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M Essays on the West

Lewis and Clark and the American Century

A Review of Ken Burns's PBS Series on the Corps of Discovery

by William L. Lang

Olander Studio, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



The magnificent scenery paralleling the Missouri River through Montana is a compelling element in Ken Burns's recent PBS documentary on Lewis and Clark. The original explorers camped on the Missouri across from a creek they called Stone Wall (now Eagle Creek) on May 31, 1805. The point (above, 1965) is fifty-five river miles downstream from present-day Fort Benton, Montana.

In the opening scenes of Ken Burns's new film on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which aired on the Public Broadcasting System in early November 1997, viewers are swept up a mist-cloaked Missouri River as the narrator intones that the powerful current beckoned "come up me" into a world unknown to eighteenth-century Americans.¹ Showing gloriously scenic footage of Missouri and Columbia river

landscapes—especially brilliant sunrises and fluorescent sunsets—Burns and his creative team use the medium to pull their audience into the nation's greatest adventure of earthbound discovery. This is filmmaking at its best and doing what it can do best: convey a historical story by re-creating and interpreting the emotions and experience inherent in past events.

In Ken Burns viewers see a master storyteller who makes his

films with a commitment to quality matched by few of his colleagues. Using methods he developed in the 1990 award-winning televised series on the Civil War, Burns taps the spectacular scenery of the vast terrain Lewis and Clark traversed to communicate the expedition as a story of heroic achievement and a

1. *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, directed by Ken Burns, written by Dayton Duncan, and coproduced by Florentine Films, WETA-TV, Washington, D.C., and Turner Home Entertainment for PBS television. The two-part, four-hour documentary film aired

November 5 and 6, 1997. Available on VHS, 240 mins., \$29.98; Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan, *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (New York, 1997); *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, PBS website (<http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/html>).

2. Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 11 vols. (Lincoln, Nebr., 1993–1997). Moulton's series, published by the University of Nebraska Press, will conclude with forthcoming publication of volumes 12 and 13, the latter an index. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York, 1996).

3. Ken Burns, "Come Up Me," in Burns and Duncan, *Lewis and Clark*, xi.

saga of national fulfillment. One of the film's principal on-camera commentators, historian Stephen Ambrose, says it directly: the expedition created "a sense of national unity that transcends time and distance and place and brings us together from coast to coast." Dayton Duncan, scriptwriter and coauthor of *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* (1997), embellishes the point, claiming that the expedition "discovered America's future." This is a story that befits a self-congratulatory nation at the end of the "American Century."

Burns and Duncan, drawing from recent Lewis and Clark studies, Gary Moulton's definitive new edition of the *Journals*, and especially Stephen Ambrose's recent biography of Meriwether Lewis,² take four hours to tell the story, from Jefferson's enlightened curiosity about western North America to Lewis's tragic suicide three years after the Corps returned from the Pacific shore. The script adheres closely to the *Journals*, noting river miles traveled, major events, and the precise mapping of

the expedition's route. Eleven chapter-like sections carry epigrammatic titles such as "The Grandfather Spirit," referring to the Missouri River, and "The Northwest Passage," referring to the Corps's failure to find an all-water route across the continent.

Like all other recounters of the epic journey before them, Burns and Duncan had to be selective in which events they depicted on screen and how deeply they pursued them. The medium limits as much as it enables what portions of the story can be told. By filming at water level, for example, the audience is given a perspective of the majestic White Cliffs on the Missouri River in central Montana that reifies the explorer's descriptions in the *Journals*. Footage of stampeding bison, fish-feeding grizzly bears, and fleet pronghorn antelope combine with readings from the *Journals* to make the film an easy and accessible blend of National Geographic nature photography and historical documentary.

There is the need in any cinematic rendition of story, however,

for a dramatic tension, a plot that propels the action and helps determine what images to use, what music to play, and what events to highlight. The outline of the Lewis and Clark plot, of course, is well known. What Burns and Duncan construct, however, is a suspenseful telling of how the Corps overcame considerable obstacles, how they became heroic. There is plenty in the *Journals* to document this approach, and not surprisingly the film dwells on the most dramatic episodes, such as the potential conflict with the Lakota who threatened to block the Corps' passage up the lower Missouri. "The fate of the entire expedition," the voice-over narration tells the audience, "hung in the balance." It is a singular moment in the story that seems to beg for interpretive hyperbole. Other turning points—the famous bouts with grizzly bears, the arduous portage around the Great Falls of the Missouri, and the violent episode on Two Medicine River in 1806 that left two Piegan dead—are also played on the screen. The more pedestrian sequences that constitute most of

Director Ken Burns (left) used several modes of transportation, including dugout canoe, to retrace the Lewis and Clark Trail prior to the broadcast of his four-hour documentary. With Burns in this 1997 view are coproducer/writer Dayton Duncan (center) and historian/commentator Stephen Ambrose (right).



