

WANDERERS IN EDEN: THOMAS MITCHELL COMPARED WITH LEWIS AND CLARK

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A comparison of the exploring experiences of Australian explorer Thomas Mitchell with those of his American counterparts Lewis and Clark shows certain similarities; their difficulty in talking to the indigenous people, their respect for indigenous property, the suspicion of the indigenous people that whites were not really men but spirits of some sort and their anxiety to get the explorers out of their territory as quickly as possible. But the differences between the Australian and the American experiences were greater and more important. Lewis and Clark, both born in Virginia, came from a society established there for generations. They were at home anywhere in America; they lived off the land and had close relations, usually amicable, with the native born Indians. None of the Australian explorers were born in the country which to them was a strange and often frightening land. They carried their food with them and rarely had more than tenuous relations with the Aborigines. Yet Mitchell was more thoughtful than the Americans about the nature of the indigenous people and their future relations with white society.

The Explorers and their Backgrounds

Thomas Mitchell, like the Americans, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, was a great explorer. As Surveyor General of New South Wales from 1828 till 1855, he made four exploring expeditions between 1831 and 1846, each a little longer than the previous one. The first lasted three months, the last just over a year. Lewis and Clark made their one great, epic journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific coast and back from 1804 to 1806. They were away for twenty-eight months though they were not travelling all that time, having twice to go into winter quarters.

As a consequence of this epic journey, Lewis and Clark have become far more familiar to the American public than Burke and Wills are to Australians. In America today there are Lewis and Clark societies: there are both national and state Lewis and Clark Trail Commissions; there are Lewis and Clark National Historical Landmarks; there is an internationally known company providing Lewis and Clark tours; there is a Lewis and Clark opera and a Lewis and Clark academic industry which produces an apparently endless stream of learned books and articles, a literature well described by P.R. Cutright, in *A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals*, 1976.

All three men were army officers. Lewis and Clark were captains in the United States army and Mitchell was a major in the British army, having served in the peninsular campaigns against the French from 1811, when he was nineteen, till the French were driven from Spain in 1814. All three men kept a daily journal even if one American sometimes merely copied the words of the other to guard against the danger of a journal being lost. These journals in some ways are very similar; they record the events of the journey, the weather, impressions of the country and detailed, often technical, descriptions of newly found plants and animals. All three men seem to have looked on the world about them as a

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great big question to be answered. All show a sense of freshness and excitement in discovery.

Mitchell, much more than the Americans, was keen to push his own barrow. He was by far the most literary of the three explorers. He was well educated, having attended the University of Edinburgh before going off to the war. In the peninsula he quickly became fluent in Spanish and Portuguese. Later he translated Luis de Camoens's *Lusiad* into English verse. He knew French and took lessons in German. After the war he brushed up his Latin, learned at Edinburgh, so he could read Virgil with greater ease. He was also very widely read in English literature and history. His pages are scattered with literary allusions and quotations. His writing, even in the field, was polished. The published accounts of his journeys differ only slightly and infrequently from the pages of his manuscript note books. He knew how to deal with publishers and, to enhance his reputation, he got his journeys before the public very soon after they were completed. His *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia* was published in two substantial volumes in 1838 with a second edition in 1839; and his *Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia* came out in 1848.

There was no such speed of publication of the American journals or literary skill in their compilation. In contrast to Mitchell, Clark was almost illiterate. The *Dictionary of American Biography* says he had little formal education and this is apparent. His knowledge of the English language was so limited it is sometimes hard to understand him. He muddles up the meaning of words when, for example, he *contributes* a man's illness to his drinking dirty water.

Lewis was better schooled than Clark and a much better writer. He had studied Latin with a local clergyman and knew something of European painting and English literature. His spelling strikes the modern reader as being highly eccentric; one of his editors has ingeniously described it as 'creative'. But we must remember that spelling had not yet become standardised for most Americans, nor indeed for all but the most highly educated Englishmen.

Nevertheless, Lewis really could write. He had exceedingly few literary graces but his writing vividly conveys the heroic story of their struggles through the wilderness. Although one knows before reading the journals that the expedition was successful, time and again, when reading Lewis's words, one wonders how are they going to escape this predicament or avoid that disaster. The dangers were so great and their material resources so slight that the expedition's destruction often seemed certain. Besides imparting this sense of menace, Lewis has many splendid passages of description. His account of shooting grizzly bears, of the great falls on the Missouri and of the many drowned buffaloes are as powerful and memorable as anything Mitchell wrote.¹

¹ For an account of the Americans' education and their attempts at 'Finding Words' see Furtwangler 1993: 27, 80-1 and especially 154-70.

The first publication of Lewis's and Clark's journals was by Nicholas Biddle in 1814 in a work entitled *The History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. Biddle paraphrased about a quarter of the million and a half words Lewis and Clark had written putting into proper and polite language what the explorers had expressed crudely and vividly. Nor did he scruple to add bits entirely his own to embellish the literary quality of the work. Although departing very widely from the original text, Biddle's edition proved immensely popular and was frequently reprinted. The Biddle tradition was reinforced when Elliot Coues published a new edition of *The History* in 1893. He claimed to give the Biddle text 'with scrupulous fidelity' but he did not hesitate to alter the text in a 'mere matter of grammar or punctuation'. He also added a new chapter in the Biddle style. The main feature of the Coues edition, however, is

There were artistic differences as well as literary ones between Mitchell and Lewis and Clark. Clark was the artist on the American expedition. His drawings of flora and fauna are often very crude and at best are mediocre. He never seems to have attempted landscapes or portraits. Mitchell, on the other hand, was perhaps the best draftsman in the British army. He was also very skilful in portraying what he saw whether it was a tree, a bird, a person, a mountain or a river. Mitchell was so superior there can be no real comparison between them.

