



# Undaunted Courage

*Stephen Ambrose*

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## **Undaunted Courage** Stephen Ambrose

Ostensibly a biography of Meriwether Lewis, the book's centerpiece is the famed Lewis and Clark expedition of 1803-1806. This section covers well-traveled ground, but the story is a good one and bears repeating. I emphasize the word "story" here, for that is what Ambrose supplies, a work of narrative history calling to mind the greatest adventure fiction. The reader may even recognize a dash of Melville and Conrad. Ambrose begins by discussing Lewis's upbringing and training, both of which influenced President Thomas Jefferson's decision to appoint him leader of the party. Lewis was heir to a plantation neighboring Jefferson's, and the president recognized the inquisitive habits of mind marking many of the landed gentry of early Virginia. In the army, Lewis had acquired the skills necessary to survive on the frontier while stationed at various posts throughout the Old Northwest. Next came Lewis' preparations for the trip, which make for fascinating reading. Here the book rivals the early chapters of *Moby Dick* in its keen attention to detail, providing an exhaustive catalog of provisions: clothes, foods, medicines, guns, powder, cookware, whiskey, and trinkets for the Indians. As he arranged the logistics, Lewis put much thought and effort into selecting his companions, not least among these his good friend William Clark. Finally, before departing, Lewis took what amounted to a crash course in astronomy, zoology, and botany with the leading scientists of the young republic.

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