EPISODE 111: THE JOURNALS OF LEWIS AND CLARK — AN AMERICAN EPIC?

Peter Coyote: Welcome to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition” from PRI, Public Radio International. I’m Peter Coyote. In this hour, the journals of Lewis and Clark as a literary masterpiece:

Dayton Duncan: It is our Odyssey. It is our great American epic. It is a true story but in it can be found lessons that you can draw from it.

Peter Coyote: Join me as we look at this saga of discovery through the lens of literature after the day’s news.

(Optional cutaway for News)

Allison Frost: Welcome to this edition of the Latest Tidings, produced in cooperation with the Daily National Intelligencer. In 1814, celebrating 14 years as America’s Newspaper. I’m Allison Frost. For the last 8 years the American people have been waiting for the official account of the 28-month long journey made by the Corps of Discovery across the Western territory. That daring exploration was led by Governor Meriwether Lewis and General William Clark. Governor Lewis died unexpectedly just a few years after the expedition ended and the job of compiling the official record fell to General Clark. He now serves as Governor of the Louisiana Territory, a post Meriwether Lewis held before he died. Governor Clark spoke with us earlier about the two volumes that have just been put forth by Bradford & Inskeep. I congratulated him on his recent gubernatorial appointment and on the publishing of his History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark.

William Clark: Thank you. I have not much reason to complain of my success or prospects. They are as flattering as I expected and not more.

Allison Frost: Governor Clark did not expect to oversee the publishing of the journals, as former President Jefferson charged the late Governor Lewis with that task. I asked Governor Clark how much progress his colleague had made on the volumes before his death.

William Clark: Firstly, as I told you once before, I do not believe there was a more honest man in
Louisiana nor one with purer motives than Governor Lewis. But I do confess, when he, parted this world, I did not know what I should do about the publication of the book. I was unable to find any notes or preparations for it whatsoever. Governor Lewis’s neglecting to write our journal has given me a great deal of trouble and expense.

Allison Frost: Governor Clark says he first had to choose an editor to compile the book. Mr. Paul Allen’s name is on the published history, but in fact it was Allen’s associate, Mr. Nicholas Biddle who the Governor says did most of the work. Mr. Biddle is a well-known man of letters whose work at the illustrious Port Folio literary magazine is highly regarded. Governor Clark says he was very impressed with Mr. Biddle’s dedication to the project:

William Clark: In addition to pouring over all our journals and notes, Mr. Biddle also interviewed me for some weeks. He was quite thorough and pressed me for some details that in fact neither I, nor Governor Lewis had set down.

Allison Frost: Such as?

William Clark: Oh, some stories of no great matter, one concerning the Indians’ particular curiosity of my slave York. One Hidatsa chief spat on his finger and tried to wipe off his dark color to see if he was in fact a white man. (chuckles) After these interviews when time no longer allowed, I also arranged for one of the members of the expedition to be at Mr. Biddle’s disposal, if he should need any reference about the journey, young private George Shannon from Kentucky. In fact, there is a Shannon’s Creek we named on our journey homeward.

Allison Frost: Governor Clark says that Creek is one of many features that appears on the map that he drew of their journey. That map accompanies the History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark. The history is published by Bradford & Inskeep.

Allison Frost: In other news, the citizens of Washington are beginning to move back to the city, after British troops savagely attacked it. Soldiers burned American public buildings including the presidential mansion and the capitol in what has so far been the most brutal strike in the war with Britain that broke out two years ago, in 1812. Correspondent Beth Hyams has our report.

Beth Hyams: Most of the city’s 8,000 residents fled well before troops arrived, as did the militia that that was to protect the city. In addition to the Capitol and the presidential mansion, the British burned the arsenal, the dockyard, the treasury, the war office, and the bridge across the Potomac. President Madison and his wife were among those who escaped, but the President reportedly left the city only a few hours before the attack. The Superintendent of Patents, Dr. William Thornton, is said to have saved his office from destruction, however, somehow convincing the British of the importance of its preservation. Nonetheless, authorities say the widespread burning of the nation’s capital has dragged American morale to new depths as this two-year conflict drags on with no end in sight. I’m Beth Hyams.

Allison Frost: And one final note, the American woman playwright and essayist Mercy Otis Warren has died at the age of 86. She was active in the American Revolution and published several plays and a history of the war in 1805.
And that concludes this edition of the *Latest Tidings*, I’m Allison Frost. Our program is produced in cooperation with the *Daily National Intelligencer*, celebrating 14 years as America’s Newspaper, since 1800.

[Program theme music]

Peter Coyote: We all know that the Lewis and Clark Expedition is America’s great epic journey.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, it was a long journey, and arduous at points. But not everybody would agree that it fits the classical definition of an epic.

[Theme music continues]

Peter Coyote: The Lewis and Clark Expedition left Saint Charles, Missouri on May 14, 1804 and traveled 7,689 miles to the Pacific Ocean and back again. The trip took more than 28 months. The expedition was President Jefferson’s brainchild, commanded by his friend and protégé Meriwether Lewis and his old army friend William Clark. It’s considered the most successful exploration in American history. Today, we explore the Lewis and Clark expedition as American epic with Clay Jenkinson, humanities scholar-in-residence at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Clay, before we embark on our central theme, can you tell us what we mean when we talk about an epic?

