

Seeing “Kentuckily”: William Clark’s Literary Legacy

by Paula Kopacz

William Clark is one of Kentucky’s overlooked treasures. Perhaps he would gain more attention in this day of budget shortages if we looked at his potential as a tourist draw for Kentucky. Indeed, as a tourist is how I first encountered Clark’s work—but it was not in Kentucky. On a trip to St. Louis, I saw the landmark arch designating St. Louis as the “Gateway to the West.” According to placards in the museum at the foot of the arch, a major justification for that moniker was the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803. While it is true that St. Louis was the last supply depot for adventurers and traders heading west in the early part of the nineteenth century, we Kentuckians can loudly contest St. Louis’s claim to be the departure point for the famous epic journey.

In fact, several cities and states can claim this honor. Pennsylvania is a strong contender. Soon after he was tapped by Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, commander of the expedition, went to Harper’s Ferry to collect weapons from the arsenal (April 1803). Harper’s Ferry was the first source of materials needed for the expedition; in addition to guns and pipe tomahawks, Lewis picked up fish gigs, knives, and other supplies there. The most important contribution from Harper’s Ferry, however, was construction of an iron frame for a boat. While he was overlooking this construction Lewis was also studying under learned men specifically selected by Jefferson to prepare Lewis for the expedition. Inasmuch as both the intellectual and material beginning took place at Harper’s Ferry, it could be considered the point of origin for the famous journey west.

Returning briefly to Washington to firm up instructions for the expedition and talk once more with Jefferson, both men realized Lewis needed another officer. On June 19, 1803, Lewis wrote to Clark asking him to co-command the expedition, “one of the most famous invitations to greatness the nation’s archives can provide” (qtd. in Ambrose, 97). Given that this request began possibly the most illustrious partnership of all time, perhaps Washington should be considered the departure point of the expedition: the expedition began as a dream in President Jefferson’s eye, and the project was shaped and funded by the U.S. government in June of 1803. William Clark’s acceptance of Lewis’s invitation several weeks later (the delay caused by slow mail rather than personal reservations) cemented the leadership team and pulled in the Kentucky frontiersman expertise and leadership experience that Lewis knew would be essential for the expedition.

Another major contending departure city is Pittsburgh, where Lewis went in July of 1803 to receive the keelboat he had ordered. The boatmaker was behind schedule, but the delay gave time for the supplies to arrive from Harper’s Ferry and for Clark and Lewis to agree by letter that they should be judicious in their tentative selection of men for the expedition. As it turned out, the keelboat wasn’t ready until August 31, unfortunately late as the Ohio River, which Lewis would use to navigate to the meeting point with Clark, was extremely low, making travel difficult for the keelboat loaded with supplies. But depart from Pittsburgh he did, and given the significance of boats on the journey, Pittsburgh, too, might claim prominence as the departure point.

Fortunately, Lewis did manage to travel to the Falls of the Ohio, and here, in Louisville, Kentucky, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark came together for the first time. Here they forged their famous team, working together to plan and prepare for the great epic journey that lay ahead. Here in Louisville they mutually selected their crew from the candidates they had been recruiting and gathering along their individual journeys thus far. Lewis had wanted Clark as co-commander for many reasons, but one was that he admired Clark’s frontier expertise: his ability to hunt and survive in the wilderness, his physical stamina, his steady emotional keel. Lewis trusted Clark’s judgment of men, and he knew that Clark would recruit young Kentuckians with similar solid skills and steady habits. So it proved with the “nine young men from Kentucke”—a critical mass of the Permanent Party whose wilderness savvy and various survival skills were necessary for the success of the Expedition. The sundry individuals destined for adventure departed on October 26, 1803, from Louisville, for the first time as a group, on the first leg of the journey. Thus, it was in Kentucky, not Missouri, that the Corps of Discovery, including both the famous leadership team and the party, was born and began to shape itself into a unit, as they headed off for the first winter at Camp Dubois, located in the vicinity of the current city of Hartford, Illinois, near the mouth of the Missouri River, a site selected not by Lewis but by Clark for the winter as a place to observe, test, and cull the men who would ultimately be selected for the Permanent Party. Thus, because of geography and manpower, Kentucky more than any other place should be recognized as the geographical and human source of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