There is another way in which Mitchell excelled. Lewis and Clark made astronomical observations from time to time to determine their latitude and longitude and Clark made some sketch maps. But their chief task was to reach the Pacific and then get back home. Mitchell, on the other hand, always regarded his explorations as part of the general survey of New South Wales. As a consequence he made astronomical observations whenever he could and ensured that every mile he travelled was measured by a chain. These careful measurements were supplemented by triangulation. He was forever ascending hills, chopping down all the trees bar one, which remained as a trig point, and, with a theodolite, taking the angles between the hills around him. The result was that he built up a remarkably accurate map of the colony. On his journey south in 1836 he made a traverse of nearly two and a half thousand miles and the error in closing this traverse when he got back to Sydney was only one and three quarter miles.²

The Expeditions and Styles of Exploring

Personal accomplishments account for some of the differences between the American and Australian expeditions. Others were more significant. Lewis and Clark's party was composed of about forty soldiers and discipline was maintained by courts martial. Early in the trip two men were tried for stealing whisky. The court was presided over by a sergeant and consisted of four privates. The first pleaded not guilty, was convicted and sentenced to a hundred lashes. The second pleaded guilty and was sentenced to fifty lashes.³

A fortnight later another man was charged with sleeping while on sentry duty. This was a capital offence so the court martial consisted of the two officers, Lewis and Clark.

the extensive footnotes, almost as long as the text, in which Coues identifies places, gives topographical information, elaborates on biographical details and gives much scientific information about flora and fauna. Coues has also been frequently reprinted. The last edition of which I am aware was published by Dover Books in 1965.

Probably comparatively few people have read the words Lewis and Clark actually wrote. They could not do so until Reuben Gold Thwaites published his *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806* in 1904-5. This work consists of seven volumes of text and one of maps. Even though it has been reprinted at least once, in 1959, the size, cost and rarity of these volumes put them beyond the reach of most readers. Two commendable attempts have been made to bring the original journal to a wider public. Bernard De Voto published *The Journal of Lewis and Clark* in 1953 reprinting about a third of the Thwaites original. Frank Bergon was another populariser. His book, *The Journal of Lewis and Clark*, is about as big a De Voto's and was published by Penguin Books in 1989. Because of their unusual publishing history with many different editions, the best one being relatively inaccessible, references will be made to the Lewis and Clark journals (L&C) by date rather than by volume and page number.

² Mitchell 1839, II:337.

³ L&C, 29 June 1804.

The man was found guilty but the sentence was lenient - one hundred lashes, no more than the unrepentant whisky stealer got.⁴

Privates never sat on a court martial in the British army. The English rightly regarded the British soldier as a cross between a peasant and a thug. The Duke of Wellington, for example, once said that he did not know how his soldiers affected the French but that they absolutely terrified him. American privates serving on courts martial were a resounding vote of confidence in the idea of social equality - a fanfare for the common man.

Mitchell probably could have got soldiers if he had wanted them but in fact he always used convicts, or, now and then, ex-convicts who had been with him on an earlier expedition. Up to 1840 New South Wales was a colony to which the British government continually transported convicted felons. In 1831, when Mitchell set out on his first expedition, over forty percent of the population were convicts undergoing penal servitude. Some were assigned to private settlers but many were retained by the government to perform all the menial tasks of the public service. Convicts built roads and public buildings. They were even employed as clerks and constables. In the Survey Department they carried stores, drove carts and wagons, acted as chain men and did all the lowly tasks to assist the surveyors out in the field. So when Mitchell went exploring he simply employed convicts as he had always done when surveying. On each of his journeys he had with him an Assistant Surveyor as second in command and on two journeys he took with him another gentleman, a botanist or a doctor, to collect specimens of natural history. But all the rest of the men were convicts or ex-convicts. The numbers varied from fifteen on the first expedition to twenty six on the fourth.⁵

Although his men were convicted criminals Mitchell's methods of preserving discipline were much more relaxed than the American. He never brought his men before a court or had them flogged. The only punishments he ever imposed were to deprive some men of tobacco or to make them serve extra time on guard duty at night. He had a commanding personality. His men respected him and quite a number volunteered to accompany him again on a later trip. However, the big inducement he had for good behaviour was the prospect he held forth of writing a favourable recommendation to the Governor of the colony to reduce or terminate each convict's period of servitude.⁶

One critical difference between the American and Australian explorers is that the Americans were completely dependant on the good will and assistance of the indigenous people to complete their journey. The Australians received a lot of assistance from the Aborigines but, at a pinch, could almost certainly have got by without them. But twice the Americans *had* to have Indian assistance. The first occasion was on the westward journey when Lewis and Clark purchased horses from the Shoshone to cross the Rockies. The purchase hung in the balance and as Lewis clearly realised, the fate of the expedition 'appeared at this moment to depend in a great measure upon the caprice of a few savages who are ever as fickle as the wind.'⁷ The second occasion was on the return journey when Lewis despaired of ever escaping from the stupendous snow covered Rockies without the assistance of Indian guides who were, he thought, the 'most admirable pilots.'⁸

4 L&C, 12 July 1804.

5 Mitchell 1839, I:16. Mitchell 1848: 6-7.

6 Ibid, 418-9.

7 L&C, 16 August 1805.

8 L&C, 27 June 1806.

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Another very important difference between the American and the Australian expeditions, and one that strikes an Australian very forcibly, is the fact that the Americans travelled through a country that was enormously rich in many different foodstuffs. Lewis and Clark and their men lived by hunting and sometimes by purchasing a variety of foods from the Indians. Very often they were surrounded by far more food than they could eat. Lewis once estimated that there were at least 10,000 buffaloes within two miles of where he was standing at Great Falls, Montana.⁹ There were many other animals which they killed and ate - there were many varieties of deer and squirrels. There were bears, badgers, beavers, grouse, goats, hares. The rivers teemed with fish. There was an abundance of wild apples, cherries, currants, grapes, berries and onions.