Clay Jenkinson: Basically, an epic is a long heroic narrative, often about war or conquest, which somehow embodies the national identity of a people or a tribe. Epics involve struggles to survive, struggles to overcome enemies or geographic obstacles. And at the center of epics we usually find a semi-supernatural hero. Epics involve immense journeys through unknown territory peopled by giants, monsters, or hostile tribes. Usually there are gods or supernatural beings. Epics often feature single combat, love between men and goddesses, genealogies of warriors and physical objects, and often enough a descent into the underworld. The great classical epics are Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the Anglo Saxon poem *Beowulf*, and Milton’s 17th century epic, *Paradise Lost*. Thomas Jefferson knew all of these great poems intimately, and in the original languages, and they were as central to his cultural understanding as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Huck Finn* is to ours.

Peter Coyote: This is all sounding a lot like the Lewis and Clark Expedition. And at least one Lewis and Clark expert does believe the journals qualify as an epic, complete with heroes and a journey to resolve a mystery. Here’s Dayton Duncan, the co-producer of Ken Burns’ documentary on Lewis and Clark.

Dayton Duncan: It is our *Odyssey*. It is our great American epic. It is a true story but in it can be found lessons that you can draw from it that still pertain to us today, and that is the mark of great literature. People still read *The Odyssey* 3,000 years after the fact and find in that stories that are both compelling of what’s going to happen next but at the same time these revelations about human beings and their fallibilities or the potential for greatness and the fickleness of fate, so much there. And the Lewis and Clark Expedition has all of that in its journals for us as Americans.

Peter Coyote: Dayton Duncan makes a persuasive case.

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, but James Ronda, the great Lewis and Clark scholar at the University of Tulsa, is not convinced. He has given his life to Lewis and Clark scholarship, so he understands it’s a great story. But that doesn’t necessarily mean it should be considered an epic in the formal sense. Here’s James
James Ronda: I think it is a leap, a bridge too far to say that these men were forever changed and they forever told this story over and over again. I don't know if this is our Homeric moment. I think perhaps this asks too much of this journey. It freights it with too much moral significance.

Peter Coyote: So we have two differing views on the question of whether this journey fits the classic epic mode. Is there anything in the journals of Lewis and Clark that suggest they thought of themselves in epic terms?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, we have to remember of course that Meriwether Lewis died before he could publish his account of his journey. We don't know what he would have done by way of polishing his field notes into something with an epic voice. What we do know is that the first to publish anything about the expedition was Sergeant Patrick Gass in 1807. He had a ghostwriter to help him, and when the expedition was leaving the Mandan villages in April of 1805, Gass actually adopts the voice of an epic romance to summarize their winter stay with the Mandan.

If this brief journal should happen to be preserved, and be ever thought worthy of appearing in print: some readers will perhaps expect, that, after our long friendly intercourse with these Indians, among whom we have spent the winter; our acquaintance with those nations lower down the river and the information we received relative to several other nations, we ought to be prepared now, when we are about to renew our voyage, to give some account of the fair sex of the Missouri; and entertain them with narratives of feats of love as well as of arms.

Patrick Gass, April 5, 1805

Peter Coyote: Let's go back to basics. What are the essential ingredients of an epic?

Clay Jenkinson: Central to the epic is the hero who inspires in us both admiration and awe. The hero is a larger-than-life figure but not necessarily a completely virtuous one. The epic hero, like Homer's Achilles, is often heroic but flawed. Typically, an epic hero exhibits magnanimity, strength, courage, and mastery of whatever he attempts. These are not far from the qualities that Thomas Jefferson saw in his protégé, Meriwether Lewis:

Of courage undaunted; possessing a firmness and perseverance of purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its direction; careful as a father of those committed to his charge, yet steady in the maintenance of order and discipline... of sound understanding, and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves...

Thomas Jefferson, 1813

Peter Coyote: Thomas Jefferson, writing about Lewis four years after he died, apparently by suicide. In spite of that Jefferson saw in Lewis the qualities of a national hero. Is that how Lewis saw himself?

Clay Jenkinson: At times he did, Peter, yes. The journals occasionally reveal Lewis presenting himself as an epic explorer or at least in the manner of Captain Cook or Columbus. But he also struggled at times with feelings that he was inadequate and insufficiently prepared for the challenges he faced on the trail. Here's his melancholy meditation written in his journal on his 31st birthday:
I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little indeed, to further the happiness of the human race, or to advance the information of the succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now so early feel the want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously expended. But since they are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought and resolved in future, to redouble my exertions and at least in deavours to promote those two primary objects of human existence, by giving them the aid of that portion of talents which nature and fortune have bestoed on me; or in future, to live for mankind as I have heretofore lived for myself.

Meriwether Lewis, August 18th, 1805

Peter Coyote: Lewis sounds like someone who has failed to meet his own expectations. He sounds like he saw himself as a flawed hero, at least in this instance. Did his co-leader on the expedition, Captain Clark, struggle with the same kind of low self-esteem?

Clay Jenkinson: Lewis took himself very seriously and talking about him in terms of heroic epic is not a stretch. William Clark, on the other hand, never casts himself in the heroic light. Clark’s flaws are very human ones. From time to time, he complains in his journal about everything from health problems to being miserably cold and wet.

