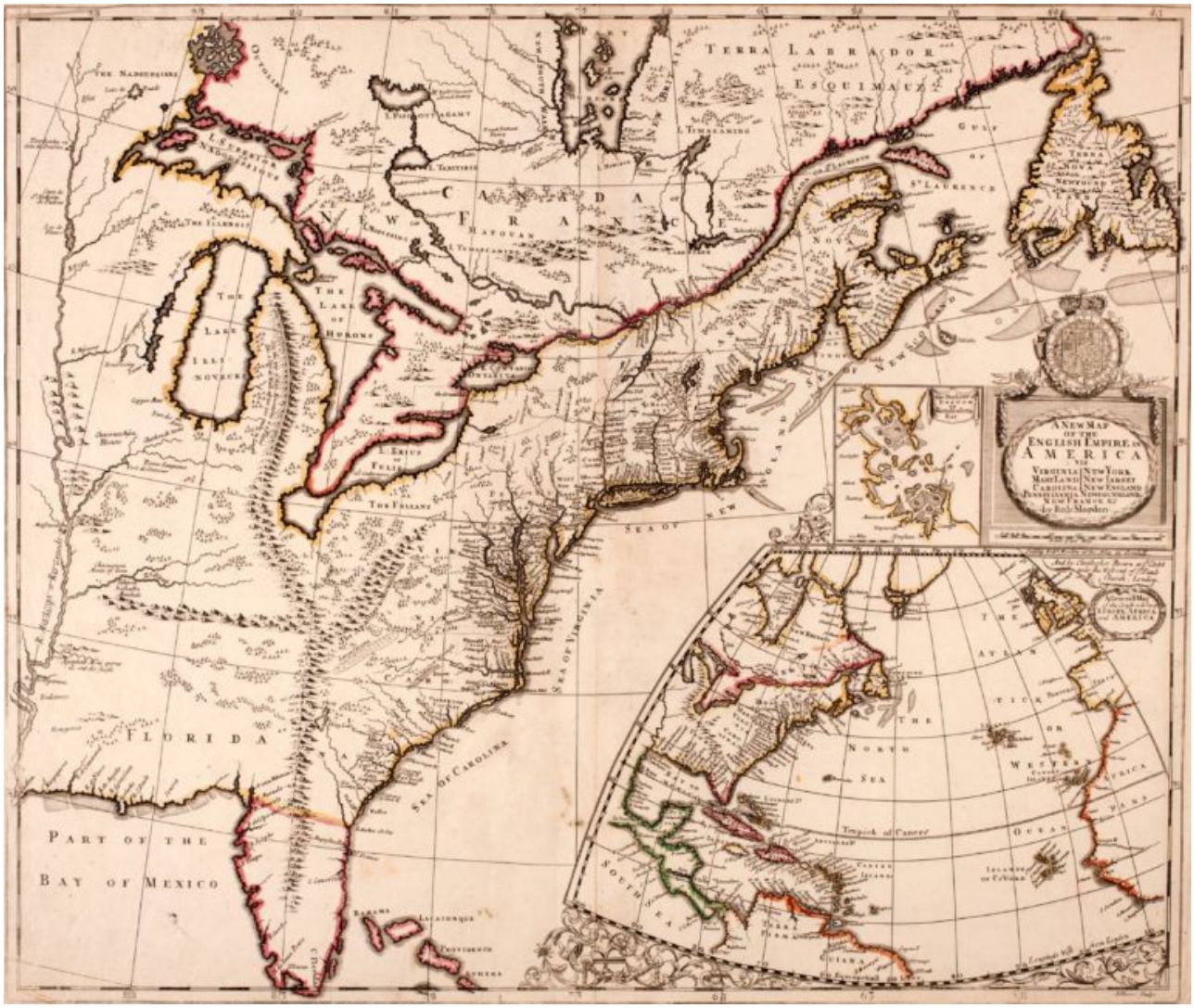
Rediscovering Lewis and Clark



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The Lewis and Clark expedition did not matter two centuries ago. The explorers were not the first to make the transcontinental journey, as they well knew, having been preceded in both travels and publication by the Canadian Alexander Mackenzie. They followed Cook, Vancouver, and dozens of trading ships that made landfall on the West Coast and had ongoing contacts with Indians in the Northwest, just as French and Anglo-Canadian fur traders had already engaged

Indians east of the Rockies.

And if Lewis and Clark didn't get there first, neither did they achieve any of the major goals of their expedition: they did not find a water route to the Pacific, a Lost Tribe of Israel, or Welsh Indians. During the return leg of their journey, they met up with traders who had believed them dead and were proceeding west nonetheless. The explorers' survival and the information they brought back with them were irrelevant to the westward course of American empire. They did not publish their journals in a timely fashion and eventually did so, after Lewis's death, in an abridgement that achieved limited circulation. Quickly, the explorers and their achievements faded from public memory.