Clark records 'takeing a Sumptuous brackfast of Venison which was roasted on Stiks exposed to the fire.'¹⁰ Of course they did not always eat so well. In winter game was scarce or it was too cold to hunt it. Crossing the Rockies was a hungry exercise. After wintering on the Pacific coast, Clark thankfully observed that 'we were never one day without 3 meals of some kind either pore Elk meat or roots.'¹¹

Sometimes these men were hungry and reduced to eating food we might find repulsive. They ate horses. Often they ate dogs which they purchased in large numbers from the Indians, sometimes forty at a time. Eventually, through frequent use, the men became quite fond of dog meat. Once, near the end of the expedition, their meat being exhausted, the men ate a mixture of boiled roots and bear's oil which Clark, at least, found an agreeable dish. So the Americans, although sometimes with difficulty, always managed, in one way or another, to live off the land. With this very varied diet the Americans were never troubled by scurvy, a disease which caused some sickness but no deaths among the Australian explorers.¹²

Mitchell's expeditions could never live off the land. Australia, for the most part, is an arid country and has nowhere near the natural food resources of North America. Australian Aborigines, perhaps about half a million of them over the whole of the continent, could live off the land - often quite well - on fish, ducks, emus, kangaroos, wombats, possums and so on. But white men lacked the knowledge and skills to do so. Mitchell, therefore, was obliged to take the great bulk of his food with him. He loaded up large bullock-drawn wagons with tea, sugar and, above all, flour. Accompanying the wagons was a flock of sheep which steadily diminished in size day by day. The expedition therefore proceeded at walking pace and on a normal day might travel ten or a dozen miles, the exact distance being measured by the chain. Lewis and Clark, when returning home down the Missouri, went 40, 60, even as far as 80 miles a day, or so Clark claimed, though the accuracy of these figures is questionable as he did not measure the distance but relied on primitive and inaccurate maps for the estimates.¹³

On every expedition Mitchell took with him one or two portable boats. They were sometimes useful in *crossing* rivers but with one minor exception they were never useful in sailing *along* a river. The typical Australian river is usually a dry bed of stones and carries water only infrequently. There are some rivers which rarely or never dry up but only

⁹ L&C, 11 July 1806.

¹⁰ L&C, 19 November 1805.

¹¹ L&C, 23 March 1806.

¹² L&C, *passim*. Furtwangler 1993: 91-109.

¹³ L&C, 20-26 August 1806.

a few of the very biggest are navigable for any distance. So it was inevitable that while Lewis and Clark mainly used boats, Mitchell had to rely on bullocks.

There is another and a more subtle reason for the differing styles of exploration which is indicated by one of the best known passages of Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*.

'The wilderness', he wrote, 'masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois ... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and ploughing with a sharp stick ...'

Lewis and Clark were both from Virginia which had been settled by English colonists since 1607. It was a long established society. By the nineteenth century these men were truly American. They were at home everywhere on the American continent however much they longed, when on the Pacific coast, to return to the United States.¹⁴ As Turner suggested, they readily adopted many Indian customs. They travelled first in vessels they called Perogues, presumably a sort of flat-bottomed barge propelled by oars or sail.¹⁵ But they also used canoes which they could make out of suitable trees. Whatever their dress when setting out they soon, as did Indians, made clothes for themselves out of animal skins. Presently, if not from the beginning, they wore moccasins not shoes or boots. With exposure to the elements, their face and hands darkened to an Indian hue. So Indian did they appear that Lewis sometimes thought it necessary to display some usually covered skin to demonstrate that he was a white man.¹⁶

They wintered in log huts they made themselves. Their ropes for towing boats were made from animal skins. They purchased Indian horses. They frequently smoked tobacco in a pipe in an Indian fashion to cement relations with the several nations they met even though they could not converse with them in words. They learned to geld horses in an Indian manner as it was superior to the European practice to which they were accustomed.¹⁷ In many ways, then, the American explorers accepted Indian customs and their manner of doing things. The wilderness, in Turner's phrase, had mastered the colonist.

The same was *not* true of Australia. Mitchell's expeditions were composed of men *all* of whom had been born in the United Kingdom, almost all in England or Scotland. They had little or no experience of the Australian outback. They were very far from being at home in Australia. Each of Mitchell's expeditions now and then shot a kangaroo or emu or experimented with an Australian vegetable but each expedition carried all it needed in its bullock wagons. If supplies ran low men were sent back to base to get more. If they failed to return, the expedition had to retreat to Sydney before it starved.¹⁸ Whereas the American explorers learned the ways of wilderness life from the Indians, the Europeans learned nothing from the Aborigines.

They did not even learn the art of tracking to any great degree. To this day black trackers are legendary for their ability to trace people's tracks through the bush. Mitchell said they could read the events of the day on the forest floor as fluently as he could read a newspaper. A ludicrous incident on Mitchell's fourth expedition illustrated the Europeans'

¹⁴ L&C, 1 January 1806.

¹⁵ Coues [1965]: 4.

¹⁶ L&C, 11 and 13 August 1805.

¹⁷ L&C, 13 August and 19 October 1805; 14 May 1806.

¹⁸ Mitchell 1839, I: 110-1.

obtuseness. The bullock drivers lost two of their animals. They had to be found. The men searched and searched in vain for these large animals which left obvious tracks behind them. At last they had to beg Dicky, a ten year old Aboriginal boy, to find the bullocks. This he quickly did.¹⁹

The difference between America and Australia in this respect is epitomised by the dead whales. In January 1806 a whale died on the Pacific beach. The Indians at once stripped the skeleton of all that could be eaten and the Americans, to share in the spoils as they wished, had to purchase 300 pounds of blubber and little oil from the Indians.²⁰

In 1836 Mitchell was on the south coast of Australia at a newly founded settlement called Portland. European whalers there chased whales in their small whaling boats. Aborigines soon realised that the more boats that chased a whale the greater was the chance that the whale would elude them all by running up on the beach. The whalers could not then cope with the animal and abandoned it. The dead whale, though, was a feast for the Aborigines. They therefore kept watch and whenever they saw a whale they sent up a smoke signal to encourage as many boats as possible to give pursuit. There had been *no* contact between Europeans and Aborigines and Mitchell simply recorded the practice as an example of Aboriginal sagacity.²¹

Why were the Europeans so slow to learn from Aborigines? Partly, as I have suggested, it was because the Europeans were so new to the country. But, more importantly, I think, it was because Aboriginal society was so different from their own that it seemed to have nothing to offer the white man.

