The Unknown Travels and Dubious Pursuits of William Clark

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a certain inevitability. For example, in concluding a section on the 1825
treaty of Prairie du Chien, Saler writes that “the conclusion of this treaty
in mid-August 1825 suggested the degree to which Wisconsin Indian
bands met federal authorities on unequal ground, conforming to Euro-
American notions of territoriality and of their (Indian) subject nation-
hood” (107). Indian nations are, in this interpretation, already on a losing
footing. This sits oddly with the fact that a large number of Native
nations completely ignored the boundaries set by the treaty after it was
signed. Happily, much greater Native agency can be found in Saler’s
chapter on mission work in the region, where the author details the mis-
sionaries’ generally losing efforts to convert Native people to the Chris-
tian faith.

*The Settlers’ Empire* is an engaging text that paints a vibrant picture
of the Midwest’s past as many settler-colonist Americans understood it.
I recommend it for enthusiasts of federal policy and those with an interest
in midwestern history and for purchase by university libraries.

*The Unknown Travels and Dubious Pursuits of William Clark*, by Jo Ann
trations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. $36.95 hardcover.

Reviewer W. Raymond Wood is professor emeritus of anthropology at the Uni-
versity of Missouri, Columbia. His most recent book (with Robert M. Lindholm)
is *Karl Bodmer’s America Revisited: Landscape Views Across Time* (2013).

William Clark’s role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Meriwether
Lewis renders him one of the iconic figures of nineteenth-century
America. The bicentennial of that expedition resulted in a number of
books detailing his life and his accomplishments in government service.
But documents continue to turn up that illuminate his life; one of the
most important is the journal that he kept (1798–1801) on a flatboat jour-
ney from his home in Louisville, Kentucky, to New Orleans. The journal
also contained a map showing many details of features along the Mis-
sissippi. The document, housed in the State Historical Society of Missouri
in Columbia, was virtually overlooked after it arrived there in 1928 until

Clark left Louisville on March 9, 1798, his two flatboats containing
cargoes of tobacco, furs, and salted pork. Having left the army, and hoping
to begin a profitable business, he would sell the cargoes in New Orleans,
which was then in Spanish Louisiana. Trogdon poses several interesting
questions about Clark’s activities at his destination. Those questions re-
volve around whether he was somehow involved with what became
known as the Spanish Conspiracy. The term refers to efforts by Spanish
officials in New Orleans to detach Kentucky and nearby territory from
the United States and to create a buffer state between the United States
and Spanish Louisiana. Spanish sources even secretly paid U.S. Army
General James Wilkinson (known to the Spanish as Agent 13) to act trai-
torously on its behalf in the scheme; Wilkinson even secretly shifted his
allegiance from the United States to the king of Spain.

No fewer than 22 other individuals were involved in this seditious
project, most of them well known to Clark. Prominent among them
were Benjamin Sebastian (a family friend), Daniel Clark Jr. (no relation),
Andrew Ellicott, John McKee, and Stephen Minor, all of whom knew
about the conspiracy, and whom William met in New Orleans. Although
the journal contains many details of the trip downriver, once Clark ar-
rived in New Orleans its entries diminish; indeed, Clark records that
“nothing extraordinary happened” between his arrival and his depa-
ture in August. But details regarding this period of Clark’s life are pre-
served in Spanish documents, records that Trogdon has mined to offer
a series of conjectures about what took place there in Clark’s contacts
with the conspirators. They record, however, only his commercial ac-
tivities while he was in the city.

Was Clark acting, knowingly or not, as an agent for his friend Gen-
eral Wilkinson? The information that Clark inscribed on his map would
have been immensely useful in Wilkinson’s schemes. Clark’s return
home was delayed by his return upriver to Natchez, where he smuggled
a secret Spanish payoff of 670 Spanish dollars to an unnamed corrupt
American official (surely General Wilkinson) by illegally transporting
those Spanish coins across the U.S. border. What did he know of this
transaction?

Returning to New Orleans, Clark turned for home by sea, taking
passage on the schooner Star, arriving in New Castle, Delaware, after
sailing around Florida and up the East Coast, suffering from malaria en
route. He continued on by land to Virginia and then returned to Louis-
ville by way of the Ohio River, reaching home on Christmas Eve.

Trogdon continues her narrative of Clark’s life, including the trip he
made to Washington in 1801, recorded in later entries in his Mississippi
journal. There he met President Jefferson’s secretary, Meriwether Lewis
(his old subordinate in the army), and likely told him of his Mississippi
River experiences, perhaps thereby paving the way for Lewis to choose
him as his second-in-command on the Corps of Discovery.

Trogdon’s narrative of William Clark’s travels demonstrates how
important it is to consult alternate sources in presenting a story. Her
account is enriched by her careful and cautious analysis and interpreta-
tion of those primary documents. She has successfully woven diverse
sources into a comprehensive account of some of the dangers that faced the newly formed United States at that time, an account that casts new light on the life of one of America’s most famous figures between late 1797 and 1803. The voyage down the Mississippi helped shape the river experiences and skills that Clark put to such good use on what he would call his “western travels” — the Lewis and Clark Expedition.


Reviewer Norman Fry is a retired Southeastern Community College American history instructor with a longstanding interest in life in Iowa’s small towns and along the Mississippi River.

Brown Water is Butch Bouvier’s personal narrative of his boat journey along the route taken by Lewis and Clark on the Missouri River. Bouvier describes himself as a “hands on” historian with a passion for living history, and his goal is not only to take the journey but to recreate the boats used by early river explorers. The narrative of Brown Water is composed of three parts. The first is Bouvier’s own narrative describing the boat building and the journey. The second narrative, written in journals given to the crew by the author, offers the volunteer crew’s perspective on the river journey. The third narrative includes “Knowledge Nooks,” short explanatory inserts that illustrate the history and techniques of boat building.

Rather than a standard history, Brown Water is a modern boatwright’s account of the building of traditional riverboats. Bouvier gives abundant details on the selection of wood for boat construction, the construction process, and the navigation by shallow draft keelboats and pirogues. Readers interested in riverboat architecture will find Bouvier’s book an informative read. Readers fascinated by a personal adventure story, one that relates that adventure to the history of early Iowa and the perils of navigating the Missouri River, will find Brown Water a raconteur’s delight.


Reviewer Patrick Nunnally is editor of Open Rivers: Rethinking the Mississippi, a digital journal published by the University of Minnesota.