Lucy Kraus, photographer, General Motors



Among the limited visual documents surviving from the expedition itself are drawings of flora and fauna, including Lewis's illustration (above) of bitterroot, *Lewisia rediviva*.

(From Duncan and Burns, *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* [New York, 1997], 39)

the *Journals* do not make good film fare. There is too much routine and not enough exceptionalist activity to move the story dramatically along. Nonetheless, Burns and Duncan do include summaries and synopses of the less dramatic work of the Corps, including location finding and mapmaking, descriptions and drawn renditions of the new flora and fauna they observed, and considerable comment on camp conditions and equipage.

Most problematic in adapting the Lewis and Clark story for the screen is finding appropriate images of expedition events and personnel. Visuals in the documentary materials are few by film standards. Embedded in the

Journals are maps and drawings depicting native culture, flora, fauna, and schematics of the Corps' two forts, but no representations of specific incidents. To solve the problem, Burns used drawings, paintings, and photographs by artists who traversed or lived in western North America long after the expedition's conclusion. Artwork by Paul Kane, Charles Bird King, George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, and C. M. Russell and photography by Edward S. Curtis, Richard Throssel, and C. E. Watkins—among many others—are used throughout the film to represent specific places and events. All this, even though people and conditions had changed considerably from the days of Lewis and Clark.

There is no avoiding the disjunctive effect of presenting early twentieth-century photographs to depict the Corps' activities and the people they encountered. In the companion volume, *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of Discovery*, readers get the advantage of captions and credit lines that provide provenance for the illustrations, but television viewers are provided no warning, no clarification for use of these modern images that clearly could not have been created by the explorers. Presenting photographs of individuals who appear to be acting out the events documented in the *Journals* is contrived to a fault (such as the twentieth-century photo of Indians on horseback on a bluff in the sequence on the Two Medicine River fight as if they were looking down on Lewis and Clark). But once committed to using images for each action, the filmmakers find themselves harnessed

to these devices, what Burns calls "significant poetic license."³

The license Burns employs is necessary, most filmmakers argue, to convey the texture of place and event, and it is the living moment of the story that they want to represent on the screen and in the script. Burns has explained that he believes history should avoid "formal considerations [that] overwhelm and capsize the truth of events, [or allow] a dry recitation of fact to render its meaning unintelligible or worse—boring."⁴ In response to an electronic query at the PBS website on Lewis and Clark, Burns elaborated that he sees himself "as an emotional archaeologist, looking into, not so much the dry dates and events of the past, but the emotional glue that makes those dry facts stick to us."⁵ It is not that in filmmaking the facts are unimportant in the telling of a gripping story, especially one as crammed with full-faced daring and physical accomplishment as Lewis and Clark's, but, as Burns explained, "my question, as a filmmaker, ha[s] always been 'Who are we?'" During filming in summer 1995, out on the prairie near Big Sandy, Montana, Burns discovered the answer to his rhetorical question, an answer that disclosed his story's broader purpose. "For all our proud pronouncements about political freedom, America, I suddenly blurted out to [camera-man] Roger [Haydock], has been as much about spiritual search, about the survival of the soul, as anything."⁶

In large measure, the unveiling of America's "spiritual search" and the "survival of the soul" are the motivating purposes behind this rendition of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. It is compelling film fare because Burns brilliantly weds

4. Ken Burns, "Four O'clock in the Morning Courage," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York, 1996), 162.

5. "A Forum with Ken Burns" (hereafter Burns Forum), PBS website (<http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/forum/intro.html>).

6. Burns, "Come Up Me," xv.

the human struggle to complete an assignment in the face of stupendous obstacles to an environment that continues to overwhelm and confirm the power of the trans-Mississippi western landscape. The imagery of blood and carnage that dominated Burns's Civil War series is replaced in the Lewis and Clark film by roiling rivers, sere plains, towering mountains, and the harsh climate of the American West. The immensity and audacity of the task are made palpable by carefully chosen selections from the *Journals* and incisive on-screen commentary by specialists who provide context and interpretation for the highlighted sequences of the Corps' journey to the Pacific and back.