The colonists quickly concluded that Aboriginal society was backward and Aborigines were racially or genetically inferior to white men. The question was sometimes raised whether they were really human at all. Although most Europeans thought they were, most also thought they were a form of humanity inferior to their own. I am not aware of any student of Aboriginal society who believes it inferior to European society. But all are aware of its great differences. Some scholars explain these differences by pointing to the limited food supplies, compared with those of most other parts of the world, and to the isolation of Australia till the eighteenth century. Some Aborigines deny this and claim that their ancestors deliberately *chose* not to follow the European path of growing crops, herding animals and building cities. By cooperating with the creatures of nature rather than by trying to harness and coerce them, they claim, they avoided the disasters inherent in Europe's so-called 'progress' and evolved instead a cooperative society which achieved a balance and a stability lasting for an unparalleled 40,000 years. Whatever the explanation, it was, I believe, the profound difference between the two races that made it impossible for the white man to learn from the black.²²

Points of Contact

It may be profitable to look more specifically at the relations between the explorers and the Indians on one hand and Aborigines on the other. There are several incidents or situations in which the American explorers participated that an Australian finds worthy of comment.

First, the Indian reaction to the legal flogging of American soldiers. The chief who witnessed this was greatly alarmed and cried out aloud at the horrid spectacle. Clark explained it was a necessary punishment. The chief thought it might be necessary to *kill*

¹⁹ Mitchell 1848: 64.

²⁰ L&C, 8 January 1806.

²¹ Mitchell 1839, II:242-3.

²² Hennessy 1993.

people but he would never flog them. His nation, the Arikaras, never shipped their children. Australian Aborigines reacted to the flogging of convicts in exactly the same way when they first saw it, in Sydney, back in 1788.²³

On both continents the explorers had great difficulties in communicating with the local inhabitants. In both places there was a multiplicity of languages. In both, explorers used native interpreters. In both, the conversation sometimes had to be conducted through several interpreters each using a different language. In both, it sometimes proved impossible to converse by speech at all and the parties were reduced to pantomime. Lewis believed that all the Indian nations he had met had a common sign language which, though imperfect and liable to error, enabled 'the strong parts' of a message to be communicated. Certainly the Americans seem to have been better at this than Mitchell and his men but they may have been merely more optimistic about their success. It is hard to make a judgment.²⁴

In both countries, again, the explorers, at least the officers if not the men, made a point at all times not to take anything belonging to the local communities, in the American case, not even their firewood.²⁵ Mitchell even went so far as to order his men to leave the sheep bones lying round the camp to show the Aborigines they had not been eating kangaroos or emus.²⁶

Some Indians, like some Aborigines, had probably never before seen a white man. They thought these pale faces came from the clouds, that they were not really men but spirits of some sort.²⁷ They were greatly relieved though when they saw the Indian wife of the French interpreter who accompanied the party. This was reassuring because no woman ever accompanied a war party in that quarter.²⁸ The Australian Aborigines often thought at first that the white men were the returned spirits of those who had died.²⁹

Now and then it happened in America, and it probably happened more often than the explorers realised, that a particular nation was anxious to encourage the explorers to go through their territory as quickly as possible and into that of the neighbouring nation.³⁰ This was so common in Australia that the term 'passing on' has been coined. Aborigines would 'pass on' travellers in a variety of ways. They might tell them there was plenty of food and water a few days' journey further down this river, they would point out carefully the best route the wagons might take; perhaps they would provide a guide to ensure the explorers did not get lost and to introduce them to their neighbours. In many such cases it was probably fear rather than hospitality or friendliness which inspired such cooperation.³¹

Another common feature of both Aboriginal and Indian behaviour was a wish to impress the white men by their knowledge of the English language, sometimes with unintentionally funny results. Mitchell was once obliged, in separating from an Aboriginal elder soon after breakfast, to wish him 'Goodnight' in return for the elder's repeated farewell

²³ L&C, 14 October 1804; Tench 1793:17.

²⁴ L&C, 14 August 1805.

²⁵ L&C, 14 October 1805.

²⁶ Mitchell 1848: 268.

²⁷ L&C, 13 August 1805.

²⁸ L&C, 19 October 1805.

²⁹ Hosking and McNicoll 1993: 41, Dixon, Ramson and Thomas 1990: 232. Cf. Ramson 1988: 206, djanga.

³⁰ L&C, 24 October 1805.

³¹ Mitchell 1839, I: 192-4, 200-4.

in those words.³² The Indians on the Pacific coast assured Lewis that they were sometimes visited by English or American traders by repeating such words as musket, powder, shot, knife, son of a bitch etc.³³

There were, then, many ways in which the American experience was paralleled by the Australian. But for reasons I have already suggested, the differences seem much more significant as the links between explorers and the local inhabitants were much more intimate in America than in Australia. The Americans, for example, not only ate Indian food, they often ate *with* Indians. They socialised. Lewis records how, on meeting the Shoshones, he and his men were so cordially embraced that 'we were all carressed and besmeared with their grease and paint till I was heartily tired of the national hug.'³⁴

Clark tells of an evening when about 350 Indians, men, women and children came to the camp and waited patiently to see the explorers dance. One of them was an accomplished fiddler and the soldiers danced for an hour or so to his music. Then they asked the Indians to dance which they happily did till about ten o'clock. Most danced by simply jumping up and down where they stood but some of the braves came to the centre of the group and danced round in a circle sideways.³⁵

Such a gathering was quite unknown in Australia although Aborigines did, now and then, dance a corroboree in front of Europeans. In 1830, soon after he came to the colony, Mitchell saw a corroboree and thought it better than any ballet he had seen at Covent Garden in London.³⁶

The Americans sometimes enjoyed the hospitality of Indian chiefs who erected large leather tents for their reception. This, too, was quite unknown in Australia although occasionally Mitchell and his men slept in Aboriginal huts when they found them unoccupied.

