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A New Discovery with Broad Appeal

Bethany Natali


Gary Moulton writes, "few events in American history are more alive today" than the Lewis and Clark expedition (x). Two hundred years after Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with their crew, embarked upon a unique and uncertain journey into the American West, numerous popular and scholarly histories continue to interpret and reinterpret the journey's purpose, meaning, and ultimate impact. Moulton has been closely involved in creating an accurate account of that historical journey, first as an editor of the thirteen-volume work The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and more recently as editor of its one-volume abridgement, The Lewis and Clark Journals: An American Epic of Discovery.

The abridged edition was published on the eve of the bicentennial anniversary of the voyage, a time when popular and scholarly interests were particularly strong. The condensed, single-volume work will appeal to a broader audience than the more detailed multivolume work. The scholarly multivolume edition builds and elaborates upon the 1904-1905 work of Reuben Gold Thwaites (Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expeditions 1804-1806) by incorporating new information, additional resources, and novel reinterpretations. The emergence of other histories of the Lewis and Clark expeditions, their diverse perspectives, and their widespread popularity revealed that interest was not limited to expedition scholars, but shared by many other audiences. In fact, such histories continue to attract audiences today, as evidenced by documentaries such as Ken Burns's recent account of Lewis and Clark, the Lewis and Clark National Bicentennial Exhibition, and similar continuing efforts by historical societies and other organizations to create accessible exhibitions for broadly defined audiences.

Moulton, observing that most one-volume accounts of the Lewis and Clark expedition relied upon increasingly outdated material, decided to create a one-volume edition based upon the scholarly edition. In the shorter
work he sought to appeal to an audience broader in scope than expedition scholars and at the same time retain scholarly accuracy and integrity. In the abridged version, Moulton retains the majority of the editorial principles utilized in the thirteen-volume edition. Moulton declines to explain each of these editorial principles in detail in the shorter work; however, he refers interested readers to the second volume of the larger edition for more specific explanations regarding the editorial principles. Moulton does note editorial emendations unique to the abridged volume in the shorter work. For example, in a given day, Lewis' journal entries take priority over Clark's journal entries; in turn, Clark's journal entries take priority over other crew members' entries. As another example, when presented with multiple versions of a single author's entry, Moulton selected the entry he believed to be "superior in content or style" to take priority over the other entries (lvii).

Moulton also includes several unique features in the abridged version, such as a lengthy introductory section describing the expedition in general and the historical context in which the journey took place. The introduction includes Moulton's comments cautioning readers not to accept as true preconceived or generally understood conceptions of the expedition and its members. For example, while Lewis tends to be portrayed as "moody" and "intellectual" in comparison to Clark's portrayal as "pragmatic" and "less literate," Moulton cautions that "these contrasts may be valid and are somewhat borne out in the record, but can be overstated" (xv).

In addition to the introductory section, Moulton modifies the abridged volume to include only entries from the Lewis and Clark expedition between 14 May 1804 and 23 September 1806. The original thirteen-volume work includes entries beginning in August 1803 and concluding in September 1806. Also, Moulton chooses to include only one crew member's entry per day in the abridged volume, whereas the unabridged work includes all known entries from every crew member. The abridged edition also includes several aids to provide meaningful context to the journal entries and their content. The journal entries are organized chronologically, and textual or contextual notations appear in the wide left-hand margins of the work. Of particular interest to readers or researchers interested in specific aspects of the journey, an extensive thematic index contained is included in the work. Finally, a concluding section contextualizes the journey for the reader, describing what is known and also what is unknown regarding the lives of Lewis, Clark, and the other crew members after the expedition's conclusion.

*The Lewis and Clark Journals: An American Epic of Discovery* is a timely edi-
tion of a popular American expedition with potentially widespread appeal. Gary Moulton, employing his familiarity and knowledge of the expedition and the Lewis and Clark journal entries, created a condensed history that effectively incorporates both the broader context by way of introductory and concluding comments and a more detailed context for interested readers by including annotations and a comprehensive thematic index.