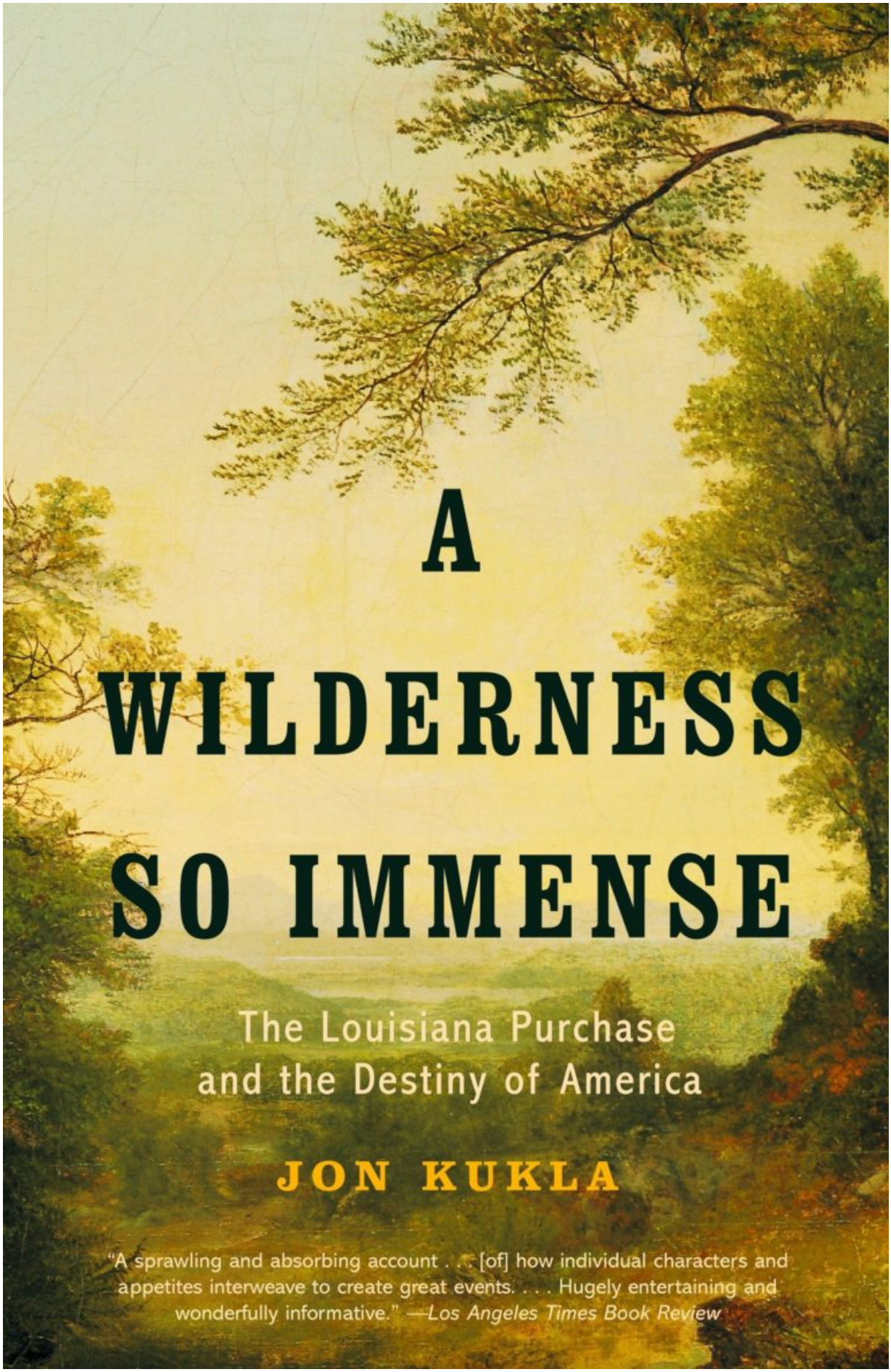
A Story So Immense


A
WILDERNESS
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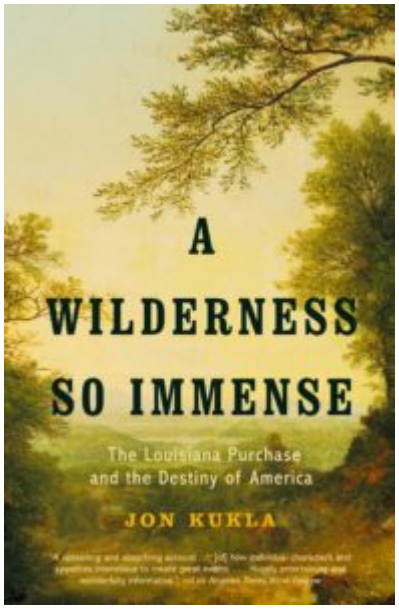
The Louisiana Purchase
and the Destiny of America
JON KUKLA
"A sprawling and absorbing account . . . [of] how individual characters and appetites interweave to create great events. . . . Hugely entertaining and wonderfully informative." —Los Angeles Times Book Review



A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America

It is reassuring, in this first of many years of Lewis and Clark bicentennial hoopla, to see that the far more significant event of 1803, the Louisiana Purchase, has not gone entirely unmarked. Jon Kukla's *A Wilderness So Immense* joins at least five other narratives, an encyclopedia, a collection of essays, and a collection of documents in an outpouring of recent work on the purchase. The Lewis and Clark bicentennial, like some of the other recent commemorations, has brought a scholarly reassessment of its subject. The Louisiana Purchase bicentennial has not seen the same level of scholarly engagement, at least not so far. And the subject is ripe for it.

