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Book Review: Interpreters with Lewis and Clark: The Story of Sacagawea and Toussaint Charbonneau

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The release of the Sacagawea dollar coin in 2000 met with decidedly mixed reviews. Critics complained that it was too much in size like the quarter and could not be accommodated in retail sales drawers. Despite the intrinsic beauty—the golden coin features Sacagawea and her infant son on the face and a soaring bald eagle on the reverse—the dollar has earned little popularity since its introduction.

Interestingly, for all the criticism of the design, there was little negative comment about the woman chosen to grace the coin. Sacagawea's story is familiar to most Americans: the teen-aged Shoshone woman, pregnant at the journey's beginning and carrying a toddler son by its end, assisted Lewis and Clark as a guide and interpreter. With her French Canadian husband, she accompanied the Corps of Discovery from the Missouri to the Pacific and back again.

Yet, as Dale Nelson argues in this slim volume, Sacagawea's shadow obscures other figures. Certainly, Toussaint Charbonneau's legacy has been subsumed by his wife's legendary status. And what of their child, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau? Where is his story? To answer these questions, Nelson unfolds a family history that follows the threesome from the end of the expedition until Jean Baptiste's death in 1866. Along the way, the author attempts to highlight the senior Charbonneau's leadership role in the American settlement of the West and the younger Charbonneau's participation in that process.

Through a generational history, this book depicts a time of rapid and profound change. Sacagawea's life links her husband's career as an explorer, interpreter, and trapper in the early period of Western expansion with her son's life as a protégé of William Clark, a guide for the Mormon Battalion, and, finally, a gold miner in the mother lode. GPQ readers will be especially interested in the descriptions of changing times in the Missouri River country during the 1820s and 1830s. The spread of smallpox and the devastation of the fur bearing animal population led to the destruction of tribal communities like the Mandan and paved the way for permanent American settlement of the region.

Nelson's intended revitalization of Toussaint and Jean Baptiste Charbonneau as significant figures in their own right in the history of the American West is moderately successful. But Sacagawea is always lingering in the background, a mute but powerful reminder of the world that she and her family, unintentionally, helped bring to a close.

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