Peter Coyote: If we’re casting these two men as heroes in the classic mold, with whom would you compare them?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, it’s a bit of a stretch but I would compare Lewis to Achilles from Homer’s Iliad.

Achilles now
Like inhuman fire raging on through the mountain gorges
splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of timber
the wind swirling the huge fireball left and right--
chaos of fire-- Achilles storming on with brandished spear
like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he killed
and the earth ran black with blood. (Fagles translation)

Clay Jenkinson: And if Lewis is Achilles, then Clark might be compared to Odysseus… clever, resourceful, grounded, never at a loss and an adept leader and diplomat:

Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned, aye, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades. [Fagles translation]

Peter Coyote: The gods frequently intervene and sometimes determine the fate of the hero. Could you say that Lewis and Clark were at the mercy of any gods?

Clay Jenkinson: Peter, they were traveling at the height of the Enlightenment. Like Jefferson, they were deists. They saw God as a kind of celestial clockmaker. So this would not seem to be a very fruitful line of epic inquiry. But in a sense, the elements, occupy a kind of supernatural role in the story. Lewis and Clark battled rain, cold, hail and raging rivers on their long journey. Remember, in the Iliad, Achilles
actually goes to war against a river before the walls of Troy. And the grizzly bear was to Lewis and Clark what the monster Cyclops was to Odysseus.

Peter Coyote: The gods must have been fascinated by the possibilities these explorers offered as they traversed the American West.

Clay Jenkinson: Now Thomas Jefferson would be skeptical about divine intervention. But Dayton Duncan imagines the possibility that Lewis and Clark, like Odysseus, were darlings of the gods.

Dayton Duncan: In the background pulling some strings obviously is Jefferson, who could be the Athena of this *Odyssey*, trying to give direction occasionally with a letter early on at least, when Lewis and the expedition have first left Washington, or whether Jefferson is the Zeus who oversees it in even a broader scale and is more likely to say well their fate is somewhat up to them. But Jefferson is with them in one respect or another all the way to the Pacific and back.

Peter Coyote: The gods are also central to what you earlier called a descent into the underworld. Did Meriwether Lewis experience something like that?

Clay Jenkinson: There is no question that Lewis underwent a descent into chaos after he returned from the American West in 1806. His demons then were interior ones: alcohol, inability to find a wife, inability to write a book about the expedition that Jefferson so earnestly desired, the problems of fame, and his inability to re-enter American life in a satisfying way. In modern parlance, his life became a “living hell” before he died, almost certainly by his own hand on October 11th, 1809, on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee.

Peter Coyote: Suicide—doesn’t sound very heroic.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, there were suicides in classical epic. Ajax was one of them. More typically, the hero dies in single combat. But in our post-Freudian world, Peter, interior psychological dramas have become one form of heroic struggle. There’s even a Greek classical term for it. It’s called *psychomachia*.

Peter Coyote: *Psychomachia*—that’s a mouthful, but a fascinating concept. The journey and journals of Lewis and Clark are starting to sound and feel like a true epic. We’ll take a break.

Let’s test your knowledge of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This time, a modern-day question: Charlton Heston and Fred MacMurray portrayed the explorers in Hollywood’s only major movie treatment of Lewis and Clark in the 20th Century. What was the name of that movie? Coming up next, if Lewis and Clark aren’t the ultimate American epic, what is? Can you identify this fictional American hero who might fill that role?

A white whale! Skin your eyes for him, men, look sharp for white water. If ye see but a bubble, sing out!

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey: the Lewis and Clark Expedition,” on PRI.

[Program Break: Aaron Meyer/Bill Lamb-Unfinished Journey: the Lewis and Clark Expedition Soundtrack (Amazing)]
John McWilliams: An epic by, oh, the time America is founded had really a very restrictive connotation.

Peter Coyote: That’s Middlebury College professor John McWilliams, author of *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre*. Clay, what does McWilliams mean when he says epic had a “restrictive connotation?”

Clay Jenkinson: Professor McWilliams means that the literary definition was quite specific and rigorous and that when we use the word epic in today’s popular culture, we’re using it in a very loose sense to mean that which is spectacular or dramatic or huge.

John McWilliams: It meant a long heroic poem usually divided into something like 10 to 24 books, written either in heroic couplets or in blank verse in which there would be a proposition, that is to say, the poet would lay out what his essential theme or topic is, there would be an invocation either of a particular god or an invocation of the muse as this force which would enter into the poet and enable him (and it was usually him) to give the best possible expression to what was a traditional heroic narrative. Then there needed to be council scenes, there needed to be epic similes, there needed to be single combats and there needed to be finally this comprehensive sense of, of expressing a whole culture.

Peter Coyote: Clay, were there ever any attempts to turn the Lewis and Clark expedition’s narrative into the kind of formal epic poem that McWilliams is talking about?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, at least one. Joel Barlow of Connecticut was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and a poet. He was well known for his own epic *The Columbiad*, a seldom-read and indeed unreadable epic poem in nine books extolling the Republican virtues of America. After Lewis and Clark returned in 1806, Barlow proposed that the Columbia River be renamed the Lewis River, and he wrote heroic verse in support of that cause. Here’s one brief excerpt from his poem:

> With the same soaring genius thy Lewis descends,
> And, seizing the car of the sun,
> O’er the sky-propping hills and high waters he bends
> And gives the proud earth a new zone.

