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Review Essay: *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* By Stephen E. Ambrose

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REVIEW ESSAYS

From time to time, a serious book excites the imaginations of a vaster public than the audience of scholarly journals. Because the Center for Great Plains Studies has, over the past sixteen years, sponsored the reediting and publication of *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*, we could not help but notice the enormous popular success of Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. To provide a focus on some of the scholarly concerns raised by this new text, we invited three prominent scholars to review the book from their own particular perspectives: Geography; Native American Studies; and Environmental History. The results of our invitations follow.

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Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West. By Stephen E. Ambrose. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. Notes, bibliography, index, maps. 511 pp. \$27.50.

GEOGRAPHY

The publisher's blurb on the dust jacket of Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage* makes a grandiose claim, as blurbs on dust jackets are wont to do. According to Simon & Schuster's marketing department, this is "the definitive book on the most momentous expedition and one of the great adventure stories of all time." Serious scholars of the Lewis and Clark expedition will not quibble over whether Ambrose has written the "definitive" book on the expedition; they will find general agreement among themselves that he has not. Few if any of those same scholars, however, would find much to

quarrel with in the dust jacket's description of the Lewis and Clark Expedition as "the most momentous" or "one of the great adventure stories" of early nineteenth-century American history. And herein lies the chief difficulty in telling the Lewis and Clark story, a difficulty that has waylaid Stephen Ambrose—as skilled a researcher and writer as he is—just as thoroughly as it has waylaid others. The difficulty is evident in the language of the dust jacket blurb, the language of hyperbolic infatuation. People who write about Lewis and Clark tend to become engrossed with the men,

with the story, with the landscape, and therefore tend to invoke hyperbole in describing people and places and events; Ambrose is no exception.

While a certain amount of infatuation is acceptable—indeed, perhaps even necessary for the writing of impassioned history—too much may lead an author into unacceptable claims, blind the authorial eye to things that are going on peripherally to the main story and the main characters, or even induce sloppiness in research and writing. It is an unacceptable assertion, for example, to say, as Ambrose does, that Lewis and Clark were “those young Virginians” whom Thomas Jefferson “knew best” or that the partnership of Lewis and Clark was “destined to become the most famous in American history.” The eye is blinded enough by infatuation that the author either repeats the errors of the ages in spite of recent scholarship that corrects them or fails to introduce ideas and facts generated by that scholarship. Why, for instance, should the reader be told that the news of the Purchase of Louisiana was released on 4 July 1803, without also being told that Jefferson had known of the Purchase agreement two months prior to that date but waited to inform the American people on the nation’s birthday when the fervor of patriotism would, he hoped, diminish public criticism of what he knew to be a questionable (if not illegal or unconstitutional) use of his executive authority in agreeing to the Purchase before submitting anything to the Congress? And it may be infatuation with the adventure story of Lewis and Clark, an urge to get over the preliminary stuff and on to the serious business of telling the expedition’s story, that produces curious and sometimes sloppy scholarship and writing. Why, for example, do the interpretations of Henry Adams play such an important role in Ambrose’s view of such early nineteenth-century events as the purchase of Louisiana Territory? Adams was a competent historian, but have we not learned a great deal in the century that has passed since he wrote? Why does the book contain misidentifications of

important Lewis and Clark scholars and authors? Paul Russell Cutright, for instance, was a biologist, not a geographer as Ambrose identifies him; it doesn’t seem extravagant to expect a scholar to be careful in identifying his peers. Why is there so much laxness in spelling and proofreading (“the jackels in Washington”)? Even worse, why do errors appear in the author’s citation from the works of others? One of the greatest of all Lewis and Clark scholars was Donald Jackson, a fine writer and superlative editor. Don would *never* describe the West before Lewis and Clark as “untrodded places,” but that is precisely what Ambrose, citing Jackson’s *Thomas Jefferson and the Stoney Mountains*, has him saying. While none of these admittedly small errors of omission or commission in itself destroys the book’s integrity, at some point their accumulation exacts a heavy cost.

Perhaps the single largest problem with the book is its failure to deal effectively with the Lewis and Clark Expedition as an exploratory process rather than an adventure story. At the outset, Ambrose obviously had great difficulty making up his mind whether he was writing a biography of Lewis or a narrative of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Although the author claims in his preface that the book is a biography, less than 10 percent of the material is strictly biographical, as much of that dealing with Jefferson as with Lewis. Fully three-quarters of the book is explicitly about the Expedition under the joint command of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark; throughout this portion our only evidence that the author is still viewing his work as a biography of Lewis is his casting Clark as a far more peripheral figure than he actually was. For example, Ambrose details Lewis’s explorations of the Marias River on the return journey of 1806 but says virtually nothing of Clark’s much more important exploration of the Yellowstone valley during the same period. If the work is to be considered biographical, then it misses much. If it is a study of the Expedition, it misses even more. While Ambrose does provide some information on the nature of

the Expedition's goals and objectives, the grounding of those objectives in geographical knowledge and theory as well as the imperial ambitions of Jefferson is too weakly developed. During the course of his account of the expedition itself, Ambrose misses one opportunity after another to discuss exploratory behavior, to explain the captains' reasons for taking actions and avoiding others. Moreover, his treatment of the impact of the explorations of Lewis and Clark on the American mind and on American vernacular culture is virtually absent.

Having taken the author severely to task for what I view as significant and, in many cases, egregious errors and omissions, I must state that it is far from my intent to savage his work. From the standpoint of the lay reader of popularized history, *Undaunted Courage* is not a bad book; it is just not as good as it should have been and could have been. Most of its readers whose only exposure to the considerable body of literature on Lewis and Clark is likely to be through its pages could certainly do worse than choosing Ambrose's book. But

it is precisely because the book serves a role that thematic studies published by university presses never can that I am disappointed by the lost opportunities to educate a public for whom the fiction surrounding the explorations by Lewis and Clark is still more credible than the facts: Lewis and Clark set out to explore the Louisiana Purchase; they were guided to the Pacific by Sacagawea. If Ambrose does not repeat these hoary fables, neither does he do enough to erase them. That erasing will come only for those lucky few provoked by Ambrose's work to delve deeply into the literature of the *Journals* and of the thematic works in the natural history, ethnohistory, medical history, and geography of the expedition. If a significant number of readers are so stimulated, then *Undaunted Courage*, for all its flaws, will have made a major contribution to the nation's collective understanding of its past.

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