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## Summer Reading: Lanny Jones' Biography of William Clark

By Richard K. Rein

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It was Landon Y. Jones, possibly quoting someone else, who once told me that an editor is to a writer as a knife is to a throat. Jones was my first editor when I began my freelance writing career by contributing stories to the Princeton Alumni Weekly in the early 1970s. Later he held the knife to my throat when I was submitting stories to People and Money magazines.

So when I finally got around to reading Lanny Jones's 2004 biography, "William Clark and the Shaping of the West," as part of my 2009 summer reading list, I looked forward to not exactly turning the tables but at least putting a sharp pencil to the page.

I'm glad I did. First a word about William Clark, who commanded the legendary Lewis and Clark expedition that defined and opened the great American west more than 200 years ago. Even though every school kid can identify both Clark and Lewis, Clark himself was never the subject of a major biography until Jones's book in 2004 — the most obscure famous person in American history.

Now a word about Jones. Growing up in St. Louis, where William Clark spent his final years as the United States superintendent of Indian affairs, the future biographer attended Clark Elementary School, named after the explorer. "Yes," Jones told me, "the St. Louis connection gave me the original personal emotional connection I seem to need in my writing."

Another word about Jones: This editor has never been afraid to put his own neck on the line as a writer. Way back in 1974, when Jones was still editor of the Princeton Alumni Weekly, the faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study across town became embroiled in a tempestuous battle about the direction of the institution. Few journalists knew what to make about it. Jones, the editor, turned into a reporter and writer and contributed a cover story to the Atlantic Monthly. It was titled "Bad Days at Mount Olympus — the Big Shoot-Out at the Institute for Advanced Study." I was impressed.

In 1980, while he was an editor at People magazine, Jones cranked out his first full length book, "Great Expectations: America & the Baby Boom Generation." And then in 2000, after he had retired from Time Inc., Jones — working from his home office in Princeton — helped kick off the 200th anniversary of the famous expedition by writing "The Essential Lewis and Clark."

The William Clark book, published by Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, neither begins nor ends with a glorious recitation of that amazing three-year adventure. The book begins a decade earlier, in 1792, when an army search party heads into the forbidding forests along the Wabash River in what is now Ohio. They discover the grotesquely mutilated remains of a military expedition that had set out a year before to drive the Indian tribes controlling the land into submission. What resulted is to this day "the most one-sided loss in the history of the United States military." As one survivor later described it: "The freshly scalped heads were reeking with smoke, and in the heavy morning frost looked like so many pumpkins through a cornfield in December."

Though he was a member of the territorial militia, William Clark was not part of that march to the Wabash. But, as Jones writes, "he would live the rest of his life with its bloody legacy."

The "shaping" of the American west was no work of art. The atrocities inflicted by the Indians were returned in kind by federal troops. In 1814 Andrew Jackson, the future president, led a massacre of 850 Creek Indians in Alabama. How did they verify that number? "By cutting off the noses of the dead warriors."

Last week in this space, reviewing Richard D. Smith's biography of Bill Monroe, I fantasized about the book being turned into a movie. The Jones book should be repackaged as a college history textbook (not so far-fetched, since the University of Nebraska is bringing out a softcover edition this fall).

Like most good biographers, Jones does not turn his story into a sermon. But as a reader I leap to a few moral lessons. Why are we surprised and shocked when some frenzied Iraqis behead an "American infidel?" The Indians reacted the same way when we intruded into their territory, and we reciprocated in the atrocity game without hesitation.

Jones remains committed to telling his story dispassionately and in telling detail. His nine-page bibliography includes 25 manuscript sources accessed at libraries and historical societies across the country. Near the end of the book, Jones does draw a very much justified conclusion: "In the span of his public life, Clark had been a primary architect of a form of what is now called ethnic cleansing. He personally signed 37 separate treaties with Indian nations . . . He helped the United States extinguish

Indian titles to 419 million acres of land. A total of 81,282 Indians was moved from the eastern United States to the lands west of the Mississippi; thousands more were moved out of Missouri, farther west.”

Jones follows William Clark’s path to his death in 1838 at age 68. But he ends the book with a telling epilogue based on an event that occurred in 1832. Two boys digging on the banks of the Wabash River discovered a small cannon in the mud — it was a relic from that devastating loss in the early struggle to wrest the west from the Indians. A few months later the cannon was prepared to help commemorate the 100th birthday of George Washington. A four-pound shot was fired from the cannon into a large oak tree 150 yards away. The shot split the oak in two, opening a crack 15 feet long from top to bottom, and ended up buried so deep in the tree that it could not be retrieved.

There may be multiple lessons here, I suspect, including the longstanding costs associated with our early treatment of our native Americans. But I choose to walk away with a simple conclusion: You can’t bury your history.

Next week: The final installment from my summer reading list, “Nothing Personal — The Vietnam War in Princeton 1965-1975,” self published by Lee Neuwirth, [www.booksurge.com](http://www.booksurge.com), 2009.