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## Book Review: Scenes of Visionary Enchantment: Reflections on Lewis and Clark

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*Scenes of Visionary Enchantment: Reflections on Lewis and Clark.* By Dayton Duncan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. References. x + 202 pp. \$22.00.

Historians all across the West have looked agog on the paroxysm of popular devotion that has erupted into the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, whispering to each other in quiet moments, "What is it about Lewis and Clark?"

This is the book that will answer their question.

For decades, Lewis and Clark have been blessed with eloquent chroniclers who have retold their story in far more dramatic ways than the participants did themselves. But no writer—not DeVoto, not Ambrose—tells this story with the flair and passion of Dayton Duncan. Duncan is largely responsible for the modern image of the Corps of Discovery as a diverse, multiethnic team that, through shared work, shared danger, and a shared goal, knit its members into a unified community representing, in Duncan's words, "democracy at its best."

The essays collected in this volume started as speeches delivered in the years leading up to the bicentennial and preserve the enthusiasm and wonder Duncan radiates so eloquently in person. They do not purport to retell the story of the expedition; but arranged chronologically, they cover most of the important episodes and would make an excellent short introduction to the expedition. They bring the scenes of the journey to life with an uncommon vividness of detail and a precise sensory feel for the landscape—its smells, textures, and temperatures as well as its vistas.

It would be possible to critique these essays for shortcomings as history. There is a decided lack of context, for example; Lewis and Clark exist in an enchanted isolation, far from their century's intellectual movements, cultural clashes, or imperial power politics. And Duncan does not hesitate to repeat some of the durable myths (that they ate nine pounds of meat a day and were searching for Welsh Indians) or to make up new ones of his own (their "democratic" vote on where to spend the

winter). But to dwell on these would be to miss the point. This is history as American parable—a kind of writing that speaks not to our critical intellect, but to our hopes and dreams, our patriotism and humanity.

Lewis and Clark have always been stand-ins for America, and here they are explicitly so. This book's model of America reflects a kind of rugged liberalism—an older, more unifying vision than the urban, identity-politics liberalism of the 1970s. Duncan holds up before us an America where people are basically well intentioned; where leaders are on the side of justice, fair play, and rationality; and where decency and shared experience are enough to iron out conflict. He shows us a nation where the possibilities were unbounded, the land unmarred, and the tragedies in the future—and he convinces us that it was real. It is a vision all the more achingly appealing for its unattainability in this age of Hobbesian, Hamiltonian pessimism.

So *that's* what it is about Lewis and Clark.

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