In the summer of 1806, while waiting for snow to melt before re-crossing the Rockies, the Americans were camped in one place for five weeks and got to know the local Indians quite well. They had footraces and one of the Indians was quite as fleet of foot as the quickest American. They also had horse races together. There is no record of any inter-racial games in Australia.³⁷

Another feature of Lewis and Clark's contacts with the Indians was the extensive medical aid they provided. Clark made quite a reputation as a medical practitioner: 'Several applied to me to day for medical aide ... I administered as well as I could to all. in the evening a man brought his wife and a horse both up to me. the horse he gave me as a present' for treating his wife.³⁸

Towards the end of the expedition, when their supply of goods to trade was running low, the American explorers began systematically to trade medicine and medical advice for horses or provisions. Clark once had a queue of more than fifty patients waiting to see him. The business became so profitable that it seems medical ethics were soon forgotten and medicines were supplied which the physicians knew would do no good. Lewis excused the

32 Mitchell 1848: 111.

33 L&C, 9 January 1806.

34 L&C, 13 August 1805.

35 L&C, 28 April 1806.

36 Mitchell 1828-30: 3 July 1830.

37 L&C, 8 June and 2 July 1806.

38 L&C, 29 April 1806.

practice by saying that they took care to give them nothing that could possibly injure them.³⁹

Once again, these practices were unknown in Australia. The one exception occurred in 1836. One of Mitchell's Aboriginal guides and interpreters was a widowed mother accompanied by her four year old daughter, Ballandella. The girl fell under the wheel of a wagon which broke her leg. One of Mitchell's convicts was the medical orderly and he skilfully set Ballandella's leg in splints. She recovered and at the end of the journey her mother married again and gave Ballandella to Mitchell to bring up in his own home.⁴⁰

The last point to consider is the matter of sexual relations between the explorers and those born in the country. As with other contacts, they were much more intimate and extensive with the American Indians than with the Australian Aborigines.

Sexual mores among the Indians no doubt varied from one nation to another just as in Australia they must have differed among the various communities of Aborigines. But whatever they were they differed from common European practices.

The first difference that Clark noticed was what he termed 'a curious custom' with the Sioux and some other nations, that of giving handsome women to those whom they wished to thank. The explorers got clear of the Sioux without taking any of their women but the Indians persisted and followed the explorers for two days trying to make them change their minds. This persistence suggests the Sioux were trying to place the white strangers under an obligation to them.⁴¹

A little further up the Missouri the explorers camped with the Arikaras or Ricarees, who received them very kindly and who seemed very pleased with the attention paid to them. Clark rather dryly observed, 'Their womin verry fond of carressing our men etc.' It was apparent that the 'tawney damsels' were available and compliant.⁴²

But not in all circumstances. The explorers had to learn which women were available and how they might be taken. Clark was once told that an Indian was about to murder his wife because he thought she had been sleeping promiscuously with the white men. Clark told him that it was not so; that no one had touched her except Sergeant Odway to whom the Indian had loaned his wife for one night. Clark told Odway to give the Indian certain articles and advised the husband to take his wife home and live happily with her in future. He also ordered the men not have anything to do with this woman in future nor with the wife of any other Indian. The injured Indian was forgiving. He later brought his two wives to the camp and seemed to want to be reconciled with the man who had made him jealous.⁴³

The expedition settled into winter quarters at the end of 1804, not far from Bismarck, North Dakota. Nearby was an Indian village and the explorers saw quite a lot of Indian life. They were intrigued by a Buffalo dance which went on for three nights. The old men of the village sat in a circle. The young men had their wives at the back of the circle and each went to an old man and pleaded with him to take his wife. The wife would then lead the old man away (often they could scarcely walk) and return with him after they had coupled. Some of Lewis and Clark's men pretended to be old men, and were accepted as such, in order to join in the ceremony. The purpose of this dance, Clark believed, was to cause the

39 L&C, 5 May 1806.

40 Mitchell 1839, II: 86-7, 265-6.

41 L&C, 12 October 1804.

42 L&C, 15 October 1804.

43 L&C, 22 November and 21 December 1804.

buffaloes to come near to the village so that they might be more easily killed. Clark could not understand how this apparently random promiscuity could bring the animals closer to the village. He did not realise that these Indians believed that sexual intercourse was a means of transferring spiritual power from old men to young women and from them to the young men. White men, as well as old men, were powerful 'medisan' so they were welcome to take part in the Buffalo dance.⁴⁴

The result of that winter spent near an Indian village was that by the spring the explorers were generally healthy except that a number of the men had contracted a venereal disease which Clark thought was very common among the Indians.⁴⁵ In August 1805 Lewis and Clark met the Shoshones whose chief was the brother (or possibly the cousin) of the French interpreter's wife. The nation consisted of about a hundred warriors and perhaps as many women and children. They lived in a wretched state of poverty but were nevertheless cheerful, even joyous. The men owned their wives and daughters as though they were chattels and treated them with little respect, forcing them to perform all the drudgery of life.⁴⁶ They had little regard for the chastity of their women and a husband would readily barter his wife for a night or two to another man. They regarded clandestine affairs, however, as disgraceful to the husband. Lewis therefore instructed his men to hire their women openly and honestly to avoid ill feeling. It seems he would have preferred to have kept his men away from the Indian women altogether but he thought that impossible because the recent months of abstinence had made his young men 'very polite to those tawney damsels'.⁴⁷

Lewis was anxious to discover whether these people suffered from venereal disease and enquired through his interpreter and his wife. It seemed that the Shoshones were infected with both gonorrhoea and syphilis and had no means of treatment. Presumably more Indians were infected by the explorers' visit.⁴⁸