> Potowmack, Ohio, Missouri, has felt
> Half her globe in their cincture comprest;
> His long curving course has completed the belt,
> And tamed the last tide of the West.

Peter Coyote: Hmmm, I doubt that that’s well-known even among fans of American verse.

Clay Jenkinson: No it isn’t, and keep in mind the river is still called the Columbia 200 years after Barlow’s quixotic proposal. Shortly after Barlow’s poem was published, John Quincy Adams—then a United States senator and soon to be the president of the United States—wrote a poetic response to Barlow. He not only thought the idea of re-naming the Columbia was ludicrous, but he also made it clear he didn’t think Lewis and Clark were the stuff of heroic epic, either.

> [Ira Glass reads Adams:] Good people, listen to my tale,
> Tis nothing but what true is,
> I’ll tell you of the mighty deeds
Clay Jenkinson: You know, Adams used this poem to settle some scores with President Jefferson, too. He disliked Jefferson’s politics and he really disliked Jefferson’s treatment of his father, John Adams, so he wrote a few verses about Jefferson’s naïve speculations about just what Lewis would find in the American West—the woolly mammoth, a mountain of pure salt, Welsh Indians. Needless to say, Lewis didn’t find any of those things, and what he did find, according to John Quincy Adams, didn’t amount to very much:

[Ira Glass reads Adams]: Come-let us all subscribe, and ask
The hero to a dinner
And Barlow stanzas shall indite
A bard, the tide who tames, sir-
And if we cannot alter things
By God, we’ll change their names, sir!

Peter Coyote: So, not everybody saw Lewis and Clark as epic heroes, even at the time of the expedition. But let’s get back to our key question: is Lewis and Clark an epic story?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, there’s no question that the expedition was an odyssey, an immense journey through mysterious country, led by two extraordinary men each representing admirable qualities, but not quite in the same way. They had extraordinary encounters along the way, some of them marvelous and some life changing. And there’s no question that their journey helped to define the national identity of the American people. In all of those ways, it’s certainly an American epic. Whether it’s the American epic remains an open question.

Peter Coyote: Are there other candidates for that title?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, I have some thoughts about that, Peter, but before I do, a warning: Professor McWilliams argues that the idea of democracy may have made epic an unlikely genre in the United States:

John McWilliams: As I see it, the moment in which the epic venture becomes really questionable is the end of the 18th century, in which you have at least two really important cultural factors emerging simultaneously. One is the notion of liberal democracy and that does carry along with it the notion that in some sense all of us are equal. Well the notion of equality seems to me militates against the traditional notion of heroism, which is essentially aristocratic. The other issue that is equally I think as important is
that poetry itself began to lose a lot of its panache. The novel was beginning to absorb greater and greater reader interest with more and more sales and was becoming more and more the voice of literate culture.

Peter Coyote: OK, we’ll take those factors into account, but you can’t put it off any longer, Clay. What are your candidates for the classic American epic?

Clay Jenkinson: As Professor McWilliams reminds us, by the time the United States was born, the age of epic was over. In a sense, America is a place of epic stories that have never found epic expression. For example, listen to this little piece from T.S. Eliot, born in the United States, but usually regarded as an English poet. This is the opening stanza of the third of his four quartets, The Dry Salvages, first published in 1941. It’s an epic fragment about the Mississippi River.

T.S. Eliot: I do not know much about gods, but I think that the river is a strong, brown god, sullen, untamed and intractable…

Clay Jenkinson: That’s very beautiful, but it’s too ironically detached, too weary to qualify as epic. The capacity was there, but the will to epic wasn’t in T.S. Eliot. In the 19th century, Walt Whitman was unable to produce the sustained narrative that epic requires, but he was certainly filled with epic exuberance. One feature of epic poetry is lists or catalogs of ships, of weapons, of armies, of treasure, etc. Here’s one of the most famous catalogs from Whitman’s poem Leaves of Grass published in 1855.

The Missourian crosses the plains, toting his wares and his cattle;  
As the fare-collector goes through the train, he gives notice by the jingling of loose change;  
The floor-men are laying the floor—the tinters are tinning the roof—the masons are calling for mortar;  
In single file, each shouldering his hod, pass onward the laborers;  
Seasons pursuing each other, the indescribable crowd is gather’d—it is the Fourth of Seventh-month—(What salutes of cannon and small arms!)

Clay Jenkinson: Henry David Thoreau included a large number of epic allusions and parodies in his work, particularly Walden, which can be seen as a kind of interior or meditative epic. Here is a famous passage linking a battle between ants to Homer’s Iliad.

It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battlefield I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. In the meanwhile there came along a single red ant on the hillside of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had dispatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Or perchance he was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus.

Clay Jenkinson: The most serious actual epic poet in American history, aside from Jefferson’s friend Joel Barlow, was a Nebraska historian named John Neihardt. Neihardt is best known for his classic Black Elk Speaks, but he spent much of his life laboring on a formal American epic called The Song of the Indian Wars. It was published in 1925. He worked very closely from the Iliad and the Odyssey in composing his
own poems and, in fact, in *The Song of the Indian Wars* he makes Crazy Horse his Achilles and Sitting Bull a modern Odysseus. Here, in his own somewhat frail voice, is one of the most famous passages from his epic, *The Death of Crazy Horse*.

> [John Neihardt:] Out yonder in the village all night long there was the sound of mourning in the dark and when the mourning heard the meadow lark the last great Sioux rode silently away.

