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Review of *Meriwether Lewis* by Thomas C. Danisi and John C. Jackson

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With the possible exception of Aaron Burr, perhaps no figure from the early history of the Republic remains more enigmatic than Meriwether Lewis, who with fellow Army officer William Clark led one of the most celebrated expeditions in the history of exploration. Lewis and Clark’s twenty-eight-month “tour,” which took them to the Pacific Ocean and back via the Missouri and Columbia drainages, gave the young nation a wealth of knowledge about the Louisiana Territory and Pacific Northwest. Lewis was just thirty-two years old when the Corps of Discovery banked its canoes in St. Louis in September 1806. Yet the young man lionized as a national hero would die—almost certainly by his own hand—barely three years later in a lonely cabin in backwoods Tennessee.

The now conventional view of Lewis’s shocking decline comes largely from Stephen E. Ambrose’s 1996 best-selling biography, Undaunted Courage. Ambrose presented a reasonable, if admittedly speculative, hypothesis that Lewis suffered from alcoholism and depression and that his life spun out of control once he returned to civilization and had to deal with problems of everyday life—outmatched
by political enemies as governor of Louisiana and unable to muster the time or energy to fulfill his commitment to write a comprehensive account of the expedition.

Danisi and Jackson set out to rebut this view. In this new biography of Lewis they argue that he was mentally and emotionally stable and had a firm handle on his duties as governor, a position whose responsibilities necessarily forced him to put the expedition history on the back burner. They attribute Lewis’s erratic behavior on his final journey (he had set out from St. Louis to Washington to protest the government’s denial of his expense claims) to chronic malaria, which in severe cases can literally drive a victim crazy—an assertion they buttress with other examples of self-destructive acts on the part of malaria sufferers.

This is neither a conventional biography nor a narrative history of the Lewis and Clark expedition, which is treated in a perfunctory and piecemeal fashion, and its authors’ prose occasionally creaks. It is a book written more for the specialist and Lewis and Clark buff than for a general reader. But it’s based on a thorough knowledge of primary sources, including new ones overlooked by previous biographers, and offers a thoughtful antidote to the prevailing image of Lewis as tragic failure.

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