The expedition's encampment at Fort Clatsop near the Pacific for its second winter, 1805-6, once again provided opportunities for extensive sexual relations between the explorers and Indian women. Something that looked to Clark like organised prostitution developed. An old woman, wife to a chief of the Chinooks, brought six girls to the explorers' camp and traded their favours for such small presents as she thought appropriate.⁴⁹ Lewis in one passage makes the point specifically. The Indians on the coast, he wrote, 'will even prostitute their wives and daughters for a fishinghook or a stran of beads'.⁵⁰ But the reality may have been in subtle ways more complicated. On Christmas eve of 1805, an Indian friendly to Clark came with his brother and two women and laid before him and Lewis two mats and two parcels of edible roots. The explorers refused to accept these offerings as they could not afford the price - two files. So then the Indians offered the women. Though no payment seems to have been demanded, Lewis and Clark declined this offer too. This rejection, Clark records, 'displeased the whole party very much

44 L&C, 5 January 1805, Ronda 1984: 131-2.

45 L&C, 31(30) March 1805.

46 L&C, 19 August 1805.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 L&C, 21 November 1805 and 15 March 1806.

50 L&C, 6 January 1806.

- the female part appeared to be highly disgusted at our refusing to accept of their favours etc.⁵¹

So there may have been some ambiguity in these sexual relations, some doubt as to whether they should be described as commercial, ritualistic, hospitable or amicable. But whatever their nature they were certainly morbid. Some of the diseases, or at least their symptoms, seem to have cured themselves fairly quickly but some of Lewis and Clark's men contracted syphilis as was shown by the use of mercury as a treatment.⁵²

In Australia sexual relations between Aborigines and explorers were far more limited. On Mitchell's first expedition, in 1832, two convicts were alone in the bush with their dray and bullocks bringing up fresh supplies. One night both men were slaughtered as they slept. At the time Mitchell thought the motive for the killing was robbery. Later he came to think that these men had failed to make, perhaps through ignorance, the proper response to the granting of sexual favours by Aboriginal women. Whether that was so or not, Mitchell thought sex spelled trouble and always forbade it.⁵³

It was not always easy to do this because many Aboriginal women, like many Indians, appeared to the explorers to be promiscuous. But once again, as in America, appearances could be deceptive. The offer of sex might well have been an attempt to placate the unpredictable and dangerous invaders. Soon after the murder of Mitchell's men, the Aborigines stopped Mitchell's wagons by laying down their spears across the track they were following. An Aboriginal man then approached each white man bringing with him two women, all divested of clothing and baggage. Most of the Aborigines had one plump woman, the other being thinner and much younger. The Aborigine bowed first to one and then the other, offering them to the white men with a wave of the hand which was as fully intelligible, Mitchell thought, as the gestures of a French dancing master.⁵⁴

This sort of thing happened now and then but Mitchell's discipline prevented any orgies. On one occasion an Aboriginal boy or young man who had worked on cattle stations and knew some English, brought a number of Aboriginal women into the explorers' camp in the middle of the night in return for payment of some sort. As the convicts had virtually no possessions they must have traded government stores or supplies, which was another reason for Mitchell to try and prevent such practices and he seems to have been successful.⁵⁵

There was just one episode when sex led straight to tragedy. On his second expedition, in 1835, Mitchell was camped for a few days about three quarters of a mile from the river Darling. One afternoon, when Mitchell was in the camp, he heard some shots from the river where a few of his men were watering the bullocks. His published account of the shooting thus depended on what his men told him. Their story was that several Aborigines had been shot, two or three of them probably killed, after some of them, although unprovoked, had attacked the watering party.⁵⁶

The truth was almost certainly far otherwise. Nine years later another exploring party was in this same place and several Aborigines reported that they had witnessed this shooting and that it accompanied the rape of a woman by one of the convicts and the

51 L&C, 24 December 1805 and 21 January 1806.

52 L&C, 2 July 1806.

53 Mitchell 1848: 119-20.

54 Mitchell 1839, I: 132-5. Mitchell 1831-2: 22 February 1832.

55 Mitchell 1848: 119-20.

56 Mitchell 1839, I: 271-5.

murder of her child or (the details vary a little according to the different reports) that it occurred after a quarrel about a convict's refusal to give the woman a kettle promised in return for sexual favours. So, according to these quite credible reports, several lives were lost as a result of inter-racial sex.⁵⁷

But that was not the end of the story. A year later, on his third expedition, Mitchell met this same group of Aborigines a couple of hundred miles away from their home, on the river Murray. Believing they were about to attack him, he set an ambush and in a short military operation he and his men killed seven before they could escape into the bush.⁵⁸ Lewis and one of his men killed two Indians who were attempting to steal their guns and horses.⁵⁹ but the massacres on the Darling and on the Murray were much more terrible and tragic affairs.

The Americans killed only two Indians but Clark, who killed none, could at least talk in a very bloodthirsty manner. He told the Pawnee Indians to keep away from the camp or he would certainly kill them. He said that they had treated the white men very badly, had robbed them of their goods; that they should keep away from the river 'or we Should kill every one of them etc. etc.' The Pawnee were not to be outdone. Seven of them halted at the top of a hill 'and blackguarded us, told us to come across and they would kill us all etc of which we took no notice.'⁶⁰

Clark also had an eye for squalor. Of a village in Washington he wrote, 'The village of these people is the dirtiest and stinkiest place I ever saw in any shape whatever, and the inhabitants partake of the carrestick of the village.' But Lewis had an eye for something else. Of this same village he observed rather the Indian art, 'these people are very fond of sculpture in wood of which they exhibit a variety of specemines about their houses.'⁶¹

Lewis was also alive to Indian virtues. The Wallahwollahs in Washington so often returned to the explorers implements which they had carelessly lost that Lewis sang their praises. 'I think', he wrote, 'we can justly affirm to the honor of these people that they are the most hospitable, honest, and sincere people that we have met with in our voyage.'⁶²

The Wider View

Neither American wrote very much about any larger view they might have had about the place of their expedition in American history or echoed in any way Bishop Berkeley's idea that 'Westward the course of empire takes its way.' In one rare passage, though, Lewis, at the outset of the voyage, compared their little fleet on the Missouri with those of Christopher Columbus and Captain Cook. The American fleet was 'not quite so respectable' but he thought he looked on it with as much pleasure as those justly famed adventurers ever beheld theirs.

