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Exploring The Great Plains: An Introduction

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EXPLORING THE GREAT PLAINS

AN INTRODUCTION

The essays presented in this issue of the *Great Plains Quarterly* were originally delivered at the sixteenth annual symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies, at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, in April 1992, under the title, “American Encounters: Exploring the Great Plains.” Other essays from the conference will appear in future issues of the *Quarterly* and in *Great Plains Research*.

The element of discovery is essential to exploration, and the idea of discovery is a compelling theme in the essays that follow. As James Ronda so succinctly puts it, exploration is often a venture to discover “self, place, and the other.” John Allen returns us to a familiar place so we can discover it in a new way. Ronda shows us that exploration is not necessarily ethnologically biased and he gives us a glimpse at the viewpoint of others in the discovery dialogue. Russel Barsh demonstrates that in spite of misguided motives discoveries of the self and some self-renewal are possible. Finally, Arlen Large reminds us that explorers were also driven by the impulse of inquiry and were as likely to have measuring instruments at hand as they were to have a sword at their side or a rifle on their shoulder.

John L. Allen’s lead essay also served as the symposium’s keynote address, “New World Encounters: Exploring the Great Plains of North America.” Setting aside both the heroic and conquest models, Allen concentrates on the role of geographical knowledge and shows that America was not so much discovered by Europeans as invented. The competing nations of Spain, France, and Great Britain defined the Great Plains landscape with four contradictory geographic labels: barrier, passage, desert, and garden. American explorers then entered the Great Plains knowing (but not necessarily understanding) the area through this lore, but most of them focused on the ideas of garden and passage. In fact, Allen concludes, the four labels persist to this day and serve as metaphors for the region.

Exploration and discovery were not always one-sided affairs. In his essay “Exploring the Explorers: Great Plains Peoples and the Lewis and Clark Expedition,” James P. Ronda demonstrates that Native Americans were learning about Euro-Americans at the same time they were being queried by Lewis and Clark. The Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, with whom the captains lingered over the winter of 1804–05 in

North Dakota, were trying to fit the new phenomenon of explorers into their cultural experience and world view. For nineteenth-century North Dakota Native peoples, trade was the essential element that had defined white outsiders, but Lewis and Clark and company were somehow different. By reconstructing the record from the native point of view, Ronda shows how the fit was made and how cross-cultural discoveries came to be.

Russel Lawrence Barsh finds "An American Heart of Darkness" in the 1913 expedition for American Indian citizenship. Rodman Wana-maker, a wealthy scion of the prominent Philadelphia merchant family, was influenced by a self-proclaimed Indian expert, Joseph Dixon, to back a scheme to obtain Native American allegiance to the United States. Barsh reasons that the idea grew out of emerging American self-consciousness: the United States was becoming a world power but had not assimilated its Native peoples. In part to resolve this unfinished matter, Dixon visited numerous Indian reservations where Native delegations signed a declaration of allegiance to the United States. Although, deception, coaxing, and some intimidation brought only signatures, Dixon declared the event a "new epoch" for American Indians. In truth, Barsh asserts, Dixon and his companions, like Joseph Conrad's explorers, did not discover real Native peoples but saw only the reflection of their own romantic images. Dixon involved the Indians in a "melodramatic charade from which the Indians gained nothing but empty promises" and he may later have regretted his mistake.

Arlen J. Large's contribution, "How Far West Am I?: The Almanac as an Explorer's Yardstick," exemplifies the scientific content of exploration. Latitude was easy for explorers

to calculate—determining longitude was more difficult. Although early expeditions lacked instruments capable of determining longitude, they frequently carried almanacs that predicted with some precision the timing of celestial events. Such a book, called a nautical ephemeris, was supposed to enable the scientist/explorer to determine the precise time at a distant observatory. He could then determine local time and, after some calculations, locate himself on the globe. The subtleties of higher mathematics (a skill beyond the reach of many explorers), unreliable chronometers, slight errors of sightings, and difficult field conditions worked against exactitude. Columbus failed on a bobbing boat at Hispaniola; three hundred years later Meriwether Lewis misplaced himself in Montana. It was near the end of the nineteenth century before technology replaced almanacs, and by then the great age of exploration was over.

It was the good fortune of this symposium to draw on a great many talented people. In addition to the indispensable individuals who presented papers, chaired sessions, and commented on the presentations, and the readers whose critiques helped ready these articles for publication, this issue has had the assistance of the capable people from the Center for Great Plains Studies. A number of Fellows from the Center served as the planning committee for the conference, and the Center staff members were essential to every minute of the conference and every step of publication. As you see, the copy in hand is the result of much work on the part of many people.

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