

Travels in a Subjective West: The Letters of Edwin James and Major Stephen Long's
Scientific Expedition of 1819-1820

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Dictionary of American Portraits (1967)



Travels in a

The Letters

and Major Stephen Long's

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View of the Rocky Mountains 50 Miles From the Base, a lithograph from the account of the Long expedition compiled by Edwin James (upper left), was sketched by Samuel Seymour, a landscape painter and member of the Long Expedition.

Subjective West

of Edwin James

Scientific Expedition

1819–1820

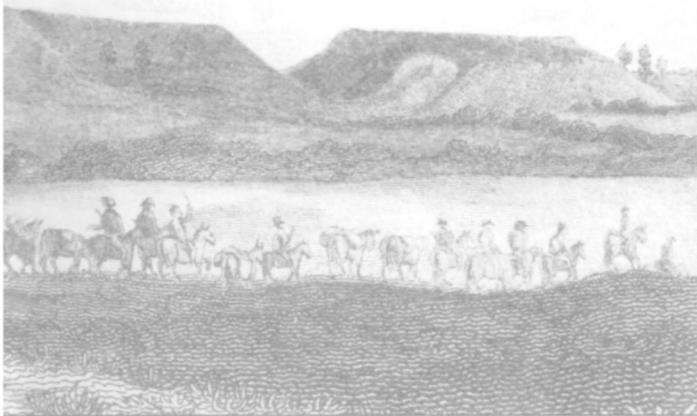
by Carlo Rotella

On October 26, 1820, a young doctor, botanist, and geologist named Edwin James sat down in Cape Girardeau, Arkansas Territory, to write a letter to his brother, Dr. John James of Albany, New York. Edwin had returned in early September from a summer's travel on the Great Plains and in the Rocky Mountains as a member of Major Stephen Long's Scientific Expedition. Despondent, irritable, and still suffering through an extended bout of fever, he heaped abuse on the expedition, its commander, and himself:

You will probably expect in this letter some account of my adventures since I wrote you which I will give as well as I can though it is with regret and reluctance that I think of any of the transactions in which I have been engaged during the summer past. I am full of complaining and bitterness against Maj. Long on account of the manner in which he has conducted the Expedition and if I cannot rail against him, I can say nothing. We have travelled near 2000 miles through an unexplored and highly interesting country and have returned almost as much strangers to it as before. I have been allowed neither time to examine and collect nor means to transport plants or minerals. We have been hurried through the country as if our sole object had been, as it was expressed in the orders which we received at starting 'to bring the Expedition to as speedy a termination as possible.' After stating this you can judge how sickened I am with the thoughts of the little I have done and the nothing which I have to say for myself.¹

In this letter and others, James appears to have provided authoritative support for the many observers who have chastised the Long expedition for its failures of science, the haste and negligence of its commander, and the insufficient attention it paid to the country through which it passed.

James's letters, not available for study before 1983, add a troublesome but potentially illuminating testimony to what is already a well-documented episode in western exploration. While they do provide new evidence that might recast or re-orient historical inquiries and disputes, the letters also present new problems of interpretation. They are another set of lines between which to read the history of the Long expedition of 1819–1820.



Yale University Collection of Americana, Beinecke Library

Long's scientific expedition also serves as context for James's own journey; the historical context reciprocally enriches and complicates a kind of autobiographical fragment contained in James's letters to his brother. The letter of October 26, 1820, for example, goes on to suggest that, whatever the failures of the expedition, James found a source of individual pride in his successful passage through difficult wilderness, weathering both natural trials and Long's unsound leadership. "I have however seen many strange things," James continued.

I have moreover seen the Rocky Mountains and shivered among their eternal snows in the middle of July, which every man has not done. I have also lived many weeks without bread and salt, gone hungry for a long time, eaten tainted horse flesh, owls, hawks, prairie dogs, and many other uncleanly things, the like of to do, and to record for the amusement of the publick seemed to be the sole ambition of our scientific commander.²

The plains, then, figured as both a personal testing ground—a waste without bread or salt in which James underwent difficult trials—and a scientifically "interesting" region yielding up plant and mineral specimens for the professional botanist-geologist. The personal narrative found in James's letters to his brother John adds a new element to the already complex play among various records of the expedition, which include the expedition's official account (compiled and co-authored by James with Long and Thomas Say), private journals and letters of its members, and the various strains of history that grew from these sources.

Major Long, Edwin James, and their expedition comrades fit into a long tradition of exploration in the West, more specifically as one of a series of official, federally commissioned investigations of the country beyond the Missouri River. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, as the United States doubled then trebled its territory, exploration of the West responded to and shaped what one historian called a growing "continental consciousness." The Louisiana Purchase and border settlements with Spain and Great Britain extended the influence of the United States in an "international competition" for North America involving Great Britain, France, Spain, and Russia.³

In addition to its scientific value, exploration served a number of important functions in extending American interests: it laid claim to newly acquired territory; it resulted in mapping little-known



Stephen H. Long

Courtesy Library of Congress

and unknown western lands; it brought discovery of new sources and markets for trade; and it paved the way for a military presence that could protect economic expansion and assure exploitation of natural resources. Thomas Jefferson codified this set of mixed geopolitical, scientific, and economic motivations in his instructions to Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, and others, guidelines with which Long and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun directed members of the 1820 expedition. Calhoun and James Monroe enthusiastically supported the process of official exploration (in contrast to the extensive and often valuable unofficial exploration performed by trappers, traders, and hunters in advance of the government).