He reflected that his party was about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width on which the foot of civilised man had never trodden. What would befall them all, he did not know but he had the most confident hope of succeeding in this voyage which had been his ambition for the previous ten years. He was then twenty-nine years old. The

⁵⁷ Waterhouse 1984: 32, 38-9. Peake-Jones 1975: 50-1. Finnis 1966: 32-3. Eyre 1845, II: 470-2.

⁵⁸ Mitchell 1839, II: 101-4. Mitchell 1836: 27 May. *Government Gazette* 1837: 65-72.

⁵⁹ L&C, 27 July 1806.

⁶⁰ L&C, 30 August 1806.

⁶¹ L&C, 24 March 1806.

⁶² L&C, 1 May 1806.

moment of departure, he thought, was amongst the happiest of his life. All were in excellent health and spirits and zealously attached to the enterprise. There was not a whisper of discontent to be heard but all acted in unison and with perfect harmony.⁶³

This mood of reflection was not often repeated but the spectacle of the great falls of the Missouri shook Lewis out of his customary sharp focus on the mundane here and now. The river was then about 300 yards wide. About a third of it was a smooth, even sheet of water falling over a precipice at least eighty feet in height. The other 200 yards fell a similar distance but here irregular and projecting rocks broke up the water into a white foam which assumed a thousand different sparkling forms every second and which was illuminated by a rainbow when the sun was shining.⁶⁴

It was so beautiful that Lewis felt he could not adequately describe it and wished to give 'to the enlightened world' a just idea of this sublimely great spectacle by borrowing the pen of Thompson (presumably James Thomson, 1700-1748, one of the first Scottish romantic poets) or the pencil of Salvator Rosa, a seventeenth century Italian painter who built an international reputation with landscapes both sublime and grand. By an odd coincidence, Mitchell, too, was so enamoured of Salvator Rosa that in his honour he named a river, a mountain and a lake, Salvator.

One thing lacking in Lewis and Clark is the ability to see the European-Indian relationship as a whole. They give many detailed descriptions of Indian villages, Indian dress, Indian customs and so on but have little to say about more general questions about the future relations between Indians and Europeans. They focus very sharply on the details of what was before them but lack a wide angled lens for the larger view.

Mitchell, though, had a much wider view of the Aboriginal question than did the Americans and he expressed it much more frequently and fully. Perhaps, though, it would be better to say he had much wider *views* because in a double sense he was deeply ambivalent. He was ambivalent about the nature of Aborigines and he was ambivalent, in the second place, about the future relations between Europeans and Aborigines.

He never seemed to be able to make up his mind about what the Aborigines were really like. Often he expressed the seventeenth or eighteenth century view of the noble savage, the man living in the wilderness uncorrupted by the diseases or the vices of a civilised but decadent society.⁶⁵

There was much that Mitchell admired about the Aborigines: their magnificent physique, their endurance, their abilities to hunt and fish, their astounding successes in tracking through the bush. He liked their independent attitude of mind (except when it interfered with his employment of them). He often praised their ingenuity in making baskets, drinking vessels, nets, spears and other artefacts. When he invented a ship's propeller he claimed to have based it on the principle of the boomerang. He enjoyed learning about their legends and the meaning they gave to the stars.⁶⁶

An unusual funerary practice, by which the bereaved son or brother sat every night in a specially built hut beside the corpse of the deceased until it was quite decomposed, indicated to Mitchell a respect for the dead unsurpassed in all the annals of humanity.⁶⁷ He formed close friendships with two of the Aboriginal guides and interpreters on whom he relied on

63 L&C, 7 April 1805.

64 L&C, 13 June 1805.

65 Mitchell 1839, I: 170-1. Mitchell 1848: 64-6.

66 Mitchell 1828-30: 17 June 1828.

67 Mitchell 1839, II: 70-1. Mitchell 1836: 10 May.

his expeditions. In all these respects his admiration was unbounded. But on the other hand, like Thomas Hobbes, Mitchell also believed that without civilisation, letters and education, the life of man was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Mitchell expressed this more pessimistic view when Aborigines were trying to steal the expedition's equipment or harass his men; when they threatened to attack the expedition or when they killed isolated individuals.⁶⁸

In these circumstances Mitchell's language sometimes suggested the Aborigines were really sub-human savages because they were utter strangers to any sentiment of sympathy or mercy. All too often, as well, they showed no sense of gratitude. Mitchell now and then rewarded Aborigines who had guided or informed him with the present of a tomahawk. This was highly valued but sometimes the recipients promptly used the axes to make spears and waddies to kill those who had provided them. Such ingratitude, Mitchell often felt, was typical of Australian man in the Eden of his existence. He convinced himself that no kindness or generosity had the slightest effect in altering or restraining the savage desire of these wild men to kill the white strangers when they first appeared.⁶⁹

Mitchell was entirely free of any racial theory. He never suggested that civilisation depended on race. Civilisation depended rather on education. He thought of himself as a civilised man and of educated British people as forming a civilised society. Convicts, speaking generally, were ill-educated and were therefore much less civilised than he was.

Totally uncivilised people were like animals. The closer the savage tribes of mankind approached the condition of animals, the more they tended to resemble each other. The uniformity of their manners and customs was a natural consequence of their uncultivated mental faculties. So Mitchell like to point to similarities between Aboriginal practices and those of, what he termed, other 'rude and primitive specimens of our race'.⁷⁰

His published journals are thus scattered with erudite references to the *Old Testament*, Homer, Herodotus, Tacitus and to a number of modern authors pointing out similarities between Aboriginal mores and those of 'rude people' in the orient or the ancient world.⁷¹

Mitchell was quite convinced that Aborigines could become civilised, just as it was possible for European peasants to become civilised, through education. He took the Aboriginal girl Ballandella into his home to demonstrate this and was delighted when she was soon able to read as well as any white child of her own age.⁷²

But Mitchell's easy equation of civilisation with education almost entirely begged the question. By 'education' Mitchell meant a civilised education, one similar to that he had received himself. Had he thought about it, he must have realised that Aborigines, too, were educated but not in a manner he would have considered civilised. Aborigines could read the earth more fluently than many of his men could read a book. As he well knew, they could compose poetry and make corroborees worthy of Covent Garden. How could they do such things if one generation had not educated the next? Sometimes Mitchell realised that he could not fairly equate black and white with savage and civilised because in his manifold difficulties in flood and field, the intelligence and skill of the black men often made the 'white fellows' look rather stupid.⁷³

68 Ibid., 4 June and 14 September. Mitchell 1839, I: 203-4, 245-8, 303-8; II: 270.

69 Ibid., 289-90.

70 Ibid., 348.

71 Ibid., 347.

72 Ibid., 352.

73 Ibid., 162.

It was another problem he never really resolved.

