

## **Good Books about History, 2013-14**

Reviews by members of the OLLI-GMU History Club

Compiled by Tom Hady

*Compiler's Note: With our decision a few years ago to include historical fiction, the question of what to call "history" has become more difficult. I view my role as limited. I will occasionally ask a contributor whether this belongs in a history compilation, but I generally accept their conclusion. Other than that, I compile the reviews, put them in a common format, and do a very limited amount of editing.--TFH.*

**Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*** (2010), reviewed by Jim Crumley

This book focuses on the impact Dolley Madison, arguably our most famous and influential "First Lady," had on the early government and social life of our nation. Born a Quaker and a widow by the time she met the "Great Little Madison," (her description of our Fourth President), she exploded on the American scene. "Mrs. Madison's Wednesday Nights" were an outlet for political foes to get together in a social setting that allowed less strident discussion. Thomas Jefferson, who shrank from confrontation of any kind, very seldom invited political foes to White House meetings. In fact, he seldom talked to any Federalists during his Presidency. Madison was not a "social person" and these events provided an opportunity to meet the opposition in a convivial circumstance. Dolley Madison is probably best known for saving George Washington's portrait when the British burned the White House, but she was much more. She knew each of our first 12 Presidents. She was the first person to send a "private" telegram. She presided over the setting of the cornerstone to the Washington monument, and, was given her own, evidently ceremonial, seat in the House of Representatives. When she died, essentially penniless, the government shut down to allow a huge crowd to attend the largest funeral to that time in Washington history.

**Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*** (1992), reviewed by Don Ferrett.

I'm glad I finally got around to reading this best seller about a group of U.S. paratroopers in the European Theater of Operations in WWII. (Specifically, they were members of Easy Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division.) Ambrose used official documents and many hours of interviews with the principals to weave together the story of a group of kids who volunteered for extremely hazardous duty after the outbreak of WWII. Ambrose first describes their extended period of training in the States under a strange Company Commander before entering combat. Most of the book is devoted to detailed descriptions of their main battles: Normandy, Market Garden, and Bastogne. Also included are the time spent waiting for D-Day in England, and the end of the war where they were the first to enter Hitler's mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden.

The book includes several maps, a few photographs, and a decent index. However, there is no bibliography, and the personal recollections of these men are all that remain to substantiate many of the details presented here. I liked the book, but felt that it was not one of Ambrose's strongest (see for example: *Undaunted Courage* or *Nothing Like It In The World*).

**Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriweather Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (1996), reviewed by Jim Crumley**

While Stephen Ambrose's reputation has suffered from the plagiarism controversies surrounding several of his books, he still wrote a good story. In this one, he tracked Meriweather Lewis from his youth as a neighbor to Thomas Jefferson in Virginia, through his military career, to his time as aide to President Jefferson, and to his selection (by Jefferson) to lead an expedition to the Northwest Territories and the Pacific. While the early parts of the book are of some interest, the expedition is the key.

When Lewis, joined by his friend William Clark, began their adventure, the Blue Ridge Mountains were believed to be the highest in North America and people thought that mammoths and other prehistoric mammals might roam the Great Plains. Jefferson was most interested in finding a water connection to the Pacific.

Throughout the trip, Lewis sent back notes on what he saw and examples of animals, minerals, and plant life that he recovered. At one point, he added Sacagawea, a Shoshone squaw, to his team. She served as a guide and interpreter for the expedition, and became famous over the next 200 years for her efforts. Most interestingly, she spoke various Indian dialects and a little French (her husband-- who either bought her or won her in a poker game--was a Quebec trapper). At least initially, she apparently spoke no English. So, when coming across Native Americans, she would translate their language into French for her husband, who would then pass the information to a bilingual (French and English) member of the expedition. He, in turn, would translate the information to English for Lewis and/or Clark's use. One can only imagine how many errors inserted themselves into this effort.

Some of the key points of the story include Lewis' first view from the other side of the Rockies and Clark's famous statement, "Ocean in View," when he first glimpses the Pacific Ocean.