As Jefferson's secretary of war, and then as president, Monroe envisioned a double ring of forts protecting the nation's military flank and economic borderlands in the West. By 1819, western expansion had slowed temporarily at the verge of the Great Plains, seemingly a natural barrier to further agrarian expansion. Observers of the period expected that the forbidding double buffer of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain cordillera would contain the young nation's growth; such a boundary would allow time for the population and exploitation of newly acquired territory and keep foreign powers at bay. As one recent

1. Edwin James to John James, October 26, 1820, James Letters, Western Americana, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. (hereafter James Letters).

2. Ibid.

3. William H. Goetzmann, *New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 97; Roger L. Nichols and Patrick L. Halley, *Stephen Long and American Frontier Exploration* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), 14.

history summarized this view: "Like an early adolescent, the country needed time to adjust to its new size and shape."⁴

In this broad context of expansion and consolidation, Calhoun issued orders in 1818 for three related expeditions in the West, a project known as the Yellowstone Expedition. Two substantial military missions, one up the Missouri River and the other up the Mississippi River, were charged with building forts in the Indian country, safeguarding profitable trade against Indian and European interference, and securing the authority of the Indian Office in the north from Green Bay along Lake Michigan's northwestern shore to the upper reaches of the Yellowstone River. The Long expedition, which Long had proposed earlier, formed the third component of Calhoun's scheme. Long planned to explore the tributaries of the Missouri and the Mississippi by steamboat and designed a special narrow-beamed stern-wheeler to penetrate rivers the broader side-wheelers could not ascend. Calhoun authorized Long to assemble a party of scientists and soldiers in the East and repair to Council Bluffs, where his group would rendezvous with forces of the Missouri Expedition.

The military expeditions encountered logistical and operational difficulties from the outset. Conventional steamboats were defeated by the ascent of the Missouri, and the cumbersome numbers of men involved magnified each failure of mechanical equipment, leadership, and planning. Spurred to action in a climate of financial uncertainty and retrenchment, Congress questioned the escalating cost of maintaining the expeditions. Under enormous pressure to cut costs, the War Department effectively abandoned the military expeditions. Long, whose party had reached Council Bluffs and was wintering at Engineer's Cantonment on the Missouri, rushed back to Washington in the winter of 1819–1820 to salvage his project.

Long submitted two proposals to Calhoun for a revised expedition, one wholly fanciful and the other more modest. The first envisioned a truly epic journey across the Great Lakes, down the St. Croix River, north and west to the Missouri, and then south to seek the sources of the Platte, Arkansas, and Red rivers (with an optional side trip to the Pacific thrown in).⁵ This proposal seems even more unreasonable when we consider that much of the travel was to be in Long's disappointing steamboat, the *Western Engineer*. Up to then, the boat had performed poorly, breaking down almost daily and sometimes making no headway against the Missouri's strong current.

Long's second and far more reasonable proposal redirected attention from the northern frontier to the Great Plains. The second plan pared the grandiose first proposal down to its western leg, a circuit of the Great Plains from Council Bluffs up the Platte to the Rockies, south to the Arkansas and Red rivers, and then east again to the Mississippi. Previous exploration in the West had yielded some knowledge and a good deal of confusion concerning the upper reaches of these river systems, leading explorers and cartographers to guess at the locations of their sources. Further knowledge of the Great Plains and Rockies would serve the goals of exploration Jefferson had codified, and the rivers would be the natural avenues along which that inquiry should proceed.

On June 5, 1819—after a five-week delay caused by insufficient preparation and sickness among the enlisted men designated to serve as escorts—Long's group left Engineer's Cantonment and headed for the Platte, bound for the Rockies. The official roster of the expedition, numbering twenty-two men, included: Major Long, commanding officer; Captain John Bell, official journalist; Thomas Say, an eminent zoologist; Edwin James, serving as botanist, geologist, and surgeon; Titian Ramsay Peale, an artist serving as assistant naturalist; Samuel Seymour, landscape painter; and a number of soldiers, porters, hunters, guides, and interpreters. Say and Peale, the son of portraitist and museum entrepreneur Charles Willson Peale, represented the influential scholarly societies of Philadelphia—America's scientific elite. Jefferson had appealed to this elite in formulating his instructions to Lewis and Clark, and the eastern scholarly establishment had played a central role in both official and unofficial western exploration by providing scientists and artists, collecting and analyzing information brought back from the West, and publishing and popularizing the results of western travels. James was connected to the Philadelphia elite through his brother John and his teachers. He had been hired in the winter of 1819–1820 to replace two Philadelphia men—Dr. William Baldwin, who had taken ill and died on the trip to Engineer's Cantonment, and Dr. Augustus E. Jessup, who had tired of exploration by winter.

Long's party passed the summer in executing the revised plan of exploration. Crossing the plains to the Rockies along the south fork of the Platte River, they reached the mountains in the first week

4. Nichols and Halley, *Stephen Long*, 13–14.

5. *Ibid.*, 107–8.

of July. James and two companions accomplished the first recorded ascent of Pikes Peak on July 14, rejoining the main group the next day. Turning south, the expedition paralleled the front wall of the Rockies. On July 19, they turned southeast away from the mountains. As planned, Long split his command on July 24. One party under Captain Bell descended the Arkansas River, while Long's contingent continued southeast in search of the Red River. Both groups had a hard time of it on the plains. According to their reports, they were continually short of drinking water and firewood and sometimes went without food. They were baked by the sun and soaked by sudden downpours, pestered by insects and sickness, and intimidated occasionally by bands of Plains Indians (who, Long claimed, misdirected his command at least once).