But I claim more for Kentucky in connection with the Lewis and Clark journey. As students of American literary history, we should note that William Clark’s journals put Kentucky on the literary map. To be sure, Clark was not the first Kentucky writer. Inasmuch as Virginia included some of present-day Kentucky, perhaps Thomas Jefferson was the first to write about Kentucky in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* published in English in 1787,¹ albeit his focus was on Virginia east of the mountains. Before Jefferson, John Filson saw Kentucky as a distinct entity even before statehood. In *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* Filson writes, “This country is more temperate and healthy than the other settled parts of America.” Distinguishing it specifically from Jefferson’s Virginia he continues, “In summer it has not the sandy heats which Virginia and Carolina experience . . .” (12). William Clark was a young teenager when Filson’s book was published in 1784; Clark’s education was minimal; in fact, in that same year when his family moved to Kentucky, Clark’s opportunity for any formal education was over. Nevertheless, in fewer than twenty years he would begin to write the *Journals* of the expedition to find a water passage from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, the annals of the Corps of Discovery. This overlooked literary achievement bridges American literary creativity between the religiously driven work of New England colonists in the 1600s and the traditionally recognized American creative genius of the mid-nineteenth century. Lodged between the British Enlightenment period and the American Romantic “flowering,” to use Mathiesson’s

word, Clark's *Journals* show American writing independent of Europe long before Emerson lamented in his 1844 essay "The Poet":

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. [. . .] Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, [. . .] our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination

Clark was first to see the full scale of America's "ample geography" and to write in detail about it. Clark's descriptions of nature have sometimes been characterized as pedestrian or tedious;² yet he anticipates the celebrated catalogues that appear in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. In his 1855 *Preface* Whitman wrote, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." Clark would no doubt agree. Clark's careful observation and objective details share Whitman's appreciation for literary transparency. Like Huck Finn, another uneducated American loner, William Clark was an intelligent man and a strong observer whose very status as an outsider to the land he was exploring gave him special insight. He was effective also because, with the exception of a few fur traders they met early on in the Expedition, he knew the Party constituted the first white men to see the American West, and the first to attempt a record. Similarly, he was amused by the response of Indians to his black slave, York, the first black man many of the Indians had seen. Constantly reminded of the novelty of his experiences by his encounters with the Indians, vegetation, and animal life, Clark extended this attitude of discovery to the new land he so carefully mapped.

What William Clark saw on the Expedition was a pristine land, rugged terrain, swift waterways, new people, new animals, and strong weather. The enormous tract of land that had just become "America," thanks to Jefferson's fortuitous purchase of the Louisiana Territory, immediately through the achievement of William Clark became transformed into American *Literature* in the fullest sense of the word. The literary achievement of the *Journals* is their creative bridging between the writings of the New England Puritans while America was still subject to British rule and intellectual influence on the one side, and the writing of the American Romantics when America was deliberately calling for a nationalistic literature on the other. The *Journals* could not have been written anywhere else but in America, and *by* anyone else but an American, a Kentucky American.

Clark's description of nature presents a new literary form. In "Wilderness Aesthetics," Frank Bergon situates the *Journals* in the tradition of American nature writing that for Bergon finds its most interesting expression in the work of the later writers Henry David Thoreau and John Burroughs. Clark's writing reminds us, however, that the tradition of nature writing in America goes much further back historically. Clark was probably as much influenced by his predecessors as he influenced those who followed him. In 1719 Jonathan Edwards wrote a careful study of how spiders' webs enable locomotion for the spider. He even includes a simple diagram to show how the spider lets itself down from a twig, then draws out a length of web which, being lighter than air, floats upward and may catch on another twig or leaf, which the spider then uses to move to the next twig, and so on. Repeatedly, being a young man of the Enlightenment, Edwards advises his reader to observe the phenomenon for himself:

And, although I say I am certain of it, I don't desire that the truth of it should be received upon my word; though I could bring others to testify to it, to whom I have shown it, and who have looked on, with admiration, to see their manner of working. But every one's eyes, that will take the pains to observe, will make them as sure of it. ("Of Insects" 35)