Clay Jenkinson: And of course, Peter, there is Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, published in 1957, one of the great road books in American history, not unlike the journals of Lewis and Clark, and perhaps the principal monument of the Beat generation. Kerouac captured the heart of the American experience when he wrote, “Whither goest thou, America, in thy shining car in the night?” Here’s a short excerpt from *On the Road*:

> The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow Roman candles, exploding like spiders across the stars, and in the middle, you see the blue center light pop and everybody goes, “Ahhh!”

Clay Jenkinson: And of course there’s *Moby Dick*, which is surely one of the most remarkable books ever published in America. Here’s Ahab in a famous scene:

> “Whosoever of ye raises me a whiteheaded whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw, whosoever of ye raises me that whiteheaded whale with three holes punctured in his starboard fluke, look ye, whosoever of ye that raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!”

> “Huzzah! Huzzah!” cried the seamen, as with swinging tarpaulins they hailed the act of nailing the gold to the mast.

> “It’s a white whale, I say,” resumed Ahab, as he threw down the topmall. “A white whale! Skin your eyes for him, men, look sharp for white water. If ye see but a bubble, sing out!

Clay Jenkinson: *Moby Dick* was published to universal indifference in 1851. Its fame as one of the two or three greatest American novels came much later. Peter, I believe that it’s not an age too late for the Lewis and Clark expedition to become the American epic. We’re just waiting for a poet and philosopher of sufficient genius to make Lewis and Clark America’s *Aeneid*. In the meantime, for my money, the greatest American epic is also the most obvious: two men, one young, one hunted, on a handmade raft, drifting down the greatest of American rivers, seeking escape and freedom, and forging a friendship that overcomes age, race and written law in quest of the higher laws of American existence. It doesn’t get any better than that. Here’s Huck:

> We went drifting down into a big bend, and the night clouded up and got hot. The river was very wide, and was walled with solid timber on both sides; you couldn’t see a break in it hardly ever, or a light. We talked about Cairo, and wondered whether we would know it when we got to it. I said likely we wouldn’t, because I had heard say there warn’t but about a dozen houses there, and if they didn’t happen to have them lit up, how was we going to know we was passing a town? Jim said if the two big rivers joined together there, that would show.

Peter Coyote: Clay, you’ve scratched the surface of some great American literature. The best part about
this is that each of us can nominate our own favorite story—that is, until that Lewis and Clark epic finally appears.

Today, if Lewis wanted to tell his story to a large audience, he might abandon the idea of a book altogether and talk to a screenwriter instead. Hollywood has always loved the epic, or at least what it considers epic, and the road trip is a perennially popular movie theme. So, why hasn’t the story of Lewis and Clark ever been made into a great epic movie? We asked film critic Bob Mondello to weigh in.

Bob Mondello: When you think of an epic film, you think of a cast of thousands, grand passions, panoramic vistas, a budget that could bankrupt a studio and a climactic something, spectacular enough to make people want to see it on the widest possible screen. The journey isn’t the point for Hollywood. It’s the destination that matters. A buffalo stampede in three-screen Cinerama. Vast armies or Orcs and Dwarves clashing at the gates of Mordor. Or maybe a chariot race.

[Music from Ben Hur]

Bob Mondello: Charlton Heston played Ben Hur in the 1959 film phenomenon that changed the style of the Hollywood epic. Up until then, movie spectacles were almost exclusively about grandeur – the enormous sets so dwarfed the actors that they might as well not have been there in the silent version of Ben Hur in 1925.

[Music from Ben Hur]

Bob Mondello: Anyone could have been on the chariot. What thrilled the crowd was the majesty -- the cheering throngs in the arena, the ships bursting into flame, the pre-censorship parade of bare-breasted maidens. Extravagance was what made film epics epic, from D.W. Griffith’s Intolerance all the way up to Cecil B. DeMille’s The Ten Commandments, also with Charlton Heston.

Charlton Heston [from The Ten Commandments]: Set these five books in the Ark of the Covenant by the tablets of the Ten Commandments which the Lord restored unto us.

Bob Mondello: The stage had previously told epic stories, as poetry had, but Hollywood didn’t have to tell stories, it could show them. And for decades, producers made the showing into the show. Until, that is, the 1960’s ushered in an era of intimate epics, films in which the spectacle backs up characters with real heft. Lawrence of Arabia, for instance, and Doctor Zhivago.

Julie Christie [from Doctor Zhivago]: If we’d had children, Yuri, would you have liked a boy or a girl.
Omar Sharif: I think we may go mad if we think about all that.
Julie Christie: I shall always think about it.

Bob Mondello: The notion that spectacle may be grand, but character is grander has persisted to today, made it necessary that, say, Titanic focus on a pair of lovers, rather than an iceberg...and that George Lucas give strong personalities to his Star Warriors.

Harrison Ford [from Star Wars]: Look, I ain’t in this for your revolution and I’m not in it for you, Princess. I expect to be well paid. I’m in it for the money.
Carrie Fisher: You needn’t worry about your reward. If money is all that you love then that’s what you’ll receive.