The best popular histories—and, in many respects, Kukla's ranks in that class—can capture the complex interplay of events and personalities that culminated in the Louisiana Purchase. In order to do so, the narrative must shift between Washington and New Orleans, Paris, Madrid, and London, the French Caribbean, the American West, and Spanish North America. It must follow a small army of heads of state, cabinet members, diplomats, military men, legislators, local functionaries, and private citizens. For the most part, Kukla handles this immense drama, with its many scenes and actors, well. His account is broadly international, richly populated, and deeply engaging. Except for a few infelicitous expressions and a tendency toward repetitiveness, *A Wilderness So Immense* provides a very satisfying and highly readable account of the purchase.

Like most popular histories, it knits together a series of pocket biographies—Jefferson, Napoleon, Carlos III, Livingston, Talleyrand, Godoy, and others—with set-piece narratives—the New Orleans fire of 1788, Napoleon in his bath at St. Cloud, and Barbé-Marbois in Livingston's garden in Paris. Like most popular histories, it relies heavily on secondary works and the most easily accessible primary sources, though Kukla has done more manuscript research than most. And, like most popular histories, it suggests rather than asserts

arguments. Kukla's analysis appears primarily in his choices about what to include and exclude, as well as in an epilogue that bears little relationship to the preceding story.

Kukla's choices form one of the real strengths of the book. Too often, popular, and even scholarly, accounts of the purchase begin in the early eighteenth century with the French settlement of Louisiana. As a result, the eventual American acquisition of the vast province beyond the Mississippi River in 1803 seems narratively, if not historically, predetermined. But American policymakers did not want any territory beyond the Mississippi until Napoleon shocked them with his decision to sell the whole of Louisiana. Kukla begins, instead, in the 1780s as Americans, particularly Jefferson, and Spaniards, particularly those on the ground in New Orleans, thought about the future destinies of the entire Mississippi Valley, east and west of the river. In his hands, the Louisiana Purchase remains what it was—an unexpected solution to a crisis that had far more to do with the trans-Appalachian than the trans-Mississippi West.

A Wilderness So Immense is nearly two-thirds complete before Kukla reaches what might reasonably be considered the event that precipitated this crisis, the retrocession of Louisiana from Spain to France in the fall of 1800. The preceding pages explain not only Spain's decision to return the province to France, but also the conditions within the United States that made this event so threatening. Long discussions of the Jay-Gardoqui negotiations over the future of the Mississippi in the mid-1780s and of the planned Genet-Clark assault on New Orleans in the early 1790s highlight the tensions between East and West, North and South, over the use and control of the river. By telling these stories, Kukla situates the purchase in the context of a fragile American union, impetuous western settlers, and calculating New England politicians.

Unfortunately, having established this context, Kukla gives the retrocession crisis itself short shrift. He never clearly explains that Jefferson and his advisors viewed French control over the Mississippi as a threat to the union of East and West. He barely suggests why the administration remained indifferent about Louisiana itself, even as it scrambled to secure control over the river by purchasing New Orleans and the Floridas. The source of this failure is curious. Kukla recognizes that both Livingston and Monroe went to Paris only after long conversations with Jefferson and Madison about the administration's concerns, intentions, and goals. Their written instructions did not, and could not, include all that was discussed in these meetings. For Kukla, this fact apparently justifies ignoring them. Madison's lengthy March 2, 1803, instructions to Livingston and Monroe—the clearest statement of the administration's hopes and fears—never appears in the chapters on the retrocession and the purchase. As in many popular histories, the opportunity to assess the thinking behind an event is passed over in the rush to get to the action itself, in this case the dramatic conversations between Barbé-Marbois and Livingston in Paris that resulted in a treaty.

Kukla also disappoints with his failure to consider fully the response to the unexpected purchase in the United States. He does well with Federalist opposition to the vast acquisition. His earlier discussion of New England opposition to the rapid settlement of the trans-Appalachian West in the mid-1780s sets him up perfectly to retell the often forgotten story of the so-called Northern Confederacy. And these disunionist plottings by a handful of New York and New England Federalists make for a captivating tale. But the more significant story surely concerns the struggles of leading Republicans, particularly Jefferson, to find ways to make the surprising outcome of Livingston and Monroe's negotiations safe for the American union. While not ignoring them entirely, Kukla could certainly have done more with the administration's efforts to prevent new settlement in most of the purchase and to establish a new government for the rest. Having begun the book with an account of Jefferson's expansionist thought in the mid-1780s, Kukla could easily have ended with such a discussion.

A Wilderness So Immense offers a fascinating tale. In many ways, it gets closer to the story that needs to be told in order to understand the retrocession crisis and the Louisiana Purchase than almost any other account, popular or scholarly. But, at a couple of crucial points, Kukla chooses to emphasize the dramatic incident over the reflective moment. He clearly understands the administration's thinking, its hopes and fears. It is a pity that he did not develop them more fully for the wide audience that this book will surely, and deservedly, reach.

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