Captain Bell's contingent reached Fort Smith safely on September 9, but not before three deserters had made off with pack horses carrying several volumes of Dr. Say's zoological and ethnographic notes. Long struck a dry streambed on July 30. Believing it to be a tributary of the Red River, he descended the major river to which it led. Only after weeks of further travel did he discover it to be the Canadian. His party reached Fort Smith on September 13, after which members of the expedition gradually went their separate ways.

Long's expedition, initially praised by some contemporaries, has taken a great deal of abuse since then, although evaluation during the last three decades has provided a more scholarly and sympathetic attempt to assess its achievements and failures.⁶ The scientists did return with a rich variety of observations and samples: sketches and specimens of animal and plant life; geological, astronomical, and meteorological data; and ethnographies and vocabularies of the Missouri and Plains Indians. Such findings provided the American natural sciences, still nascent and interested primarily in the description and classification of nature in

6. For negative views of Long and the expedition, see Hiram Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (3 vols., New York: Francis P. Harper, 1902); Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion* (2nd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1960); and William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959). Goetzmann later amended his assessment in *New Lands, New Men*, 122. For more balanced views, see Nichols and Halley, *Stephen Long*; Richard Wood, *Stephen Harriman Long 1784-1864: Army Engineer, Explorer, Inventor* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1966); Howard Lamar, ed., *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains* (Barre, Mass.: Imprint Society, 1972); and Maxine Benson, ed., *From Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Major Stephen Long's Expedition, 1819-1820* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 1988).

North America, with a wealth of material for study. Long's influential map of the region between the Mississippi River and the Rockies included more accurate representations of the Platte's south fork and the Front Range of the central Rockies between Long's Peak and the Spanish Peaks to the south. Long's map depicted the dimensions and features of the central plains in greater detail than had previous cartographers. The misguided descent of the Canadian provided an opportunity to remap in more detail the river systems of the southern plains, proving false the notion, current at the time, that the Canadian's sources were tied to those of the Red. Long also depicted a section of the "Great Spanish Road," a route that was to become part of the Sante Fe Trail.⁷

Long's map is most famous, however, for its designation of the high plains as a "Great Desert," a view he, Say, and James expounded upon at length in appendixes to the expedition's official account. Long and his expedition have often been dismissed out of hand for this offense alone.

Historical criticism of the expedition falls into three overlapping categories: unsound or uninspired scientific behavior; Long's failings as a commanding officer and as an explorer; and the popularization by the expedition's official account of the notion of a Great American Desert between the 98th parallel and the Rockies. Commentators noted the explorers' half-hearted attempts to travel up the Platte and the Arkansas rivers into the Rockies, following neither to its source. The expedition did manage to map the headwaters of the Canadian, largely by accident, but never came near the Red.

Rushed by a late start and a tight itinerary, the expedition's scientists found it difficult to devote sufficient attention to their work, especially on the return trip, when both contingents were forced to concentrate on matters of subsistence. Despite the expedition's haste and concern for survival, critics have wondered how such learned men could see only a desert-like sterility in a land that supported the Plains Indians and a vast assortment of animal and plant life.

Criticisms of the expedition's scientific activities have usually crystallized in attacks on Long as soldier and scientist—as commanding officer and as explorer. Long has been accused of ineptitude and timidity, a lack of interest in science, and an

This map, reproduced from *Mapping the North American Plains* (1987) shows the routes of Major Stephen Long and Captain John Bell with the words "Great American Desert" written in three lines directly in front of the Rocky Mountains along the left of the map.

unhealthy desire for fame leading to professional advancement. Long's habitual haste and unrealistic, possibly self-aggrandizing tendencies in planning—evident in the grandiose and unworkable revised proposal Calhoun rejected—have led many to conclude that he was more interested in covering ground than in accurate scientific work. Negligence and ineptitude on the part of Long and Captain Bell, both in procuring reliable equipment and in taking readings, are blamed for the erroneous measurements the expedition recorded for Pikes Peak and other Rocky Mountain elevations. Bell and Major Biddle (the latter quit the expedition after reaching Council Bluffs in late 1819) have provided disparaging assessments of Long's character and judgment, statements to which historians have had recourse in support of theories that Long was anything from a mediocre scientist to an outright incompetent.

The harshest and perhaps least deserved criticisms of Long have usually involved the idea of the Great American Desert, an idea Long did not originate. The high plains appeared as desert regions on Spanish maps of earlier centuries, and Pike foreshadowed by thirteen years the thrust of Long's comments as they appeared in the expedition's account. Pike, the first American to publish a widely read description of travels in the Southwest, suggested that "[t]his vast plains of the Western Hemisphere may become as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa." He stated that this country was wholly arid and unsuitable for cultivation, and that, left to the "wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country," this desert region would restrict national growth "to certain limits and thereby insure the permanency of the union."⁸

Long's less informed critics have credited him with inventing a desert where none existed, while others have more justly emphasized his role as popularizer of the notion of an American desert. In an often-quoted appendix to the account of the expedition, Long echoed Pike's assessment of the region as unfit for cultivation and preventing further expansion west.⁹ On one version of Long's map, in which the words "GREAT AMERICAN DESERT" are spread across the high plains, the following legend is written across the country just south of the Platte: "The Great Desert is frequented by roving bands of Indians who have no fixed places of residence but roam from place to place in quest of game." The plains, like an ocean, figured

as a place of ceaseless movement and rootless wandering, a place where civilized settlement was antithetical to the rules of the environment.