Mitchell was also ambivalent about the future of relations between Aborigines and Europeans. His opinions here were impaired by a serious error he made about the facts. He estimated the number of Aborigines in the regions he had explored, roughly two thirds of eastern Australia, to be considerably fewer than six thousand. The real figure must have been five or ten times as great.⁷⁴

In several places on his journeys Mitchell had seen wild cattle. If their numbers became greater, he thought the Aboriginal population, because of this new food supply, might increase very rapidly. If not civilised, these more numerous Aborigines might become formidable and implacable enemies of white settlers.⁷⁵ As it was, there were serious conflicts on the frontier. On his fourth expedition in 1845-46, Mitchell had seen, on leaving the outer fringes of European settlement, the way in which Aboriginal attacks had forced outlying stations to be abandoned.⁷⁶

But another outcome he thought more probable. Mitchell was an early environmentalist. He recognised that cattle drove out kangaroos. He often saw and deplored the way cattle trampled beautiful water holes into barren patches of mud which could then provide water for neither man nor beast.⁷⁷ In addition, stockmen killed kangaroos for their skins but no mercy was shown to an Aborigine who, deprived of his customary food, helped himself and his family to a bullock or a sheep. That was theft by immoral savages.

The inevitable result, Mitchell feared, would be the virtual extinction of Aboriginal people unless measures were taken for their protection. At the very least, he believed, it would be an act merely of justice, not generosity, to prevent white men from killing kangaroos and emus which were essential for Aborigines just as sheep and cattle were for Europeans.⁷⁸

Mitchell grieved over the passing of the Aborigines yet he was horrified if they struck back and recaptured their hunting grounds from the white invaders and he recognised quite clearly that his explorations were actively assisting the spread of white settlement.⁷⁹ Several intellectual dilemmas baffled him. This was a moral dilemma he never came anywhere near solving.

Lewis and Clark practically ignored such larger issues although they had quite specific political aims in their dealing with the various Indians nations they encountered. The United States by the Louisiana purchase had recently acquired from Napoleon a vast territory, roughly all the land between the Mississippi and the Rockies, and Lewis and Clark attempted to persuade the Indians inhabiting it to accept the sovereignty of the United States government, or, as they put it, to recognise the authority of the Great White Father in Washington. They also tried to stop the endemic warfare between the Indian nations and to ensure that the lucrative fur trade was carried on by Americans rather than the English or French.

The first formal conference with the Indians to announce these policies was held on the Missouri on 3 August 1804. A mainsail was erected into a temporary awning to shelter the diplomats and the soldiers made a formal dress parade to impress them. Lewis made a long

⁷⁴ Ibid., 351-2.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mitchell 1848: 20-2, 25, 32, 34, 46.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 14, 69-70.

⁷⁸ Mitchell 1839, II: 351-2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 159, 171.

speech. The Indians chiefs all made speeches and were given presents, medals according to their rank, a canister of gun powder, a bottle of whisky and some clothing. Everyone seemed to be in agreement but little that was tangible resulted from this or the many subsequent conferences.⁸⁰

On the return journey, for example, while still in the Rockies, Lewis and Clark collected the chiefs of five or six nations together and spent half a day with a piece of coal and a mat drawing a map showing the relative position of the United States and detailing its nature and power, its desire to preserve harmony among its red brethren and its intention of establishing trading posts for their relief and support. The negotiations went on and on. The officers spoke in English to one of their men. He translated it into French to the party's French interpreter. He translated to his wife in the Minnetaree language. She put it into Shoshonee and the young Shoshone finally interpreted it into the local language, Chopunnish. It is no wonder that the explorers' political hopes were little realised.⁸¹

Their political program, Lewis and Clark believed, was quite compatible with Indian welfare. The coming of 'civilisation' and extended trade with the United States, they were convinced, would be to everyone's benefit.⁸² Lewis once prepared a good meal of boiled corn and vegetables for the half starved Shoshones. He thought the 'poor devils' were very grateful and their chief wished his nation could live in a country which could provide such food. Lewis told him that before long the white men would enable his nation to live in the country below the mountains where they might cultivate corn, beans and squashes.⁸³

But these were vague hopes however much they signified good intentions. The only record we have that either man seriously contemplated future relations between Europeans and Indians is a twenty-eight page essay which Lewis wrote in 1806 or 1807 entitled an 'Essay on an Indian Policy'.⁸⁴ It discusses the fur trade which, Lewis believed, would flourish in the future when American free competition replaced the old Spanish system of state controlled monopolistic licences. Lewis's mental horizon was very narrow. Unlike Mitchell, who saw further, if only through a glass darkly, the Americans had no inkling that European civilisation meant for the indigenous people, to use a phrase of Levi-Strauss, 'a monstrous and incomprehensible cataclysm'. Neither man seems to have had the slightest notion of the extent, over the next two or three generations, to which Indians would be deprived of their lands.

As one cynical and xenophobic observer put it:

Across the plains where once their roamed
The Indian and the scout,
The Swede with alcoholic breath
Puts rows of cabbage out.

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⁸⁰ Cf Ronda 1984: 18-9.

⁸¹ L&C, 11 May 1806.

⁸² L&C, 20 August 1805 and 26 July 1806.

⁸³ L&C, 22 August 1805.

⁸⁴ Coues [1965]: 1215-43.

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