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Review Essay: *Environmental History*

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ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

A summer ago I canoed down the Missouri River, along the wild pristine White Cliffs of Montana, with the Lewis and Clark journals in hand (the De Voto abridged edition). Like many others, I have felt strongly the pull of that famous expedition, the nostalgia for a lost West without cities, dams, or overgrazed pastures, when Indians still defined the place. But I was not prepared to like this retelling of

the story, with its hagiographical and militaristic title spliced to its Wallace Stegner-ish subtitle. Was this to be Meriwether Lewis as the Colin Powell of another day? Or as the original of John Wesley Powell? Either way, I was nervous that this book might set popular western history back a decade or more. My fears were excessive. Ambrose has written an honest and at times moving and insightful

book about an important man and moment in our history. It is not highly original nor does it represent painstaking new research, but it is a book that gives the public a feeling for the moral ambiguity in America's sense of mission and for the flaws that may be found even in our most celebrated achievements.

Forget the title. In 1809 Meriwether Lewis took his own life when he could not find a way out of the mess he had made of his ambitions. That's weakness, not courage, and neither Ambrose nor any of us will probably ever figure out why a man who could fulfill one task so successfully could so miserably fail in others. Ambrose says it was because Captain Lewis was a great military commander but a bad politician and argues that his life fell apart when he tried to govern the new territory of Upper Louisiana. I think the problem lay deeper: he never trusted himself, for good reason, to run any show all on his own but depended on strong, authoritative older men like Jefferson and William Clark to steady his direction. Left to his own guidance, he floundered into dishonorable use of office, tawdry entrepreneurialism, and failure of nerve.

The most implausible claim made in the book is that Lewis stood only a little below Charles Darwin as a scientist. Had he been able to transform his exploration journals into a published work, Ambrose argues, the world would have seen him for the intellectual genius he was. Instead, he froze up and produced nothing; only much later did others do the editing and show what prodigious new biological information Lewis had collected. But that claim confuses a careful though minor talent for descriptive field work with brilliant hypothesis formation; dozens of nineteenth-century frontier naturalists were Lewis's equal, and he contributed not a single new idea to biology. He carried out a vital, arduous, often dangerous assignment with considerable skill, and that should be enough to earn a nation's gratitude and respect.

Ambrose is most convincing when he examines the motives behind the Lewis and Clark expedition, framed primarily by Jefferson but

shared by both the explorers and much of the rest of the nation. They had a dream of creating an American commercial empire stretching from sea to sea, in no way different from the imperial dreams of the British in India or Africa. They were after resources, land, and wealth—and the power those would bring. Scientific knowledge was never for any of these men an end in itself; always, they justified their enthusiasm for nature by a commercial ethos. Jefferson personally had all he needed in the way of money, so his motives were more disinterestedly materialistic; but Lewis was still a man on the make, looking for private economic opportunities while pressing plants and parlaying with Indians. Ambrose seems to regard this motive as basic to human nature and shows how eager the Indians along the Missouri River were to lay their hands on the white man's goods. We would be wrong, however, to conflate a primitive people's enthusiasm for steel axes, blue beads, and whiskey with Jefferson's more sophisticated, systematic drive to transform a continent into a flow of commodities for sale in the world marketplace. He saw a "West" emerging out of natural chaos, directed by a moral imperative of economic growth—a West that would make nature pay an infinite return. Indians must either consent to play a role in this economic empire or fade away. The western land itself, though appreciated by Jefferson and by Lewis for its extraordinary beauty and intellectual challenge, must in the end be reduced to profit.

What Lewis in particular wanted from his expedition, along with lots of personal glory and Jefferson's fatherly approval, was a stake in a new fur trade empire firmly under the control of American capital. He would seek to organize a ruthless killing machine that would devastate the faunal paradise he had found. Massive destruction was at the very core of his vision of the West.

Ambrose skillfully situates this culture of economic imperialism in the eighteenth-century tobacco-planting, slave-owning aristocracy of the tidewater South, with its insatiable lust for virgin soil and its cruel indifference

toward the people they enslaved, and in the Democratic Republican party ideology of leaders like Jefferson. Lewis came from a long line of land speculators. For him as well as his contemporaries the West was another Virginia to exploit.

I think we must acknowledge the ambiguity and complexity in Jefferson's as well as Lewis's motives toward the land as we do in their use of other human beings; they were not, after all, men without scruples or prin-

ciples. They often inspired the world with their noble words and brave deeds. But I came away from this book impressed that even here in this first opening of the West there was an element of darkness. Going up the Missouri was in large part a nation's search for the shortest way to make a killing.

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