Two related explanations have emerged justifying Long's view of the high plains as desert. The first emphasizes that, for the time and given the technology available, the plains did represent an impassable obstacle to western settlement in the established agrarian pattern. The population pressures and massive capitalization necessary for a mass movement into the region were not available until mid-century. Furthermore, the developments that changed the plains as a human habitat—dry-farming, windmill technology, extensive irrigation systems, and improved systems of communications and transport, represented above all by the railroads—registered their cumulative effect after 1845. Their influence, and that of further exploration, began to make it difficult to call "desert" a place where agrarian society was perceived to be supplanting "rootless" Plains Indians and white adventurers.

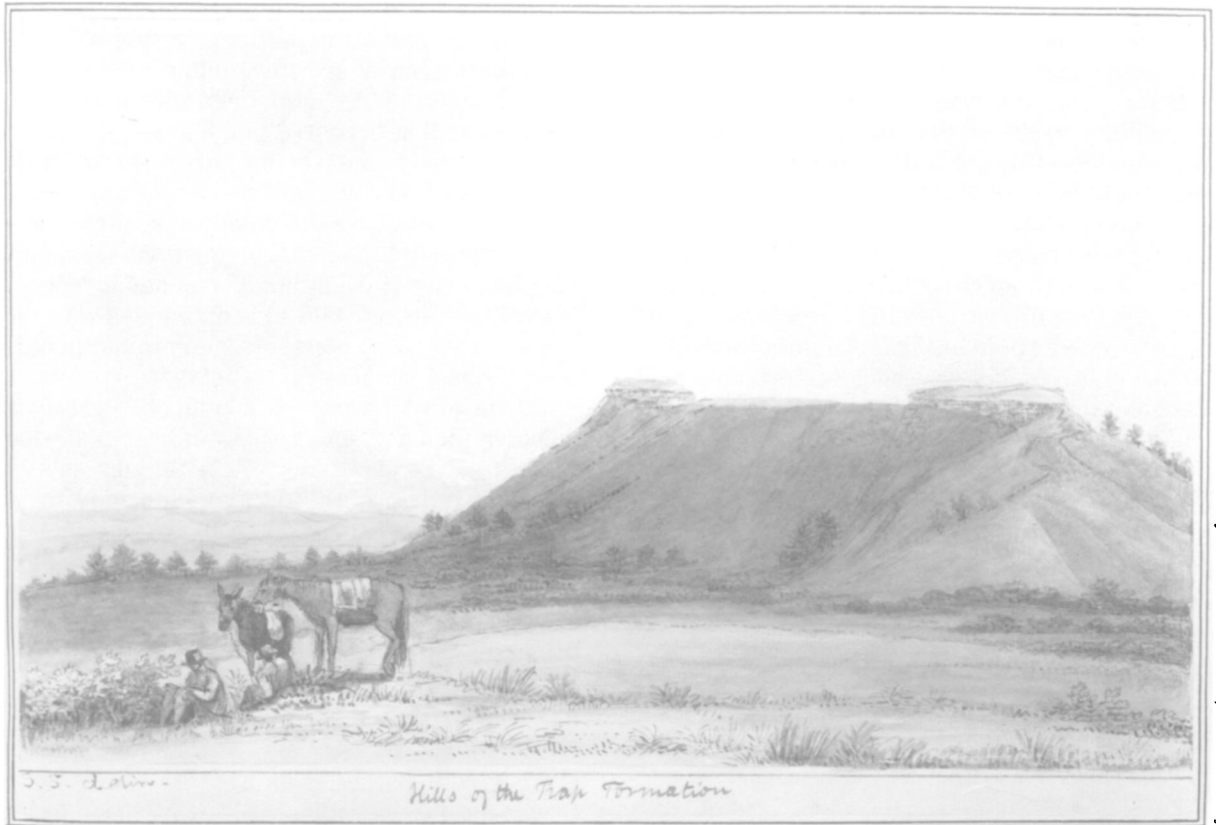
A second explanation holds that objective conditions—especially climate and topography—went hand in hand with the subjective experience of Long's party. "Given the experiences of the explorers during the summer of 1820," one biography of Long argues, "it would have been surprising had they described the Plains as anything but desert." The hardships encountered on the treeless plains in high summer—extreme heat without water or shade, fever, lack of firewood for cooking game when they could find it—led to a general acceptance by Long's men of the desert idea. "Clearly, this idea was unanimous among the explorers and not Stephen Long's single-minded or perverse view."¹⁰ One can easily imagine that the party, hurrying in great discomfort and often with empty stomachs through an inhospitable and apparently depopulated country in the relentless heat of high summer, might have arrived to a man at the conclusion that they had indeed passed through a desert.

Edwin James's letters to his brother John present an opportunity to address anew the disputes and

7. On Long's map and its relation to other maps of the plains, see James L. Allen, "Patterns of Promise: Mapping the Plains and Prairies, 1800-1860," in *Mapping the North American Plains: Essays in the History of Cartography*, eds. Frederick C. Luebke, Frances W. Kaye, and Gary E. Moulton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 47, 49.

8. Quoted in W. Eugene Hollon, *The Great American Desert Then and Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 64.

9. Long concluded, "In regard to this extensive section of country, we do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819 and '20, by order of the Hon. J. C. Calhoun, Sec'y of War: Under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long. From the Notes of Major Long, Mr. T. Say, and Other Gentlemen of the Exploring Party. Compiled by Edwin James, Botanist and Geologist for the Expedition* (2 vols., Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1823), 2:361.