Bob Mondello: There is, you’ll notice, still an epic journey whether it’s a Jedi knight’s flight across galaxies to battle the Dark side, or a Russian doctor’s trek through snow to rejoin his beloved Lara. Worlds and worldviews are still in the balance, too. Epics aren’t epic if they’re too intimate. Which may be part of the reason Hollywood’s only treatment of the Lewis and Clark expedition was such an epic fizz. The producers had a story of nation-building and manifest destiny. They had a whole country’s worth of big sky. They even had Charlton Heston (he played Clark to Fred MacMurray’s Lewis). But although the filmmakers grandly titled their picture *The Far Horizons*, what they decided to dwell on was not heroic distances or historic vision, not the continent-spanning, nation-changing journey, or the clash of cultures it represented. They concentrated instead on a romance they made up to give Donna Reed something to do as Sacagawea.

Donna Reed [from *The Far Horizons*]: How does a white woman get a man?
Charlton Heston: She waits, ‘til he asks her to marry him.

Bob Mondello: Even in 1955, when Westerns were hugely popular, *The Far Horizons* wasn’t considered any good, but it wasn’t bad enough to dent anyone’s career. Longtime movie stars Donna Reed and Fred MacMurray soon became even more famous on TV (in *The Donna Reed Show* and *My Three Sons*). And it was just a year later that Charlton Heston, this cast’s relative newcomer, led an expedition out of Egypt as Moses, after which the public forgot his little expedition to the Pacific. Hollywood seems to have forgotten it, too, or at any rate, to have buried memories of it. In the half-century since, no major studio has ever returned to the Lewis and Clark story, unless you count a dreadful 1998 comedy, *Almost Heroes*. That one starred Matthew Perry and Chris Farley as a rival team of explorers, trying to beat Lewis and Clark to the Pacific.

Chris Farley [from *Almost Heroes*]: The buffalo is near now.
Matthew Perry: Ah. You can tell that by sniffing its droppings.
Chris Farley: No. I can see the herd right over there.
Matthew Perry: Hmm.

Bob Mondello: Epic, this isn’t, even in its silliness. But perhaps the basic story of Lewis and Clark doesn’t lend itself to epic treatment from Hollywood. The stuff of legend, it may be, but explorers, somehow, don’t fire Tinseltown’s imagination the way warriors do. There’s never been a good movie about Christopher Columbus, or Magellan, or about the race to the South Pole. For Hollywood, it’s the destination, remember, not the journey, and just reaching someplace scenic, like a beach, which is what Lewis and Clark reached, well, that’s not the sort of set-piece that filmmakers know how to hang a whole movie on. Now if Lewis had challenged Clark to a chariot race? Different story. I’m Bob Mondello.

Peter Coyote: In case you didn’t catch it, Bob Mondello had the answer to our quiz question. The title of the Hollywood film about Lewis and Clark is *The Far Horizons*. Coming up next… American Indians offer their own epic story traditions:

N. Scott Momaday: The first word was spoken and even the gods cringed to hear it for it was the sound of origin and being.
Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition,” on PRI.

[Program Break: The Makoche Masters “Wapaha Olowan” (Makoche Music MM0191D)]

Peter Coyote: The great epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, are believed to have been recited or sung before they were written down. They come out of an oral tradition, a method of storytelling carried on today by native peoples around the world.

N. Scott Momaday: To speak words and to speak them with responsibility and beauty, that is a very high art among Indian people.

Peter Coyote: The Pulitzer prize-winning writer N. Scott Momaday, who is Kiowa.

N. Scott Momaday: It exists, it goes on simply because people do speak with beauty and with responsibility and people listen to what is said carefully and above all, they remember what they hear. That is the whole thing about oral tradition it is always just one generation removed from extinction so you take it seriously you cannot afford to throw words away.

Peter Coyote: How can a culture preserve a heritage that depends on the rhythms and traditions of spoken word?

Clay Jenkinson: Indigenous peoples have been remarkably successful at maintaining oral traditions against almost impossible odds. Nowadays, we have many technologies to preserve the spoken word electronically. But scholars of epic have shown that recording oral narrative usually destroys the culture’s capacity to pass those stories on from bard to bard. Fortunately, traditional ways of preserving the spoken word continue in our electronic era. Roberta Conner, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla and the director of the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute near Pendleton, Oregon, describes how her people have passed stories from one generation to the next:

Roberta Conner: In the old way of teaching, if you were gifted as a student of our culture someone would take you on as an apprentice. They would decide when you were ready for certain kinds of information. When you had earned it, when you were worthy of it, you would be given that gift of knowledge. It was not a right, it was a gift. So someone gives you a story to tell. It would have had some aspect of ceremony, include some sense of permission, and it would have been given to you as a gift, and you would care for it the way you would care for any highly prized gift.

Gerard Baker: The great epic stories were the stories of creation.

Peter Coyote: That’s Gerard Baker, a Mandan-Hidatsa and superintendent of Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

Gerard Baker: There were stories in our oral history when animals could talk, as I’m talking now, that set up our societies and set up our clanship systems and set up our way of life. Those are the epic stories.

N. Scott Momaday: The first word was spoken and we cringed to hear it, the first word was spoken and the animals cringed to hear it, the first word was spoken and even the gods cringed to hear it for it was the
sound of origin and being, it was the sound of wilderness breathing, it was the sound of the sun burning it was the sound of life and death, it was the sound that opens the silence, the sound in which the silence of the stars is heard and the words of time followed upon it.

