

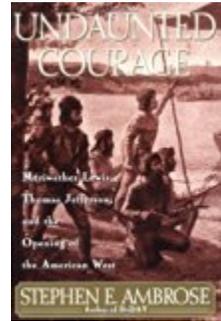
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen E. Ambrose. *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson and the Opening of the American West*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. 511 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-81107-9.

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Ambrose on Lewis and Clark: A Good Yarn and Good History

Ostensibly a biography of Meriwether Lewis, the book's centerpiece is the famed Lewis and Clark expedition of 1803-1806. This section covers well-traveled ground, but the story is a good one and bears repeating. I emphasize the word "story" here, for that is what Ambrose supplies, a work of narrative history calling to mind the greatest adventure fiction. The reader may even recognize a dash of Melville and Conrad.

Ambrose begins by discussing Lewis's upbringing and training, both of which influenced President Thomas Jefferson's decision to appoint him leader of the party. Lewis was heir to a plantation neighboring Jefferson's, and the president recognized the inquisitive habits of mind marking many of the landed gentry of early Virginia. In the army, Lewis had acquired the skills necessary to survive on the frontier while stationed at various posts throughout the Old Northwest.

Next came Lewis' preparations for the trip, which make for fascinating reading. Here the book rivals the early chapters of *Moby Dick* in its keen attention to detail, providing an exhaustive catalog of provisions: clothes, foods, medicines, guns, powder, cookware, whiskey, and trinkets for the Indians. As he arranged the logistics, Lewis put much thought and effort into selecting his companions, not least among these his good friend William Clark. Finally, before departing, Lewis took what amounted to a crash course in astronomy, zoology, and botany with the leading scientists of the young republic.

At last, the expedition cast off from St. Louis in spring, 1804, cruising up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, traversing the Bitterroot Range, and flowing down the Columbia. Ambrose is at his strongest here, mixing quotations from Lewis and Clark's journals to impart their impressions of terrain, flora, and fauna during their passage through uncharted wilderness. The author constantly refers to "the first recorded" animal, bird, or plant species Lewis discovered. A sense of wonderment prevails in the book's great middle, but Ambrose does not neglect the trip's many dramas. First, the men are tested by the sheer physical demands of rowing against strong river currents or portaging across rugged mountains. Second, they are continuously on guard against Indians, never knowing what type of reception they will receive—hostile (the Sioux and Blackfeet) or friendly (the Mandans and Nez Perce). Eventually, as history shows, the expedition triumphed over nature, the elements, and human limitation by reaching the Pacific Ocean and returning every man but one safely.

In the last portion of the book, Ambrose recounts Lewis's difficulties in coping with the world-wide fame he faced upon returning as well as his own personal demons. Here the reader is reminded of *Heart of Darkness*, only Lewis discovers a hole in his soul while attempting to navigate civilization. In 1809 at the age of 35 he committed suicide, a debtor, alcoholic, melancholic, and failed territorial governor.

The book is largely a synthesis of journals and let-

ters from Lewis, Clark, and Jefferson, most contained in a succession of editions by Biddle, Thwaites, Jackson, and—most recently—Moulton, together “the rock on which all Lewis and Clark scholarship stands.” Ambrose tends not to interpret too much from these materials, choosing instead to let the participants speak for themselves. Still, he throws in judgments regarding leadership tactics (drawn from his considerable expertise as a military historian) and especially about contradictory policies toward the native populations the party encountered, offering a glimpse of the tragedy that began with the expedition and accelerated during the rest of the century.

My only criticism concerns the maps—the author often mentions a significant site “near present-day” Missoula or Kansas City, except it is not noted in the maps, requiring one to refer to another source to pinpoint its location.

In his foreword, Ambrose makes plain that this is a personal book. He explains that its subject has interested his family for years, testified to by numerous vacations they have spent camping and canoeing along the route. I once heard the author state in an interview that his purpose in writing history was to create a “ripping good yarn.” He has more than succeeded at this goal, writing rock-solid history with a novelist’s eye.

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