Careful observation and precise description of natural phenomena are the hallmark of Edwards’ scientific writings. Still, his nature writing is filled with a sense of the “mystery” of nature’s events and nature’s creatures. The spider’s method is “wondrous”; Edwards has “happily” seen the phenomenon (“Of Insects” 32). We see here a man who was like earlier Puritans in his authentic and unfiltered appreciation of nature, his curiosity seeing its new world newness for what it is, in its earthly beauty. Science and spirit are not separate for Edwards and earlier Puritans; as nature is the work of God, it “instruct[s] intelligent beings in things pertaining to Himself” (*Images* 250). In this view, “The book of Scripture is [merely] the interpreter of the book of nature” (*Images* 251). Even the figure of that famous Kentucky frontiersman, Daniel Boone, is associated by John Filson with a strong sense of “curiosity” about the wonders of nature. As Filson writes in his “autobiography” of Daniel Boone, “Curiosity is natural to the soul of man.” Edwards’ careful description shows he is mesmerized by the process he describes, and the wonders of natural history, or natural theology, to use the term associated with the great divine Cotton Mather, have captivated Americans since their arrival in the 1600s; have persisted in Kentucky Literature, characterized as it is by a pervasive love of the land; have been depicted in Kentucky’s legendary heroes such as Daniel Boone; and have been carried into the American West by William Clark.

Clark’s curiosity about the natural world must have been mightily stirred to agree to the undertaking proposed by Lewis. His curiosity is duly manifest in his *Journals* through all his measuring and calculating, and especially in creating the maps that he made of the new, uncharted land. The *Journals* are filled with his detailed recordings of longitude and latitude—sometimes interlinear in his prose, sometimes listed separately in table form. As Bergon notes in “Wilderness Aesthetics,” it is a “commonplace” of Lewis and Clark criticism to characterize Clark’s work as “laconic, measured, and scientifically objective.” Although Bergon takes issue with the extremes of characterization critics note in forging a contrast between Lewis and Clark, he nevertheless agrees that Clark is “more terse, objective, and direct” than Lewis (149). The seriousness of Clark’s scientific enterprise cannot be denied, for like Thoreau later, Clark kept field notes and then would transpose, copy, and rewrite these notes for the *Journal*.³ When Thoreau wrote *Walden*—and in the many rewritings of *Walden*, he dispensed with his precise measurements and detailed observations from his *Journal*, but those details were the origin of *Walden*. Although today’s reader might easily wish Clark, too, had omitted many of his details, Clark considered the measurements and his maps the most important aspect of his responsibility to the Corps of Discovery, and necessary to report back to Jefferson from his travels. The scientific and ethnographic information that he carefully recorded, he believed more important than his reflection on it.

Among the kinds of information Clark routinely records in addition to geographical details and the measurements needed for mapping is the weather. Clark’s entries often begin with some comment on the weather: “Sunday [March] 25th [1804] a fair morning” (Vol. 2:181); “July the 28th, Saturday 1804 Set out this morning early, the wind from the N W. By N. A Dark Smokey morning Some rain” (Vol. 2:424); “December 16th Monday 1805 rained all the last night” (Vol. 6:126). The weather on that day like many days in Fort Clatsop merited further description: “The winds violent Trees falling in every derection, whorl winds, with gusts of rain Hail & Thunder, this kind of weather lasted all day, Certainly one of the worst days that ever was!” Weather is worth recording not only for its own sake (the Weather Channel today now deems weather worthy of special programming—how weather changed history, for example,

or the history of weather), but obviously because it had such enormous impact on the group of explorers whose very survival was largely dependent on its power and its whims. In this light, the *Journals* make a contribution to weather literature as today's scientists attempt to determine the degree of climate change over the last couple hundred years and assess the adaptations and accommodations made by both plant and animal growth. Clark's attention to weather issues, while a constant in his *Journals*, needless to say vacillated as it impacted to different degrees the physical progress of the Expedition and the comfort of members of the Corps.

But even his recording of the weather shows that Clark was not a mere reporter of dry details, but a man who was intrigued by and often reflected—admittedly sometimes briefly—on the “scientific” details he was finding. Frequently he was struck with the beauty of the new land he was seeing: as he was on the fourth of July in 1804, in Kansas. He comments on the plain on which they camped, “one of the most butifull Plains, I ever Saw, open & butifully diversified with hills & vallies all presenting themselves to the river covered with grass and a few scattering trees” (Vol. 2: 346). Noting the abundance of fruits and nuts along the Nebraska/ South Dakota border, he writes: “the Prairies Contain Cheres, Apple, Grapes, Currents, Rasp burry, Gooseberris Hastlenuts and a great Variety of Plants and flours not Common to the U.S.” He concludes, “What a field for a Botents [botanist] and a natirless [naturalist]” (Vol 2: 433).