Peter Coyote: Again, the writer N. Scott Momaday. Clay, did Lewis and Clark ever hear or record creation stories from the Indian tribes they encountered?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, but unfortunately they didn’t always take the time to write them out in their journals. There is one important instance, however, of their recording an origin story. On the return journey in 1806, a Mandan chief by the name of Sheheke told Clark his people’s creation story and on that same day, Clark took time to write it down:

_He told me his nation first came out of the ground where they had a great village. A grape vine grew down through the Earth to their village and they saw light. Some of their people ascended by the grape vine upon the earth, and saw buffalow and every kind of animal also grapes plumbs &c. They gathered some grapes & took down the vine to the village, and they tasted and found them good, and deturmined to go up and live upon the earth, and great numbers climbed the vine and got upon earth men womin and children. At length a large big bellied woman in climbing broke the vine and fell and all that were left in the village below has remained there ever since._

*William Clark, August 18, 1806.*

Clay Jenkinson: The editor of the Lewis and Clark journals, Gary Moulton, has offered a great insight about this passage. He noticed that Clark couched the Mandan origin story in cadences of the English language that are clearly derived from the book of Genesis of the Old Testament. In other words, Clark understood that he was on this occasion recording sacred material.

Peter Coyote: Poet Gary Holthaus has listened to many native stories like this and says modern culture has lost something profound contained in those oral traditions.

Gary Holthaus: There is something about the sound of it that is compelling and you know you’re in the presence of something extraordinary when it happens, there is a kind of articulateness that is impossible to miss, or dismiss. And so they’ve been at that oral tradition for a long time and we’ve left it behind pretty much. So much of our language any more doesn’t reflect that oral tradition. We’ve become too literate in our own minds.

Peter Coyote: And now, in a program about stories and storytellers, we give you a short tale about the way the ordinary can feel epic, especially in the West. Oregon writer Kim Stafford reads from his collection of essays *Having Everything Right.*

Kim Stafford: After school I stopped at home to change my outfit—shucking slacks for jeans, tossing aside my polite cotton shirt for the buckskin one my grandmother had sewn, pulling on my boots—and lit out for The Woods on the run. We called it The Woods, just as we called a nearby slope The Big Hill; the limited territory of childhood is exact, and therefore mythic. Two blocks from home the human world dwindled to a path threading through nettle and alder. A spider web across the path meant no one was there before me. I crawled under its fragile gate to solitude and was gone. This was my routine from third grade to high school—to straggle home after dark and stand in the cold garage, shivering and balancing on one foot to shed my muddy clothes..."What did you find today?" my grandmother (we
called her Boppums) would ask, as she sat picking at a crust of cockleburs in one of my socks. I would run to my mud-stiffened pants to dig through the pockets for a rock an Indian might have used, or a leaf I liked, crumpled and fragrant, or a waterlogged stick turning into a fossil, or a furry length of twine I had braided from cedar bark. “I could use this to snare a rabbit, if I had to.” The Woods was a wild tract developers had somehow missed in their swath through old Oregon. It probably stretched about three miles long by two miles wide, and was surrounded by the city of Portland and its suburbs. Raccoon, beaver, salmon, deer, awesome pileated woodpeckers and exotic newts were among the secret lives of the place. Once, in fifth grade, four of us decided to head north through unexplored territory toward the edge of the world. Lewis and Clark had nothing on us, on our glorious bewilderment when we emerged, near dark of a long Saturday, to find a broad, dangerous road, a tall house covered with ivy, and a giant in blue coveralls mowing his lawn. “Where are we?” Bobby Elliott shouted over the roar of the motor. The man looked down at a row of muddy, scratched little savages. “Terwilliger Extension,” he shouted. We were stunned to silence by this bizarre name for most of the long detour home past the ice-cream store.

Peter Coyote: A child’s epic landscape, from Oregon writer Kim Stafford, director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College. You can really hear the ancient tradition of the storyteller in a modern poet like Stafford. Clay, epic tales often revolve around conflict, battles, conquest. What do we see of that in the Lewis and Clark story?

Clay Jenkinson: There was very little actual fighting in the course of the expedition, no war. But like all epic, the Lewis and Clark expedition is an encounter story. Dayton Duncan believes there are unspoken dark forces lurking in the Lewis and Clark story:

Dayton Duncan: For it to be a good story, an epic story, a classic story, there has to be some kind of undertow going on under the surface and sometimes right out in front of you. And certainly with this expedition there’s that in every turn. There’s the undertow of Lewis’s personality and where he’s going to end up. There’s the undertow of what’s going to happen to the Native people who are befriending these strangers so many times, one after another, and knowing that it might not turn out well for them. There’s the undertow of these effusive descriptions of the landscape and the wildlife that they saw, astonishing stuff. It seems like this paradise, this Eden, and we know there’s an undertow to that as well.

Peter Coyote: What happens to heroes when they go to a new place, confront new landscapes and new people?

Clay Jenkinson: Sometimes they are transformed. Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness explores the danger of taking your own cultural epic and moving it into somebody else’s territory. His character Marlow’s search for the trader Kurtz in the Belgian Congo ends with a vision of a man driven mad by his own participation in the brutality of conquest and colonialism and frankly by his encounter with the other.