Hills of the Trap Formation, 21 x 14.5 cm. watercolor by Samuel Seymour, 1820

uncertainties raised in historical evaluation of the Long expedition. In these letters James expressed strongly held opinions of the expedition's activities and set down progressively less favorable judgments of Long. In several instances he provides the most unequivocal kind of testimony supporting those who have tended to dismiss the expedition's achievements and attack Long. As James set his sights on returning to the East, however, he came to view the expedition's scientific achievements in a more positive light in keeping with the tone he adopted in the expedition's official account. Further complicating James's testimony is a personal narrative that emerges from the letters to parallel the expedition's story. James becomes a more three-dimensional character through his letters, and the development of that character complicates any reading of his professional opinions and judgments. James's individual perception of the West, of the expedition, and especially of Long is at once a contribution to historical knowledge and a product of one man's

individual quirks and personal history.¹¹

Edwin's letters to John were later assembled in a thick volume by a relative (probably Edwin's niece, Clara Reed Anthony). They were acquired from a private collector (whose interest lay not in the letters themselves but in the philatelic value of their "cancels") by Yale University's Beinecke Library in 1983 and had not been available for study before then. The correspondence covering the period of the expedition (winter 1819 to spring 1821) divides into three distinct phases: when Edwin James struggled to find employment and a measure of satisfaction in New York City; when he hired on with Long and headed west to Engineer's Cantonment; and when, after a gap of several months in which the expedition made its journey, he reflected on the summer's work while recuperating in Kentucky and the Missouri Territory, then returned to the East.

These are a young man's letters, written to the brother to whom he felt closest.¹² They show an uneasy blend of deference and intimacy, brotherly good humor and brotherly hostility, and they show a candor not evident in James's more formal and

10. Nichols and Halley, *Stephen Long*, 167.

11. Additional sources on James's character and career include Edwin James's diary, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York City; and Maxine Benson, "Edwin James: Scientist, Linguist, Humanitarian" (doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado, 1968).

12. On Edwin James's close relationship to John James, see Benson, "Edwin James," 9.

reserved letters to mentors, professional acquaintances, and potential employers. James's attitude toward his successful and established older brother showed marked variation over the course of the expedition, as his earlier abject tone was increasingly tempered by a kind of philosophical superciliousness—an air of worldly superiority which nonetheless expressed Edwin's continuing insecurities having to do with professional and personal achievement. Throughout the letters, the fluctuations of his relentless obsession with money both suggest a real concern about his financial status and figure as an index of his wavering self-esteem. Such considerations contribute to a self-portrait, both unconscious and self-conscious, that reflects on James and on what the expedition meant to him.

The earliest letters, those written in the winter of 1819–1820, introduce James at the low ebb of his fortunes, pursuing a frustrating existence in New York City:

I am still here, taking patiently the bangs and 'buffetings of outrageous fortune,' and at times I can discover no prospect of relief. I have advertised for employment as a Private Teacher but I have heard nothing farther from it and it is probable I shall not. I am entirely at a stand. . . .¹³

Born in Vermont in 1797, Edwin James was not yet twenty-three at the time he wrote these lines to his brother. Having graduated three years earlier from Middlebury College, he was studying medicine informally and looking for steady work befitting a man embarking on a medical or scientific career. Read in the present day, his letters to John have a timeless quality, expressing the self-doubt and premature cynicism of an aspiring young professional anxious about his career and dignity. Sometimes, his letters read like telephone calls home from New York that could have been made yesterday. Edwin's letters of this period are exercises in self-doubt, characterized by despair shot through with wild surges of hope, betraying shame at his economic and emotional dependence on his family. He alternates praise of John, who had at that time just published a well-received book, with endless complaints about his own suffering, poverty, hunger, and embarrassment.

The fragility of his self-esteem is constantly in evidence. He is quick to discern personal insult in

a prospective employer's brusque manner, or in a harassed mailman's impertinent response to his repeated asking after return letters. He insists that his brother write more often with advice, and complains that his correspondents neglect him. He is resigned to the fact that, wherever he might go, "the mark and the fortune of Cain would still accompany me." He habitually discounts any hope or possibility of change for the better, slipping into categorical pronouncements of despair: "I am wholly astonished and confounded with the present state of my concerns, and I think there is less prospect of change or relief than ever."¹⁴

Edwin must have been a difficult correspondent. On the one hand, the reader bristles at what seems to be an impossibly self-centered response to a letter from his two brothers, John and Henry, concerning his mother's death. In a bland opening, he writes, "Your last letter and Henry's containing the intelligence of Mother's death. I should have answered before," then launches into a detailed discussion of finances with, "but I have been waiting with great impatience for some news to communicate in relation to my own affairs. . . ."¹⁵ On the other hand, Edwin is capable of thoughtfulness and a bit of gentle irony at his own expense.

If ever I come to see a less stormy time I think it possible that I may not regret this opportunity to gain wisdom by experience. The daily lessons which I am taking of a certain 'stern rugged nurse' [i.e., hardship] . . . will enable me to feel and conduct [myself] a little more like a two legged animal toward the poor. . . .¹⁶

Running across the dominant gloom and self-pity is a strain of what Edwin sometimes calls "my philosophy," an intermittent effort to see his troubles in some greater perspective and a reflective impulse in which he struggled against chronic self-defeat.

Once hired by Long, and thus knowing his travail in New York would come to an end, Edwin expounded a philosophy of simplicity to his brother, maintaining that his only worldly ambition was to be free from hunger. Such a creed clashed sharply with his continued complaints about finances and obvious admiration for his brother's worldly success. Ahead stretched the expedition, "the Missouri business," which had become to him the last and only hope of salvation.¹⁷ His brother evidently had helped him win a position with Long, assistance that engendered heartfelt thanks and perhaps added a twist to Edwin's jealousy toward his brother. Typically, Edwin found a negative side to "the Missouri business," complaining from the

13. Edwin James to John James, December 28, 1819, James Letters.

14. *Ibid.*, January 3, 1820.