Lewis and Clark were rediscovered after the passing of the American frontier. Celebration of them is a twentieth-, now twenty-first-century phenomenon that reflects more on the creation of a national origins myth than it does the historical significance of the expedition in its own time. Politics, local pride, and the integration of western states into our patriotic myth making account for the outpouring of histories, novels, films, journals, conferences, Websites, civic clubs, and vacation packages associated with the expedition. Lewis and Clark matter, then, because our nation needs their contribution to the multicultural and ecologically sensitive stories that we now tell about ourselves. They are central characters in the superficial "feel-good" brand of American history that catapults books to the top of nonfiction bestseller lists.

Lewis and Clark also matter because they and four other men associated with the expedition kept journals. Editors of the most recent edition, which is a monumental editorial accomplishment, estimate that the journals run to 1.5 million words. Such documentation for any event from the early nineteenth century is extremely significant. These are rich sources, in addition to being voluminous. They present an opportunity for exploring multiple perspectives—of the explorers and the people they met—which can be supplemented by other artifacts of the past. What the journals provide, then, is access to any number of subjects—gender, race, exploration, the self, humans and nature—for which they have been only lightly used. The journals are potentially of inestimable value to historians who approach them from a literary critic's or microhistorian's perspective rather than the narrative historian's heroic angle from which they have been traditionally viewed.

Given their extraordinary potential to tell such stories, it's all the more regrettable that the journals are generally a misunderstood source. They are not, for example, "original" in the common meaning of that word. We know from internal evidence that the neat notebooks held by the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia are second, third, sometimes fourth generation sources: transcriptions of transcriptions. So-called "field notes" are largely lost, but there are entries that can be traced through multiple rewritings. Such survivals provide opportunities for gauging the journalists' literary

ambitions, the goals towards which they rewrote, and what they wanted to share and tried to hide from readers as they moved from earlier reactions to polished texts.

The journals are not best used or most creatively understood as fonts of chronologically ordered fact. The entries were often, perhaps usually, not made on the dates assigned them. Indeed, the expeditions' chroniclers wrote as much as six months after the recorded dates and used the present tense to hide the passage of time. They copied from entries dated later than theirs. Clark, for example, took his text for November 7, 1805, from one drafted by Lewis on March 22, 1806. Such patterns are fascinating and significant to the postmodern reader in ways that the traditional heroic narratives of the expedition miss or misconstrue. As literary sources bearing upon the interior lives of the writers, the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition matter greatly and in ways that historians have only begun to tap. James P. Ronda's *Finding the West* (Albuquerque, 2001), Albert Furtwangler's *Acts of Discovery* (Urbana, Ill., 1993), and John Logan Allen's *Passage Through the Garden*(Urbana, Ill., 1975), are examples of more creative approaches to the journals. Ronda, Furtwangler, and Allen are not duped by heroic assumptions about the writers or the apparent transparency of the texts. They each approach the sources critically, engaging the explorers' perspectives as contestable terrain and the journals as texts that reveal as much or more about the writers of the journals as what the journalists wrote about.

With this sense of the explorers as limited by their perspectives, the journals can be approached anew. For all the hundreds of books, thousands of articles, and multimedia extravaganzas devoted to Lewis and Clark, few people have actually considered them as men or as explorers, within historical contexts that make them significant for those of us who do not share Ken Burns's romantic image of the expedition or the late Stephen Ambrose's heroic vision of Meriwether Lewis. We can begin to look at Lewis and Clark as culturally emblematic rather than fabricating a historical significance for them. We can situate the task of journal writing within the history of exploration, which will deepen our understanding of explorers and what they did. We can question the role of hunting in the articulation of masculine identity. We can consider cross-racial sexuality, the influence of myth on exploration, and the role of fear, violence, and personal ambition in early American cultures. We can address spirituality, possession (of objects and of the soul), dreams, authority, discipline, and race relations.

There is much to learn about our nation's origins and the natures of texts, and many ways in which Lewis and Clark can contribute significantly to the understanding of our pasts and the presents that they gave and received. The journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition can do all of this for us. In return, we can do a better job of sorting out the human from the heroic, history from mythology, patriotic pabulum from more satiating analysis, even—dare we try?—the past from the present.

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Common-place asks Thomas P. Slaughter, professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and the author of *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness* (New York, 2003), why, on the two hundredth anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition, their journey matters.