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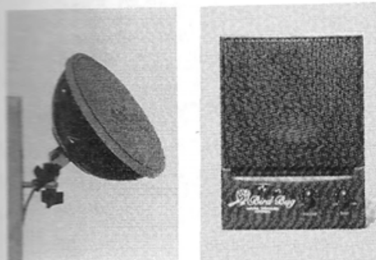

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calls our "underdog landscape." At its heart, Manning's book is a valiant attempt to spring the great grassland from "civilization's trap." —*Camille LeFevre*

WHAT THE EXPLORERS SAW

Hiking with Lewis and Clark

To Daniel B. Botkin, those who count the tree rings of North America's natural history surrender too often to the recurring pipe dream of a lost Arcadia. Like historians of kings and empires, natural history's chroniclers often fall for the idea that in some distant past a world existed in which life was free of strife, blessed by perpetual natural bounties. That assorted ecological villains—frontier buffalo hunters, strip miners, clearcutters, and the like—have used this idyll to justify their own rapaciousness is hardly news. But according to Botkin, others who should know better—biologists, wildlife managers, hydrologists, meteorologists, and foresters—have succumbed to the same sylvan myth.

Botkin, who holds a Ph.D. in ecology, feels the Arcadian breezes whenever he hears alleged experts talk about "normal" local temperatures (when they really mean the average temperature over an arbitrary and limited period), rivers at "equilibrium" level, or the "natural" level of buffalo populations. Such formulations, he says, disregard nature's essential fluidity. More to the point, they assume that before the Europeans arrived, North America was a shining Bierstadt landscape of ecological innocence, unaffected by human actions.

To remedy such thinking, Botkin offers *Our Natural History: The Lessons of Lewis and Clark* (Grosset/Putnam, $25.95), a first-person narrative that augments his own thoughts on the expedition with visits to sites along its route and interviews with various experts.

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REVIEWS

son with exploring the newly purchased Louisiana Territory. Leaving St. Louis in May of that year, the two led an expedition up the Missouri River to its headwaters, in what is now Montana. They crossed the Rockies, then descended the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. By the time they returned to St. Louis, they had covered almost 8,000 miles.

The expedition cleared the way for settlement and commerce. But what makes it unique is the volume of scientific records it amassed. Jefferson, after all, had instructed the explorers to keep detailed records of everything they encountered: climate, rivers, rocks, plants, and animals, as well as the languages and folkways of native people met along the way. Before the trip, Jefferson had sent Lewis to Philadelphia for training in natural history, the techniques of collecting specimens, and mapmaking.

The expedition's journals offer a rare glimpse of the presettlement American West. For Botkin, they dispel the myths that shroud the region's past and hamper our own efforts to maintain its ecological vitality. Among the first to fall is the notion that before Europeans streamed in, the West was a realm unshaped by human hands. The expedition frequently encountered—and was often aided by—Native Americans. "Lewis and Clark were traveling in *their* wilderness, but they were also traveling in the Indians' backyards," writes Botkin, "in the Indians' hunting and gathering grounds, along paths familiar to Native Americans. . . ."

Echoing recent assertions by William Cronon, Richard White, and various other environmental historians, Botkin argues that Native Americans had helped to shape the landscape that whites insisted on calling virgin land. Fire, the ability to work wood, and the bow and arrow, he says, constituted three "powerful technologies." He writes, "There is ample evidence that Native Americans greatly changed the character of the landscape with fire, and that they may have had major effects on the abundances of some species through their hunting."

In the journals Botkin finds object lessons for those intent on returning the West to some hypothetical pre-European ideal. The explorers' notes suggest, for

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example, that neither buffalo nor grizzly bears were as plentiful as is commonly thought. The expedition reported seeing only 37 grizzlies during its entire trip—hardly the "wall-to-wall grizzlies" of popular imagination. For Botkin, the lesson is clear: There is no "natural" abundance. There is a range of abundances, all of which are natural in the sense that the population was at those levels at some time prior to modern civilization. Wildlife managers, then, should focus less on hypothetical numerical abundances and more on the specific requirements of each species. As Botkin says, "We must understand what it needs from its habitat and the ecosystems within which it lives."

He also admires Lewis and Clark's discipline. The tools of, for instance, their cartography—the sextant and compass—seem quaint to us, and their maps often erred. Even so, Botkin writes, in their step-by-step measuring of the continent, the explorers brought to their work a devotion to detail increasingly missing in modern fieldwork. "Oh, yes," he says, "we have digital devices readily at hand: pocket calculators, handheld field computers, geopositioning satellites, remote sensing maps, and huge computer databases.... But in spite of all the gadgetry, we generally fail to measure what we need to."

Botkin largely steers clear of scientific jargon and never quite names the various experts he criticizes. In fact, however, *Our Natural History* echoes arguments made more directly in Botkin's 1990 *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century.* The author is a leading advocate of "non-equilibrium ecology," a breakaway movement that since the '70s has challenged many of the ideas of G. Evelyn Hutchinson, the brothers Eugene and Howard Odum, and other traditional ecologists. Most important, it challenges their vision of nature as essentially harmonic—in balance and orderly.

Repetition and an annoying pedantry ("in the last chapter, I discussed....") occasionally mar Botkin's otherwise fluid narrative. For the most part, however, *Our Natural History* moves like a bracing hike in the Rockies with a partner who, not unlike Lewis and Clark themselves, is possessed of the scientist's intellectual discipline and the naturalist's sense of wonder. —*Tom Chaffin*

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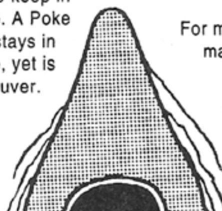

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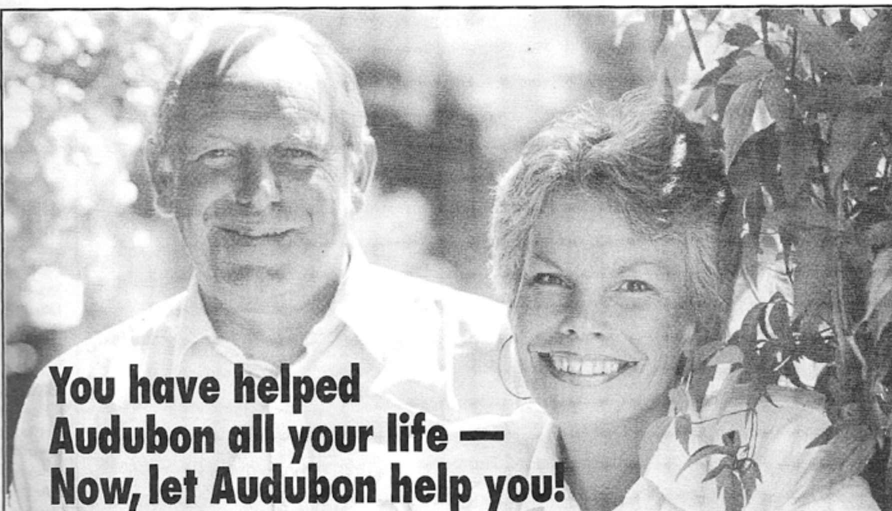

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