15. *Ibid.*, March 4, 1820.

16. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1820.

17. *Ibid.*

outset about the effects of federal parsimony on the amount and regularity of his pay.

Although it soon deteriorated on the journey west, James did form a good opinion of Long when they first met in Philadelphia. He wrote, "I find Long has the appearance of a pretty clever fellow, about 40 years of age, and as I judge of moderate talents. I believe he has formed a pretty good opinion of me, as to be sure he ought to do."¹⁸ James notes that he had observed the signal courtesy in this first meeting of not requesting advances upon his pay. For James, this probably constituted a supreme self-restraint, as money was foremost on his mind.

Steaming west a month later, James made this encouraging report: "I am (I think) gaining in the good opinion of Maj. Long as he is decidedly in mine. Capt. Bell, another of our party joined us at Pittsburgh. He is also a superior man. I expect to pass my summer most delightfully."¹⁹ This uncharacteristic optimism disappeared in ensuing weeks as James became aware of the finalized plans for exploration. His initial complaints, not specifically directed at Long, centered on the War Department's penuriousness and on the incompatibility of such a hasty journey with careful science. His generalized disgust with the planned project, however, soon took the form of a growing dislike and mistrust of Long.

On May 10, 1820, James wrote a long letter from Franklin, Missouri Territory, saying his goodbyes. He was preparing to set out overland for Engineer's Cantonment. Mail delivery was unsure beyond that point. Reviewing the course planned for the expedition, he grouched, "I am sorry that we shall make so hasty a business of it." In his next and last letter of the spring, a brief note scrawled just prior to leaving Engineer's Cantonment, he passed a harsher judgment on Long: "We shall make the greatest possible despatch for our commanding officer has not the least affection for the service and is in the utmost anxiety to return."²⁰

Yet, James retained hope for the summer, noting that the party was in good health and "well-equipped." This last detail counters the assertion of several historians that Long failed to acquire sufficient scientific equipment, although James might have meant simply that the party was well-armed, which it seems to have been.²¹ James himself was in excellent health and in rare good spirits. He proudly noted the "unparalleled havoc which I make among the venison and cornbread," which afforded "a constant subject of raillery to my traveling companions." His expectation that he would

become "perfectly reconciled and accustomed to the manner of living which we are to adopt" on the plains seems particularly exceptional when compared to the chronically disaffected tone of his correspondence.²²

Professional aspects of the project aside, James looked forward to the human dimensions of a journey into what he perceived as wilderness—a hope already evident in letters written the previous February, just after he learned that he might join the expedition. Still in New York, he had written almost breezily to his brother: "So you see while you are reposing with great dignity and *sang froid* upon your laurels, I am like in order to escape starvation to take a five years' walk among savages and pagans."²³ Against his most self-defeating instincts, Edwin James expected something good to come of his passage through a wilderness without bread or salt and peopled by savage pagans. Unlike his travail in a similarly inhospitable and barren New York, the wilderness journey held some inherent promise. On the eve of embarking on the expedition three months later, James seemed to have that promise in mind once more.

James did not write to his brother again until fall, when he sent off the bitter lines about the expedition, Long, and himself. In his first few letters home, written in Cape Girardeau and other locations near Fort Smith, James detailed the particulars of his "complaining and bitterness against Maj. Long." At the same time, James described aspects of his experience that seemed to serve as counterpoint to the frustrations of operating under Long's command. In his personal narrative, James struggled across the sterile plains to reach the Rockies, where he found a measure of accomplishment and serenity, at least in retrospect. In keeping with the Great American Desert thesis, he characterized the plains separating settled lands to the east from the Rockies to the west as a barren stretch in which men travel and suffer, rather than a place in which people put down roots. The metaphor of plains as ocean recurs throughout James's letters and in the expedition's official account. In one letter, he wrote:

Our voyage after leaving the inhabited country and spreading our sails upon that almost bound-

18. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1820.

19. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1820.

20. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1820, June 5, 1820.

21. Roger L. Nichols, "Stephen Long and Scientific Exploration of the Plains," *Nebraska History*, 52 (Spring 1971), 50-64.

22. Edwin James to John James, May 10, 1820, James Letters.

23. *Ibid.*, February 6, 1820.

less ocean of Savanna which lies along the feet of the Rocky Mountains extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Sources of the Saskatchewan and from the Missisipi to the Northern Andes [Rockies], was almost as unvaried and eventless as if we had been at Main Ocean.²⁴

James portrayed the plains as a place of difficult passage, barrens in which he was ground between the twin stones of physical privation and unsound leadership. The Rockies figured as a new world beyond that ocean, at once impassive and inviting. The "smooth and naked plain extends to the foot of the mountains," which, in the words of a section of the official account almost certainly written by James, "may be considered as forming the shore of the sea of sand."²⁵

In the hour before sunset on July 14, 1820, James stood at the summit of Pikes Peak and looked back east across the plains. Long had allowed James and four companions three days to reach and climb the peak, which, James noted, "had among the french hunters . . . and among the Indians the reputation of being inaccessible. My ascent of it was accordingly thought an Exploit by our party." The party's tight schedule necessitated an exhausting forced climb to reach the peak late in the day, and he had only half an hour on the summit in which to enjoy the scene and make observations. Only James and two others actually reached the summit. As the sun went down and the temperature fell, the three men hurried down the mountain toward their base camp and an impatient Long on the plains below. James, characteristically bitter and fault-finding, praises the mountains in romantic and unequivocal terms:

Within and about the Rocky Mountains everything which forms a part of the surface of the earth has a character of vastness and grandeur unlike what I have seen elsewhere. I shall never cease to regret that opportunities for seeing and admiring those glorious objects were so few and so sure never to return.²⁶

The regretful character of this description was attributable to Long, who, according to James, avoided the transcendent peaks "as if they had been abodes of infection and death or the gates of destruction." Outraged, James continued: "Our scientific and enthusiastic commander encamped on a plain of sand at the distance of 24 miles from the base of the mountains and informed me that he allowed me three days to make what examination I wished among them."²⁷ James establishes a dra-

matic contrast: himself on the mountain, finding scientific inspiration verging on the poetic; Long, bound to the sterile plain below, exerting his influence to delimit the moment and bring James down from the elevated country.