*I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror-- of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision-- he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath--”The horror! The horror!”*  

Peter Coyote: That’s the face of the conqueror, from the Heart of Darkness, who concludes by saying, “exterminate the brutes.” By those standards, Lewis and Clark’s journey was benign. We’ve talked
about how epic stories can be useful to a people in helping them to define their culture, in giving them an account of their origins, in retaining cultural memory. University of Arkansas professor Elliot West:

Elliot West: Our creation story is one of peoples of many backgrounds being made one through an experience, and in our creation story that experience is encountering the wilderness, encountering the West, and Lewis and Clark their story has become I think emblematic of this larger experience of people encountering the wilderness and being made one.

Peter Coyote: So epic can be many things: war, conquest, endless journey, a glimpse into the darker sides of human nature, coupled with the triumph of founding a city or realizing a cultural identity. For a final perspective on why the Lewis and Clark expedition has never been written as the American epic, we turn to our humanities scholar, Clay Jenkinson.

Clay Jenkinson: Back in the 17th century the poet John Milton worried that it was an age too late for epic. Although the term epic is bandied about with considerable license in American culture, we don't have a national epic that somehow justifies and explains our national experiment to ourselves and to the world. Everyone seems to agree that the Lewis and Clark Expedition contains the stuff of epic, but so far in 200 years no great poem has been written about that journey. Whatever else it is, our national epic has to tell the story of how the American people came to posses most of the continent. This epic has to be about our westering movement, about the advance of American civilization from ridge to ridge all the way to the Pacific, and about the challenges we faced in that immense migratory journey, from the land itself, from indigenous peoples, from unfamiliar flora and fauna, and from the spiritual risk of walking off the map of the known world. At its center, our epic has to be about the struggle between white Americans pursuing their dream of empire and Native Americans fighting to protect their homelands and retain their pre-modern culture. There have to be losers in a national epic of course, but everybody has to be portrayed with dignity. The Lewis and Clark story fits this matrix perfectly.

I do not agree that it is an age too late for a Lewis and Clark epic. All we need is a modern Homer or Virgil to do the story justice. Because the great conquest stage of American internal history is over, we may just now be mature enough as a people to examine our national experience without falling into cliché or defensiveness. We may now for the first time be able to see ourselves as we actually are, not as we might wish to be. It’s not just verse that makes a great epic. That would be easy. The hard part is discovering the mature conceptual understanding that transforms all the fragments of human experience into a coherent masterpiece. For the ancient Romans, that poet was Virgil. When he wrote the epic of Rome, the Republic had broken down entirely and the empire was struggling to find its mission statement. Sound familiar? Virgil’s Aeneid manages to celebrate the achievement of Rome at the same time that it asks profound questions about Rome’s triumph over the rest of the Mediterranean world. Somehow Virgil manages to focus on Rome’s greatness without losing sight of the fact that it came at a great cost—cost to indigenous Italians, cost to Roman families who lost their sons in battle, cost to the soul of the leader Aeneas. It was a very careful balance that Virgil struck—he had to synthesize the whole Roman achievement, triumphs and travesties, not just this or that part of it.

That’s precisely what we need for Lewis and Clark. It was a great journey, led by remarkable, even heroic, men. It is a story of how determined American citizens, spurred on by the American Athena Thomas Jefferson, helped to spread the base of our future Republic all the way to the mouth of the Columbia. But it also destabilized Indian country and set in motion an orgy of resource extraction that brought the buffalo and the condor to the brink of extinction.

We Americans are not very sensitive to complexity. We find it nearly impossible to accept that there may
be a tragic element in our national character. We like stories with happy endings. We are uncomfortable with irony. That’s one reason why there’s no American epic, for an epic, as Virgil knew, has to be about what he called the tears of things. The Lewis and Clark Expedition is about heroism and perseverance and even a kind of national innocence. But it is also about gunboat diplomacy and the arrogance of the imperial agenda. We see the rich comedy of Charbonneau’s buffalo sausage recipe, and the pure beauty of Reuben Field running a foot race against the best of the Nez Perce runners, but we also see Meriwether Lewis putting a gun to his head at a squalid inn in Tennessee. Like the Aeneid, the Lewis and Clark epic is about the cost of empire. There was an environmental cost, there was a gigantic cost to indigenous peoples. There was, if we are willing to admit it, a cost to the national spirit and integrity of the United States. It is a heroic story, but not without a dark side. The stuff is there, waiting for a genius to turn it into poetry.

Sing in me muse the story of the man with undaunted courage, the heroic but melancholy son of Virginia, the President’s friend, and of his faithful partner in discovery that red-headed man of action and good sense, the weak-spelling map maker of Kentucky, and of the stout keelboat that took them into the heart of the undiscovered continent until they bestrode the mighty and heretofore deemed endless Missouri River, sing in me muse.

For the “Unfinished Journey,” I’m Clay Jenkinson.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. This program was produced by Lewis & Clark College and Oregon Public Broadcasting. The producer is Eve Epstein, audio engineer Steven Kray, associate producer Sherry Manning. Original music composed and conducted by Aaron Meyer and Bill Lamb. The executive producers are Clay Jenkinson and Morgan Holm. Major funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding was provided by the National Park Service and the Jonsson Family Foundation. Support for this program also comes from this station and Public Radio International stations nationwide and is made possible in part by the PRI Program Fund whose contributors include the Ford Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. To learn more about this series visit opb.org and click on the “Guide to Lewis and Clark.”