

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1996

Review Essay: *Native American Studies*

Clara Sue Kidwell
University of Oklahoma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Kidwell, Clara Sue, "Review Essay: *Native American Studies*" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1108.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1108>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

Being asked to review a book from a Native American perspective raises a basic question about the peer review process for academic journals. What constitutes historical objectivity in the review? Will a review identified as representing a particular perspective be received in the same way as a review by a historian who writes about American history?

Given that very few Indian voices are recorded in the journals that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark kept during their epic western explorations, and that Ambrose can record only snatches of their thoughts, we cannot

recover fully the many different ways that people of western tribes viewed the exploring party. The reviewer is forced to take a presentist stance to evaluate whether an author who is relying on accounts of encounters with Indians written almost two hundred years ago is treating the subject of American Indian cultures fairly and accurately.

Ambrose is a fair and objective historian who pauses in his narrative to acknowledge the irony in the hospitality that the Nez Perce offered to the expedition in light of the United States government's effort to remove this tribe

from its territories along the upper Snake River in the late 1870s. The Nez Perce hosted the expedition in the fall of 1804, and Twisted Hair provided a map of the route that would take the explorers to the Columbia River. That knowledge was essential to the success of the Lewis and Clark expedition, but it ultimately resulted in the Nez Perce's dispossession. In 1871 Chief Joseph's band fled the Wallowa Valley and headed for Canada rather than engage in almost certain war with American settlers. The Nez Perce almost succeeded in reaching the Canadian border (one of the major points of international contention the Lewis and Clark expedition hoped to resolve but did not—another irony) because like Twisted Hair they knew the terrain so well. Some thirty miles from the border they were stopped by the U.S. Army; the survivors of the trek were sent to Indian Territory, a hot, dry, desolate area far different from their beloved western homeland.

Indians are only supporting players in the story that Ambrose tells. His focal point is Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson's private secretary. Lewis became Jefferson's agent in his grand scheme to open the western territories both for American national expansion and for the final removal of American Indians from their lands east of the Mississippi River to the west. Jefferson's instructions to the expedition occupied some nineteen pages. Lewis was to collect information on the flora and fauna of these new regions, reflecting Jefferson's keen curiosity about natural history. The instructions included an elaborate questionnaire Jefferson had worked out in conjunction with members of the American Philosophical Society to be used in collecting data on the Indians the expedition encountered. Already Indians were becoming subjects of scientific study. As Ambrose indicates, Jefferson thought that Indians "could be civilized and brought into the body politic." Lewis and Clark were the vanguard of that effort.

Ambrose tells the story of Meriwether Lewis, capturing admirably the moods and personality of the man. He also reports the

suspicion with which a Shoshone warrior encountered Lewis and two members of the Corps of Discovery, as well as Lewis's knowledge that the success of the expedition quite literally depended upon these people for the horses they could provide.

But Ambrose presents the expedition's bottom line as the political destiny of the United States. Lewis and Clark were to pacify Indian conflicts, establish potential trading relations with the United States, and make clear the path that would wrest control of the Indian trade from British agents west of the Rockies and north of the 49th parallel.

What is of most interest about the expedition from an Indian perspective is what Indians might have learned from the explorers about American behavior, and how the goods and information Indians gave the expedition show something of Indian cultural values. Ambrose gives us accounts of encounters that unwittingly represented the symbolism of different cultures. Lewis and Clark paraded their men before assembled Oto and Missouri chiefs in close order drill to demonstrate American discipline and military power. The Yankton Sioux danced in paint and regalia to demonstrate their brave exploits in battle. What did each group learn or even sense from the other? There is no way to answer the question, and it would not have occurred to Ambrose to ask it.

Lewis and Clark learned that the Otos and Missouris raised "water millions" (watermelons), which they gave to the expedition in exchange for pork and meal. In a territory where the expedition relied upon dried beans and meat, fresh fruits were a boon to the diet. The Oto and Missouri learned that the Americans considered them children, and that suddenly without their knowledge they had been brought under a "Chief of the Seventeen great nations of America" who in a great council had displaced the French and Spanish who would never again "visit their former red children." Given the continued presence of traders of various nationalities in the Missouri valley, such a message could only have been

puzzling to the Indians, and Lewis's declaration on behalf of a "chief" of numerous nations whose existence was unknown could only have been more puzzling. The Americans would threaten and chastise, but with a force of thirty-four men their presence was only symbolic.

Ambrose captures the grand adventure of the expedition in vivid terms, but others have told the story as compellingly. The expedition's exploits must stand beside the voyages of Christopher Columbus as an incredible intellectual feat. Lewis himself made the comparison, but Bernard De Voto made it explicit in *The Course of Empire*. Columbus was guided by the myths of a short and easy voyage to the coast of China. Lewis and Clark were led by the myth of a short and easy passage by water across a continent of prairies and mountains to the great western ocean. The ultimate consequences of both voyages for the Native people were disastrous.

Undaunted Courage should make the history of the Lewis and Clark expedition accessible to a wide audience other scholars will not reach. James Ronda has focussed on the expedition's relationship with and impact on Indian tribes in *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*, and Ambrose has relied extensively on Ronda's scholarship, incorporating his con-

clusion into his own work. Ambrose laments the fact that Lewis and Clark did not take advantage of Sacagawea's knowledge of Shoshone culture except to ask her how to say "white man" in that language. Ronda points out that the term translated as "alien," something more akin to enemy in Shoshone understanding.

Ambrose is a world away from the negative and racist judgments of Indians that Francis Parkman made in *The Oregon Trail*. He does report the explorers' negative judgments of the tribes in the vicinity of Fort Clatsop. Ambrose has trekked across the route that Lewis and Clark took and conveys amply the wonder, excitement, suffering, and ultimate achievement of the venture, but De Voto's lyrical prose in *The Course of Empire* captures with greater emotion the expedition's sense of wonder on its way west. Ambrose, however, tells a rousing good story, and despite the insight of historical hindsight, we must marvel at the persistence of the intrepid adventurers and the astuteness of the Indians who traded the exploring party out of the very buttons on its uniforms.

CLARA SUE KIDWELL
Native American Studies
University of Oklahoma