Clearly, Long is the villain of the story in James's letters to his brother that fall. James painted Long as a disinterested and careless explorer who interpreted the purpose of the expedition's travels to be "expeditious travel." According to James, Long never thought to explore the Rockies or to turn upstream on any of the rivers emerging from them. "We were in sight of the mountains, travelling south along their base more than a month, during all which time curiosity or other motive never induced our commander to step his foot within their stupendous scenery."²⁸

James believed Long an inept officer, unable to master even the mechanics of a day's march followed by a meal and a few hours' sleep. Responding to his brother's request for details of the journey, James sketched with biting sarcasm a typical day of travel: ". . . we rode patiently or until we perceived it growing suddenly dark, perhaps from the sun having gone down a little before when we were obliged to lie down supperless and without water or wood." He noted "[t]he unavoidable fatigue, and the privations (which by the way were often procured for us by the studious care of—those whom it might concern)."²⁹ James's sudden and exceptional discretion is unexplained, but "those whom it might concern" obviously referred to Long and possibly to Captain Bell, who James came to despise.

Even James admitted, however, that his growing personal hatred of Long colored his evaluation of him as a scientist and commanding officer. Long was James's boss; considering the fragile condition of James's self-respect when he left New York, it would be surprising if James did not either idolize Long or detest him. All of James's complimentary assessments of Long early on were linked to Long's good opinion of James—either real or imagined, but always according to James. Although James insisted that he had given "entire satisfaction in the discharge of my duties," it is possible that James cooled to Long as Long cooled to the expedition, to James personally, or to both.³⁰ James

24. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1821.

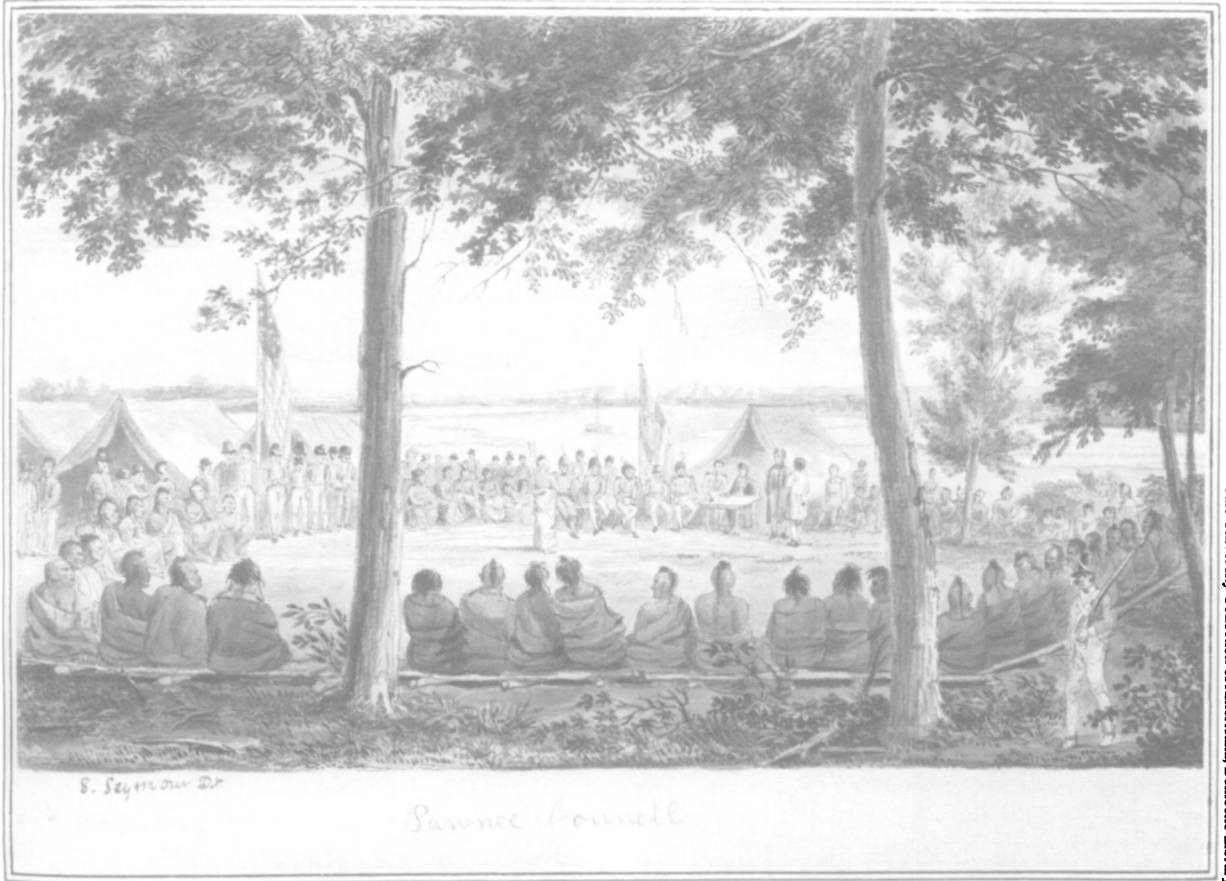
25. *Ibid.*, April 26, 1821; James, *Account* 1:477.