There are a few missteps—C.M. Russell's famous *Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flathead Indians at Ross's Hole, September 3, 1805* is used to depict the explorers' meeting with the Shoshone, and the stealing of the Clatsop canoe after the Corps had left the lower

Columbia rather than when it actually took place—but in general the production is true to the detail and sequences of events reflected in the *Journals*. Complaints can be raised about the use of swelling orchestral music to heighten the film's intensity, the often morose-sounding reading of *Journal* entries, the overly emotional portrayal of Meriwether Lewis's death, and the unavoidable soundbite character of many of the on-screen commentaries. But these elements are also powerfully effective in communicating the production's central themes.

The film's effectiveness is demonstrable. The television series drew an estimated 25.8 million viewers and their response to the film was overwhelming, as was the reader response to Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, which has sold hundreds of thousands of copies since its publication in 1996. Thousands of World Wide Web-users have connected to the PBS

website, where correspondents can ask questions of the filmmakers, order related merchandise, view historic maps and documents, and tap into educational activities in social studies and math that use the film as a classroom resource. This is the Lewis and Clark Expedition coming at us from multiple directions: television, videocassette, illustrated book, and interactive website. It is as orchestrated as any Hollywood promotion, and it is nearly as effective. As with the Civil War series, Burns has created and delivered a compelling package of information about our nation's past that reaches more people and shapes more attitudes about these topics than all of the combined efforts of teachers in America's classrooms. The power and effectiveness of this creative work should not be dismissed by historians and educators, nor is that likely. But just what kind of history is it and what does it purport to teach?

To supplement contemporary photography and the available maps, drawings, and correspondence originating from the expedition, Burns and his producers used paintings and drawings such as John Clymer's *Captain Clark "Buffalo Gangle"* (1976). Like others, Clymer depicted scenes from the Corps of Discovery's journey long after the expedition was completed.



Courtesy Doris Clymer



Coproducers Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan joined the Lewis and Clark Honor Guard to reenact the Corps of Discovery's canoe portage around the Great Falls of the Missouri River in summer 1997.

In reply to the question “What is the larger historical significance of the expedition?”—posed and answered on the PBS website—writer Dayton Duncan answers: “It’s America’s story, I think. There’s something in there for everybody.” Historian Ambrose replies: “Teamwork. The number one story here is there is nothing that men can’t do if they get themselves together and act as a team.” Hidatsa historian Gerard Baker reminds: “In a nutshell, what happened to our people in the years after Lewis and Clark is that we went downhill. In a nutshell, we lost.” And historian James Ronda comments: “If the Civil War is our *Iliad*, then this is our *Odyssey*. . . . one of the ways to understand American history is to think about our history as a series of journeys. We’re forever going somewhere.”⁷ These replies underscore the truism that a historical topic as large as the Lewis and Clark Expedition is complex, and its meanings are manifold, and there are many legitimate historical viewpoints.

7. Burns Forum, “What is the Larger Significance of the Expedition?” (<http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/living/9.html>).

It is arguable, though, whether film can assume this responsibility and fulfill the required functions of historical inquiry. While Ken Burns argues that his film avoids the “dry recitation of fact” and that his approach revels in the “emotional glue that makes those dry facts stick to us,” he is, in fact, producing something quite distinct from history. It is more accurate to call his product a “heritage film.” As geographer David Lowenthal has recently argued, heritage depictions of the past should not be confused with history. History aims to “explain through critical inquiry,” while heritage proposes “to celebrate and congratulate.” Lowenthal argues that “a prime function of heritage is to sustain traditional perspectives in the face of each generation’s autonomy and unlikeness. So we conflate as we create, keeping menacing breaches at bay by making the new seem old and the old feel new.”⁸

The heritage championed by this Lewis and Clark film is triumphal. There are few hints and no

pointed discussion of the negative consequences of the expedition. In on-screen commentator William Least Heat Moon’s words, the expedition’s efforts “were the sinews that bound the two oceans together. . . . [T]hey discovered that America was even more than Thomas Jefferson dreamed that it could be.” Of course that is true, but we also know that Lewis and Clark discovered parts of the American promise that incorporated some of the nightmares of Jefferson and his generation, such as native resistance to the American intrusion into their world and the potential for violence. Lewis’s railings against Indians at Fort Clatsop, for example, merit no mention, even though it is clear that tension between the Corps and Native Americans reached an apex in that episode. Instead, the “dark” side of the story is primarily represented in the film by Lewis’s suicide, partly because his heroic stature is a prime focus in the film, and partly because there is not time in the four-hour presentation to

8. David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York, 1996), 168, 172.

9. Burns Forum, “What Happened to Sacagawea?” (<http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/living/4.html>).

