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Jefferson's Third Library: Lewis & Clark and More

Thomas Jefferson's interest in what we now call "science," or by him natural history or natural philosophy, is in no better way illustrated than by his founding part in the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803-06. He was the driving force behind this exploration of largely unknown western lands [to European settlers in the east of North America]. The President assured that the exploration would be scientifically based and properly documented.

He assured that Meriwether Lewis was a trained observer and preserver of plant specimens and live animals, making certain that these were transported back to the east for others to eye with wonder and study. This was not the usual sightseeing or commercially motivated trip. It was a scientific expedition first and foremost, at least and especially for Mr. Jefferson. The wonderful story has been told in many books since Jefferson's time, from various points of vantage, all available at WLN libraries or through Access PA. For the modern point of view:

(1) Stephen E. Ambrose, "Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West," Simon & Schuster, New York (1996).

And if you want to be with the day-to-day voyagers "in person," getting the raw feel of it on land and rivers, then you want to read the journals in three volumes, which exist thanks to Jefferson's attention to all details. That source is:

(2) Elliot Coues, ed., "The History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark," Dover Publications, (1979 unabridged reprint of four-volume Coues edition of 1893).

If you want to know about Benjamin Rush's widely accepted and wrong medicine of the times and how it was that, still, only one Corps of Discovery voyager died, then you have:

(3) E.G. Chuinard, "Only One Man Died: the Medical Aspects of the Lewis and Clark Expedition," Ye Galleon Press, Fairfield, Washington (1999).

Imagine yourself a risen Thomas Jefferson reading these books today about what he did then, wondering: how did I affect the science to come after my own time, and how did this white man's incursion into Native American lands play out? We know: great and not so great, respectively. But he doesn't know, so he buys more of the mostly classics of today, including those below, for a third time building a personal collection.

(4) Francis Parkman, "The Oregon Trail/The Conspiracy of Pontiac," The Library of America, New York (1991).

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(5) Gerald L. Geison, "The Private Science of Louis Pasteur," Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. (1995).

(6) Jennifer A. Doudna and Samuel H. Sternberg, "A Crack in Creation: Gene Editing and the Unthinkable Power to Control Evolution," Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York (2017).

(7) Horace Freeland Judson, "The Eighth Day of Creation: The Makers of the Revolution in Biology," Simon and Schuster, New York (1979).

(8) Brenda Maddox, "Rosalind Franklin: The Dark Lady of DNA," HarperCollins, New York (2002).

Does he really buy them? Oh no! Too expensive for a man always mired in debt. This time he gets a Magic Library Card!, because public libraries abound in our time.

Stay tuned; there will be more related to Mr. Jefferson's libraries. It is our American story, for good and bad.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation