudes toward expansion gave way to its wider acceptance. The notion of the West occupied a fundamentally different place in the American political and cultural imagination than it had at the turn of the century.

Kastor’s book fills a lacuna in our understanding of the rise of expansionist ideology within a young American nation struggling for self-identity. His notes and bibliography offer a gateway for further reading about the Lewis and Clark expedition. This reader finds, however, that the book does not deliver fully on all the tantalizing promises laid out in the introduction. As Kastor emphasizes, “the definition of accuracy” (p. 1) lay at the heart of questions about how knowledge of the West was collected, packaged, circulated, and consumed. I would have welcomed a more explicit interrogation of notions of accuracy during this era, as well as more detailed comparisons of technical work in the field with resultant published products. Cartographic accuracy was anything but self-evident. How were standards applied, and what rhetorical functions did they play? What factors, precisely, led observers to perceive one map as more accurate or authoritative than another? Such questions deserve to be examined with greater analytical depth if we are to understand fully how knowledge of the West translated into policy decisions. Another quibble: throughout the book, Kastor makes too many sweeping references to what “Americans” thought or felt, and he deploys concepts such as “print culture” too ambiguously. Criticisms aside, William Clark’s World will leave readers wanting to learn more about the role of landscape description in the creation of modern America.

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