10. “Remarks by President Clinton at ‘Lewis and Clark’ screening, November 10.” In U.S. Newswire (via Comtex), November 11, 1997, Infonautics Corporation.

address larger and more grave outcomes. James Ronda's response to the website query about Sacagawea's fate comes closest to peering into the unsettling aftermath. Sacagawea, Ronda tells us, became "an orphan in a world made by the expedition. A woman alone, a woman wearing the cast off clothes of others."⁹

The images of Sacagawea wandering in an alien world and the destruction of the world she left in the company of Lewis and Clark are not in keeping with the triumph of American derring-do, military teamwork, and the binding of a nation from ocean to ocean. The highlighted election at the mouth of the Columbia River in 1805 that allowed a black and a woman to participate is more in keeping with the congratulatory mood of the film. And it is true that this interpretation of the Lewis and Clark Expedition is in keeping with this

nation's self-congratulatory mood since the conclusion of the Cold War, which many proclaim as an American victory resulting from perseverance, ingenuity, and teamwork. President Clinton reflected on the film's appropriateness for the post-Cold War world in comments he made during a special viewing of Burns's film at the White House in November 1997: "Lewis and Clark were America's foremost explorers . . . [T]hey are the forebears of those who have given us the recent Mars expedition, those who are now building the international space station, those who are hunting for the mysteries of the human genome, those who are looking for answers to the challenge of global climate change."¹⁰

Lewis and Clark connect directly to America's success in this century, the "American Century." Heritage films purposefully make

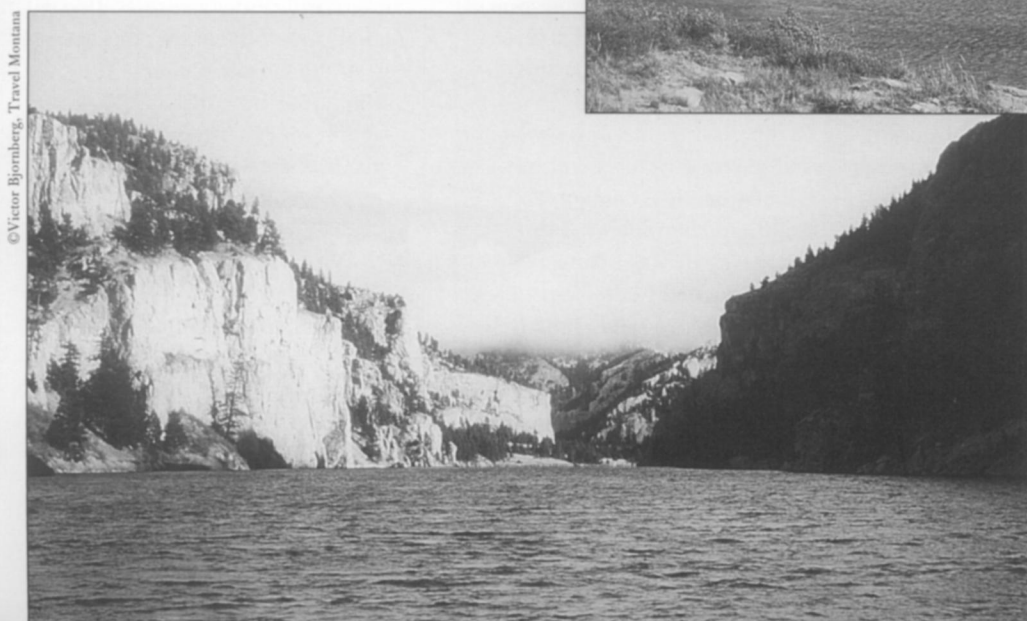
connections between those virtues in the present with their counterparts in the past. By keeping the past alive in this manner, the heritage perspective provides an easy access to a distant past while it delivers its message. Historians can critique this effort, but they should remember it is not history they are criticizing, it is heritage. It is also demonstrably true that Ken Burns is forthrightly addressing a visible void in our culture's appreciation of the past. This film reminds all that reflection on our past is essential to a healthy community. *M*

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Burns's documentary is the first of what will be a number of heritage events and observances connected with the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition and its passage through such places as the Gates of the Mountains north of Helena (below). Another will be the opening of the National Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center (right, 1997). Located on the south bank of the Missouri River near Great Falls, Montana (in background, right), the center is to be dedicated on July 3-4, 1998.



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