

## **Undaunted Courage by Stephen Ambrose \***

**by Rev. Joe Dirt - Thursday, January 30, 2020**

<http://www.curmudgeon-alley.com/undaunted-courage-by-stephen-ambrose/>

In many ways I wish I had not read this book.

Don't get me wrong, as always with Ambrose, it is a wonderfully written and researched book. I have always had a minor interest in the Lewis and Clark expedition. I have a vague recollection of reading a book about the expedition aimed at young readers when I was an early teen. Having moved to St. Louis a few years ago this interest has grown. It is hard to move around this area without being reminded that the expedition started and ended here. When I ride my bicycle across the Missouri River into St. Charles I pass a historic marker commemorating Lewis and Clark. The markers are all along the Katy Trail which in many places runs close to the Missouri River.

A few years I obtained an older book on the Lewis and Clark expedition. It touched on all the key points of the trip, but was not the deep dive into the journals and other historic documents like the Ambrose book. I came away from that book with the feeling that Clark was the real leader of the expedition, they sure did eat a lot of dog meat on their trip, and luck had a huge role in their success.

*Why did I have a vague regret about reading Ambrose's book?*

In many ways I have lost two more heroes. Obviously what Lewis and Clark did was an extraordinary feat and very important in opening the west. The trip was important in eventually creating a United States that went from the Atlantic to the Pacific. However, both men had feet of clay, Lewis much more so than Clark. It is a bit of magical thinking, but I sometimes feel people are put into this existence to accomplish a single purpose. Lewis and Clark's purpose was the expedition. Towards the end of their trip, Lewis was accidentally shot in the rump by one of his men. Ambrose's take on this is that it would have been better for Lewis's legacy if he had died from that accident.

*Undaunted Courage* is mostly about Lewis, so I will briefly talk about Clark before moving on. My issue with Clark is his slave, York. York accompanied Clark on the expedition and was an integral part of the Corp of Discovery (the name of Lewis and Clark's command). After they got back, York began to feel that as payment for all he had done for Clark and the country he should be set free. Clark was not of that mind and even threatened to send York to the slave market to be sold if his attitude did not change. I cannot imagine how much more petty and unappreciative a man can be. However, men of his ilk really did not look upon blacks as humans. Clark went on to have a decent life after the expedition overseeing Indian affairs in the Louisiana Territory.

Part of what made the expedition so successful was that Lewis was an extraordinary commander for the Corp of Discovery. His men trusted him and Clark without reservation. While Lewis was not an expert in any field, he was a very good naturalist and observer, having more than a passing knowledge of astronomy, botany, zoology, geology, etc. He was religious about documenting the science in the journals of the expedition. What he was not so good about was daily journaling of the trip. He would go

for long periods and not make any entries even though Thomas Jefferson's orders to Lewis were for him to do so! Clark was responsible for the majority of the daily entries, Lewis for the scientific entries.

They, along with Thomas Jefferson, were men of their times. However, the amount hubris and patronizing attitude towards the American Indians was astonishing.

One thing that did astonish me in reading this account is the amount of sex the members of the Corps of Discovery had with the Native Americans and the amount of STDs contracted by them. There is no record of Lewis and Clark engaging in sex with the Indians, but they did treat their men for syphilis and probably gonorrhea. Apparently it was an Indian belief that by sharing a woman, a warrior could gain the power of another, more powerful man???

As an aside, I got curious about STDs and the New World. Apparently, Columbus brought syphilis back to Europe from his little expedition. And I always think of our ancestors as being so prim and proper!

Much of the success of the expedition can be attributed to Sacajawea, and other Indians. If they had only known what was to come? The Indians were looking for white trade goods and medicine, little realizing what it would eventually cost them.

Ambrose theorizes that Meriwether Lewis suffered from maniac depression. Jefferson knew this to be true and an inherited family trait. Lewis was also an alcoholic who only got worse as life after the expedition got worse. Ambrose feels that the lapses in journaling were a combination of depression and alcohol withdrawal. The expedition started out with whiskey that was gone fairly quickly into the trip.

Things really started to go south for Lewis when the trip was completed. And in some ways I put much of the blame on Thomas Jefferson. Both Lewis and Clark, but especially Lewis, were the Charles Lindbergh of their time. They were much sought after and feted. This fame and adoration were unsettling to Lewis, and all the feting did not help his issue with alcohol.

One thing that Lewis did that Jefferson could have stopped pertained to the journals of the expedition. Lewis was determined to monetize them. He saw the journals as his private property. His intentions were to publish them privately and reap the profit. First, there is a strong argument they were government property. Jefferson should have taken control of the journals and had the government publish them. Lewis started the process for private publication, but inexplicably did not carry through.

After Lewis's death Clark was more proactive and a limited version was printed in 1814. It did not include much in regards to the scientific discoveries of the expedition. That would wait another 90 years until a more complete version was published in 1904. Since then much scholarly work has been done on the journals. Many of Lewis's first discoveries were attributed to others due to the lack of publication.

Another huge mistake of Jefferson was to appoint Lewis governor of the Louisiana Territory, a position for which Lewis was totally unsuited. Jefferson thought he was doing a service by placing him there. Both men would have been better served if Lewis had been placed in a position with less politics and authority that would have given him more time to work on the journals. We will never know.

It amazes me on the lack of follow through on the part of Thomas Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis after

the expedition. It was as if Armstrong and Aldrin had locked up their moon rocks in a closet and forgot about them.

Rushing to the end, Lewis ran into many political problems as governor. He accrued much debt, partly the fault of the War Department, and partly due to his own speculations. As his problems grew so did his drinking. He decided to leave St. Louis and go to Washington to deal with some of the issues pertaining to his debt. He tried once or twice to commit suicide on the river boat to Memphis. He was detained there briefly over concern for his mental health, but then permitted to go on. He would later successfully commit suicide in a cabin he was lodging in. It apparently took two gun shots and self afflicted wounds with a knife to do the deed.

There is some speculation he was murdered, but Ambrose dismisses this. He thinks if murder had been suspected Jefferson and Clark would have been up in arms. There is also some speculation that his mental problems were due to syphilis, but no concrete evidence.

I suppose another way to look at Lewis is how much he accomplished with the demons that he had. But then on the trip, for the most part, the demons were at bay. Whiskey was not to be had, and occupation is a wonderful antidote to depression. We humans are such a strange mixture of the sublime and the ignoble.

In my magical universe Lewis would have been transported from this realm not too soon after the completion of his trip. In my own personal magical universe, I am going to remember the man who arrived out the wilderness in St. Louis in September 1806.

Available at Amazon: [\*Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West\*](#)

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\* Although I categorized these articles about books under the rubric of Books Reviews, they are really just my ramblings about a book I have recently read that impressed one way or another. It is a way for me to digest what I just read. That I share them on the web, is my little hubris.

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