

*The Unknown West*

WITH THE POSTING TO PARIS, six weeks spent traveling in southern England, the three-month tour of France and Italy, the six-week tour of Holland and the Rhineland, and the monthlong northern tour of the United States, Thomas Jefferson was a well-traveled man, especially for someone who craved (or claimed to crave) the solitude of life at home. His most important voyage of discovery, which began the process of cementing together the modern geographic vision of the country, was conducted vicariously. The journey of the Corps of Discovery, made between 1803 and 1806 under the leadership of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, was in many ways a reflection of Jefferson himself, the man who commissioned and planned it. The expedition was one of his greatest scientific achievements.

The western wilderness extended, as everyone knew, two thousand miles or more to the Pacific Ocean. Most of it was unknown (except, of course, to its Indian inhabitants). Explorers from the Pacific side had not penetrated far inland before they saw a barrier before them, range after range of the magnificent Great Stoney Mountains, but some also told of a mighty river in the north (the Columbia) that afforded access to the hinterland. In 1800, French and Spanish traders, trappers, and missionaries knew a great deal more about these western lands than did the English speakers who ruled from the Appalachians eastward. But which group of Europeans would finally discover the secrets of the western wilderness? Indeed, who would colonize, exploit, and own it?

Jefferson the statesman saw the vast spread of land from the west bank of the Mississippi to the Pacific as a political, economic, and scientific opportunity. The French and Indian War had given British America the