In a separate paragraph, which Moulton takes from the Field Notes, Clark elaborates on the land before him:

The Plains of this country are covered with a Leek Green Grass, well calculated for the sweetest and most norushing hay—interspersed with Cops [copses] of trees, Spreding ther lofty branches over Pools Springs or Brooks of fine water. Groops of Shrubs covered with the most delicious froot is to be seen in every direction, and nature appears to have exerted herself to butify the senery by the variety of flours, raiseing. Delicately and highly flavered raised above the Grass, which Strikes & profumes the Sensation, and amuses the mind throws it into Conjecterng the cause of So magnificent a Senerey [several words illegible, crossed out] in a Country thus Situated far removed from the Sivilised world to be enjoyed by nothing but the Buffalo Elk Deer & Bear in which it abounds & [page torn] Savage Indians. (Vol. 2: 346-47)

The passage is remarkable for what it reveals about Clark's thinking about nature when not consumed with survival issues. The wilderness is not moral space, as it is with early Puritans. Instead, Clark richly experiences the visual and olfactory beauty of the new land. The passage is laced with sensuous adjectives—the “sweetest” hay, the “most delicious” fruit, the perfumes of the flowers. His use of adjectives of taste and smell in particular recall Edwards's sense of the divine, specifically his repeated use of the sensuous adjective “sweet” to describe his experience of God: “And as I was walking there, and looking upon the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious *majesty* and *grace* of God . . .” (*Personal Narrative* 84). Similar, too, is Clark's acknowledgment that apprehending the beauty of the plains initiates reflection on its ultimate source (it “throws” the mind “into Conjecterng the cause of So Magnificent a Senerey”) since it clearly did not come from the white man's civilization. From this passage in 1804 it is not so far a leap back in time to Cotton Mather's *Christian Philosopher; A Collection of the Best Discoveries in Nature, with Religious Improvement* (1720) or ahead to the transcendentalism of Emerson's “Nature” in 1836.

Moulton's decision to reproduce Clark's spelling and punctuation irregularities and inconsistencies no doubt distracts the contemporary reader. While it is true that Clark

was not well educated in a formal sense, his varied spellings and lack of punctuation would have been far better received in the early nineteenth century than today, since the standardization prompted by Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book* (1788) was not yet realized throughout the republic and certainly not in the wilderness of the Louisiana Purchase or the Kentucky frontier. As Lawrence Davis, Charles Houck, and Clive Upton affirm, “the image historians get from Clark’s spelling is one of a country bumpkin, despite his extraordinary ability to lead men, to handle boats of all kinds, and to make maps, celestial and terrestrial observations, and surveys” (138). Until 2000, studies of the language of the *Journals* were largely limited to counts of the alternate spellings and unusual coinages. Davis, Houck, and Upton, objecting to Moulton’s categorization of the nonstandard spellings as “erratic” (qtd. 137), demonstrate the systematic nature of the spellings and the conventions underlying them: eighteenth-century (as opposed to nineteenth-century) spelling conventions, or phonetic and analogic spellings (139). I would suggest, too, that the variant spellings argue Clark’s creativity and ingenuity, and that his spelling reinforces his open-minded approach to the new world he was exploring. If Whitman could feel free half a century later to pull in foreign language words and coin new ones, how much more freedom should be accorded Clark? Surely his spelling variants reflect the novelty of the expedition, the newness of what Clark was doing and seeing and hearing and tasting and smelling every day. The men were giving names to rivers and brooks and landmarks, new species of animals and new plants; certainly the experience of novelty and creativity spilled over when Clark sat down to write in the field or to transpose from the field notes into the *Journals*. Some of Clark’s nonstandard spellings became the American norm as American English differentiated itself from British English,⁴ and so once again Clark’s work bridges American literary culture from the British Puritans to the creativity of the American Renaissance and beyond to the realism at century’s end and the ever-increasing rigidity of linguistic conventions.

