



The Salish People and the Lewis and Clark Expedition

Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee, Elders Cultural Advisory Council, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

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On September 4, 1805, in the upper Bitterroot Valley of what is now western Montana, more than four hundred Salish people were encamped, pasturing horses, preparing for the fall bison hunt, and harvesting chokecherries as they had done for countless generations. As the Lewis and Clark expedition ventured into the territory of a sovereign Native nation, the Salish met the strangers with hospitality and vital provisions, while receiving comparatively little in return.

For the first time, a Native American community offers an in-depth examination of the events and historical significance of their encounter with the Lewis and Clark expedition. The result is a new understanding of the expedition and its place in the wider context of U.S. history. Through oral histories and other materials, Salish elders recount the details of the Salish encounter with Lewis and Clark: their difficulty communicating with the strangers through multiple interpreters and consequent misunderstanding of the expedition's invasionary purpose, their discussions about whether to welcome or wipe out the newcomers, their puzzlement over the black skin of the slave York, and their decision to extend traditional tribal hospitality and gifts to the guests.

What makes *The Salish People and the Lewis and Clark Expedition* a startling departure from previous accounts of the Lewis and Clark expedition is how it depicts the arrival of non-Indians—not as the beginning of history, but as another chapter in a long tribal history. Much of this book focuses on the ancient cultural landscape and history that had already shaped the region for millennia before the arrival of Lewis and Clark. The elders begin their vivid portrait of the Salish world by sharing creation stories and their traditional cycle of life. The book then takes readers on a cultural tour of the Native trails that the expedition followed. With tribal elders as our guides, we now learn of the Salish cultural landscape that was invisible to Lewis and Clark.

The Salish People and the Lewis and Clark Expedition also portrays with new clarity the profound upheaval of the Native world in the century before the expedition's arrival, as tribes in the region were introduced to horses, European diseases, and firearms. The arrival of Lewis and Clark marked the beginning of a heightened level of conflict and loss, and the book details the history that followed the expedition: the opening of Salish territory to the fur trade; the arrival of Jesuit missionaries; the establishment of Indian reservations, the non-Indian development of western Montana; and, more recently, the revival and strengthening of tribal sovereignty and culture.

Conveyed by tribal recollections and richly illustrated, *The Salish People and the Lewis and Clark Expedition* not only sheds new light on the meaning of the expedition, but also illuminates the people who greeted Lewis and Clark, and, despite much of what followed, thrive in their homeland today.

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