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Review of *The Death of Meriwether Lewis: A Historical Crime Scene Investigation* by James E. Starrs and Kira Gale

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Was the death of Meriwether Lewis at a backwoods inn on the Natchez Trace on October 11, 1809, suicide or murder? Those on the scene as well as those who knew him best, including Thomas Jefferson and William Clark, all pronounced it a suicide. But was it? Suicide stood as the accepted verdict until the 1840s when the report of the Lewis Monument Committee suggested it was murder. No evidence was given, but once the possibility was raised it grew in popularity and acceptance. Relying on evidence and emotion to reach a conclusion, the two sides in the suicide vs. murder controversy have debated Lewis’s fate ever since. Different scenarios, theories, and villains have been presented to support each side’s belief, and the facts as known have been cited, ignored, and misused. Fact and fiction both come into play.

In The Death of Meriwether Lewis: A Historical Crime Scene Investigation, authors Kira Gale and James E. Starrs (this is really Gale’s book; Starrs contributes the introduction to part 1 and was the organizer of the 1996 coroner’s inquest of which a transcript is included) aim to persuade the reader that Lewis was murdered. Starrs acknowledges himself to be a forensic sleuth who has been involved in the exhumation of historical figures around which there might be (depending upon whom one listens to) some controversy. In part 2, Kira Gale presents “The Evidence”: transcripts of documents relating to Lewis’s death, her introductions critiquing their validity and reliability as evidence. In part 3, Gale presents her “Case for Murder,” based on selected evidence, historical facts, and opinion. The book does provide a service in gathering together a number of primary documents regarding Lewis’s death (while ignoring others) and presenting the transcript of the 1996 inquest (whose purpose was to support possible murder and thus recommend exhumation for forensic testing of the remains under the Lewis monument).

Readers who believe Lewis was murdered will like this book. Those who believe he died by his own hand will likely shake their heads at the selective and sometimes skewed use of sources. For readers on the fence, the “investigation” is clearly slanted to support murder in an effort to lead them to that conclusion.

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