Facing unfamiliar Indians, some of whom were reported to be hostile, the literature that Clark must have found most helpful to him in preparing for the expedition were the Indian Captivity Narratives, the best known of which is Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, published in 1682. While not the first captivity narrative by any means, hers can be seen as a representative sample of the blindness to and intolerance of native ways. By the time William Clark was entering Indian territory, relationships were no longer so actively volatile as they were in Rowlandson’s day. Indians and whites traded, and as many Indian tribes had picked the wrong side to support in the Revolutionary War and the French and Indian War, the large scale threat was over. Clark was very aware of the possibility of skirmishes, however, and he was especially cautious when dealing with groups that had not encountered whites before or were known to be hostile. Rowlandson’s description of the Indians who captured her as “murtherous Wretches” (12) and “ravenous Bears” (13) informs Clark’s caution in meeting new Indians. The Expedition hoped to establish peaceful relationships with the Indians, and given the size of the Corps, peace was essential for survival. Mostly they traded and exchanged gifts; they also got much needed geographical and topographical information from those who knew the area. Nevertheless, although their record of positive exchanges is highly laudatory, the *Journals* largely continue the racial prejudice that dominates the genre of captivity narratives, seeing the Indians as “other” to be studied. So how did American literature reach the “noble savage” idea prevalent during the Romantic period? Again we see William Clark and the *Journals* as a transitional stage, for Clark wrote extensively and often with sym-

pathy and admiration about Indian culture and customs. He is clearly taken with the way the Indian nation on the Columbia River preserves and stores fish. He notes the “great numbers of Stacks of pounded Salmon (butifully) neetly preserved,” and after reporting the painstaking method of drying and pounding the fish, he concludes, “thus preserved those fish may be kept Sound and Sweet Several years” (323, 325). Although not yet at the point where he can depict the Indian as a righteous and instinctively noble specimen, as in Lydia Child’s 1824 *Hobomok*, for example, Clark nevertheless bridges the gap between the strong intolerance of the early captivity narrative genre and the exaggerated sympathy of the Romantic period.

The *Journals* are a massive undertaking. I certainly cannot do them justice, as they are an invaluable repository for botany, zoology, cartography, geography, topography, sociology, linguistics, ethnography, psychology, and probably much, much more that I haven’t even yet glimpsed. As a work of literature by a son of Kentucky, they argue the importance of Kentucky in the nineteenth century, not only in politics, but also in American literary tradition. For all his curiosity and openness, Clark’s perspective was nevertheless Kentuckian, and his knowledge of Kentucky flora and fauna often filters his perspective, as when on August 1, 1804, he notes “two Kind of Honeysuckle, the Bush which I have Seen in Kentucky, with a paile Pink flower, also one which grow in Clusters about 4 or 5 feet high bearing a Short flour in clusters of the like Colour” (Vol. 2:433). Kentucky provided solid grounding and perspective for the Expedition. Later, Emily Dickinson will assert in “The Robin’s My Criterion for Tune” that she sees “New Englandly,” further reminding us, “The Queen, discerns like me — / Provincially—.” Clark was invited to share command of the Lewis & Clark Expedition precisely because of his Kentucky expertise and his ability to see “Kentuckily.” Removed by space and time from European literary conventions, Clark’s *Journals* suggest the emerging American literary tradition arose not from nothing or in opposition to British tradition, but from authentic confrontation with the new western land mass. As such, they make understandable the way the past affects the present which again determines the future. Not only the field of Kentucky literature but also American literature should acknowledge the claim of the *Journals*. The legacy is strong. Now we just need the Tourism Department in Frankfort to realize the great opportunity it has in promoting the literary legacy of William Clark.

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Endnotes

1. Jefferson cites the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as the western border of Virginia.
2. Bergon reports that the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* finds the journals “cluttered with tedious detail” (142).
3. The story of the creation of the *Journals* has its own fascinating history—the newest edition, from the University of Nebraska, includes selections from Lewis, Clark, Gass, and Ordway, sometimes more than one draft or more than one author on a single event or period. Sometimes early drafts are selected in preference to drafts more carefully constructed for the *Journals*. Editors Elliot Coues, Nicholas Biddle, and Reuben Gold Thwaites have all influenced preparation of this latest edition.
4. Davis, Houck, and Upton note “gray (American)/grey (British),” “analyze (American)/analyse (British)” as some examples (139).