The book concludes with Lewis' controversial term as Governor of the Louisiana territory and his death by multiple gunshots. Ambrose presents the death as a suicide, but equally responsible historians believe he was murdered. The author rejects those conclusions. Regardless, we'll probably never know the truth.

Another interesting sidelight was the continuing "feud" between the Adams family and Thomas Jefferson. John Quincy Adams and his grandson, the historian, Henry Adams, completely dismissed the Lewis and Clark Expedition as little more than a trip across the country. For most other historians, it was more than that.

**David Howard Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (1999), reviewed by Jim Crumley**

This is the third book I've read on the building of the transcontinental railroad. It is clearly the most comprehensive, but may be overly detailed for some (maybe most) people. The dreamers, the engineers, and the politicians, along with the controversial designs, inter-regional conflict, backroom deals, and out-and-out bribery are all here. The Indian threat, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Plains and major weather phenomena are all overcome. The silver find in Nevada, the gold find in California, and the desire to connect east coast and west coast as a link between European and Asian commerce all drive "the greatest engineering challenge in history." Thomas Durant, who is presented in a fictionalized portrayal on the AMC series, "Hell on Wheels, appears even more devious in "real life."

Durant's Union Pacific races to lay track going west and Leland Stanford's Central Pacific railroad rushes to meet up to connect the nation's rails at Promontory Point, Utah. It's really an exciting story as they overcome one problem after another to change commerce in our nation like no previous episode in our nation's history could have.

**Robert D. Bass, *The Swamp Fox: the Life and Campaigns of General Francis Marion* (1959), reviewed by Jim Crumley**

This is a short (245 pages) book about the life and times of Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox." The author notes Marion's very hard-working, Christian upbringing in South Carolina and his exploits fighting Cherokees during the French and Indian War, but, within about ten pages, he gets to the whole point of the exercise—Marion's time as a partisan guerrilla during the American Revolution. His "cat and mouse" game throughout the eastern half of South Carolina with Britain's infamous Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton provides highlights to the narrative. In fact, it was Tarleton who gave him the nickname, "Swamp Fox."

Marion was apparently only semi-literate and could be moody and introspective, but he had an intuitive strategic and tactical genius that served him well. Starting as a Private, he led the British on a "merry chase" through much of the war and eventually was promoted to Brigadier General under Nathanael Greene. While the British (particularly Tarleton) were accused of terrorist tactics (burning of homes and killing women and children), Marion was known for, and frequently criticized for, his humane treatment of the enemy.

**Pierre Berton, *The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush* (1958), reviewed by Tom Hady**

Here are the stories of the flood of humans who descended on the Klondike after gold was discovered in 1896. Most of them were looking for gold, but many just saw a good business opportunity selling needed supplies to the gold-seekers—and they got rich doing it. Some went over Chilkoot Pass, the location of the iconic pictures of men laboring up the steep, snow-covered trail. Others went through Skagway to White Pass, and found themselves on "Dead Horse Trail." Still others tried other routes. Most got to the Klondike too late, if they made it at all.

One point not always clear in other accounts is that while Soapy Smith and his henchmen ruled Skagway, the Mounties enforced law and order on the Canadian side. It was said that you could leave a bag of gold dust on the trail for a week and come back to find it intact. Miscreants in Dawson were given one of two sentences by the Mounties (their commander apparently also ran the court): leave town, or work for a term of months on the government wood pile—which amounted to an astounding 1320 cords of wood for a winter's supply. Fifty prisoners were usually at work, year round.

Mounties to the contrary, petty crime was rampant on both sides of transactions: *Most men used the so-called "commercial dust," heavily laced with black sand, to pay their bills. As the bank valued this commercial dust at only eleven dollars an ounce, a customer using it to buy groceries or whisky could reckon that he was saving five dollars an ounce, since the normal price of clean Klondike gold ran around sixteen dollars. . . On the other hand, the bartenders and commercial businessmen weighed the dust carelessly, so that a poke worth one hundred dollars was usually empty after seventy dollars' worth of purchases were made.*