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**Review of ]effason and Southwestern Exploration: The Freeman and Custis Accounts of the Red River Expedition of 1806 Ed. by Dan L. Flores**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Jefferson and Southwestern Exploration: The Freeman and Custis Accounts of the Red River Expedition of 1806.* Ed. by Dan L. Flores. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984. Editor's introduction and epilogue, maps, illustrations, notes, appendices bibliography, index, xx + 386 pp. \$48.50.

The years between 1803 and 1807 were some of the most productive in the history of western exploration. Inspired and directed by Thomas Jefferson, parties of Americans ventured across the mountains to the Pacific, probed the upper reaches of the Mississippi, and explored the southern Rockies and Southwest. As Dan L. Flores correctly reminds us in his *Jefferson and Southwestern Exploration*, surveyor-astronomer Thomas Freeman and naturalist Peter Custis belong in the Jeffersonian Corps of Discovery. During the spring and summer of 1806 Freeman and Custis, accompanied by a military contingent under Capt. Richard Sparks, explored the Red River.

Flores has really written two books—books that sometimes jostle each other uneasily between the covers of one volume. One of these books contains the surviving records of the expedition. As the reader soon discovers, those reports make up only a small part of the documentary section. Most pages are filled

with long and dense footnotes. Too often the footnotes become substitutes for the documents themselves. Despite Flores's repeated assertions, Freeman and Custis do not emerge as particularly keen observers of the Red River world, and the documents themselves are not very well presented. Jefferson's instructions to Freeman are placed at the end of the book while expedition financial records are buried in a footnote. The Nicholas King "Map of the Red River in Louisiana," probably the most important document to come out of the expedition, is presented not in the original but in a redrawn version.

Donald Jackson once observed that an editor's prime responsibility is to present the documents and then stand aside. Flores seems intent not only on presenting the slim store of Freeman-Custis documents but offering an interpretation of them as well. In his annotations and in a long introduction and epilogue Flores spins out an elaborate theory explaining why the expedition was planned and why it failed. While there is no doubt that the Freeman-Custis venture was bound up in larger Spanish-United States tensions and the expansionist dreams of men like Gen. James Wilkinson and Aaron Burr, the assertion that Jefferson was "courting disaster" and war with Spain by sending the party stretches credulity

and the evidence. What stopped the expedition was not so much Spanish opposition as shallow water and a short supply of trade goods. Much of Flores's interpretation confuses the causal with the coincidental. For example he makes much of the fact that on 21 July 1806 Secretary of War Henry Dearborn sent copies of "The Rules and Articles of War" to American commanders in the Louisiana and Orleans territories. The implication seems to be that Jefferson and the War Department intended the expedition to provoke war with Spain and the action on 21 July was taken to prepare officers for such a conflict. Flores has evidently confused the "Articles of War"—routine Army housekeeping directions—with formal rules of engagement. In fact, the document sent on 21 July was a revision planned long before Freeman and Custis ever ventured on the Red River. It is just this sort of confusion that undermines Flores's argument.

The Freeman-Custis expedition does have an important place in exploration history. Flores's presentation of the documents, including the previously unpublished Custis natural history catalogue, goes a long way toward filling out the Jeffersonian roster of explorers. But Flores has weakened his book by half proven hints of conspiracy, charges of congressional cover-up, and occasional sniping at other expeditions. The Freeman-Custis story does not require hype. Readers will be pleased to have the documents but may reject Flores's telling of what they mean.

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