26. Edwin James to John James, October 26, 1820, April 26, 1821, James Letters.

27. *Ibid.*, October 26, 1820.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1821.



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Pawnee Council, 20.5 x 15 cm. watercolor by Samuel Seymour, 1819



Yale University Collection of Americana, Beinecke Library

View near the base of the Rocky Mountains, 21 x 14.5 cm. watercolor by Samuel Seymour, 1820

seems to have been the kind of man who would have taken Long's lack of professional enthusiasm as an imagined personal slight.

In addition, Long apparently made haphazard and intermittent salary payments to his party. Although it may have resulted from the government's own slipshod accounting and an uneven flow of money from Washington, such laxity struck at the heart of James's worries and insecurities. Edwin wrote to his brother John that Long had left him "ragged and destitute to winter as I can in the western country," adding that he was incapable of writing a pleasant letter until he had been paid. Admitting that his evaluations of Long and the expedition were colored by his outrage, Edwin claimed that Long had misled him as to the duration of his regular salary, and that his commander finally attempted to pay him the balance of his wages in local Kentucky currency "now at 37 ½ cents below par and on the decline. This stroke of contemptible knavery," Edwin added icily, "is a little below what I expected of him."³¹

James was not alone in disparaging Long because of personal resentments. The views of other expedition members are likewise tainted by possible animosity and questionable motivations. Major Biddle, who resigned from Long's command while it wintered at Engineer's Cantonment, thought the expedition "chimerical and impossible. Although I believe Major Long an amiable good man and I daresay respectable in his own department," Biddle wrote, "I cannot but believe he is entirely unqualified for an expedition of this description." Biddle's initial enthusiasm for the expedition had been dampened by an encounter with a band of Pawnees, who had intimidated and robbed a detachment of scientists under Biddle's care during an overland leg of the journey west to Engineer's Cantonment. Biddle said the episode "mortified" him and made him anxious about career advancement, "particularly as the story may be told in such a way as to appear disadvantageous to me."³² Thus, Biddle's judgment of Long seems tinged by a personal embarrassment involving his own conduct under Long's command.

Captain Bell, Biddle's replacement, also experienced problems with a detachment under his command. Three deserters fled camp with several valuable books of Dr. Say's notes in their saddlebags as Bell's group descended the Arkansas River. Moreover, tensions between Bell and Long were such that Bell, at one point refusing to obey Long's orders, reportedly told his commanding officer,

"We are out of the U.S., enforce your orders if you can," and "By God we both wear pistols."³³ John James evidently wrote to Edwin regarding a public commentary by Bell that disparaged Long and the expedition's achievements. Bell's bitterness toward Long may have been professional, inspired by Long's failures as an explorer and an officer, or Bell may have vented purely personal animosities in public in a way that misrepresented the expedition's activities. An 1821 letter from Edwin to John James gives validity to both possibilities and raises doubt about Bell as a provider of credible evidence against Long. Noting Bell's "mean and liberal prejudices against almost every individual of the party," Edwin suggested to John that Bell's "meagre and erroneous communication . . . relating to our expedition" was primarily a failure of character and only secondarily an exaggeration of the unpleasant truth:

You are already acquainted with my opinion respecting the manner in which the Expedition was conducted but I was in hopes there was not such an ass in the party as would, to satisfy a mean and contemptible pique; come forward and exhibit to the public our mean performances in a unfavorable light.³⁴

His lack of respect for Bell notwithstanding, Edwin James's letters inevitably enlist themselves on the side of Long's opponents. At the same time, however, James lends support to a growing recognition that Long neither invented the notion of the plains as desert nor encountered any significant dissent from the party's scientists on the subject. The expedition's official account as well as the private writings of James, Long, Bell, and Peale all show repeated references to the plains as desert, Siberian or Tartar barrens, ocean, and wasteland. James's wilderness without bread, salt, water, or wood supported the buffalo and the Plains Indians who adapted their lives to the buffalo. It did not nourish James—at least in his harshest evaluations—physically, psychologically, or professionally. In contrast to the mountains, which James repeatedly termed a beautiful and "interesting" region, the plains were "monotonous" and sterile.

While recovering from his summer of exploration, Edwin wrote to John that he was so ill and weak after an "ague fit" as to be unable to hold a pen steady and thus had been tardy in writing. Edwin complained that hunger and haste had left him little opportunity to study the subtleties of the

30. *Ibid.*, October 26, 1820.

31. *Ibid.*, April 20, 1821, October 26, 1820, June 9, 1821.

32. Quoted in Wood, *Stephen Harriman Long*, 90.

33. Quoted in *ibid.*, 111. Testimony given at subsequent court-martial proceedings against John Bell, which had no direct connection to the Long expedition, provides evidence of confrontations between Long and Bell.

34. Edwin James to John James, March 1, 1821, James Letters.

35. *Ibid.*, April 25, 1821, December 14, February 14, 1822.

plains environment in detail. Sick, broke, and uncomfortably quartered for the winter, James viewed the expedition darkly. Subjectively, the trip across the plains seemed to have been a waste, and the plains themselves a wasteland.

As he wintered in Arkansas, Edwin James faced a range of choices as to what to do next. He considered further adventure and travel. His letters of 1820–1822 are full of plans to join an expedition to the Northwest Coast, to sign on as a ship's surgeon and see the world, to "indulge my self a little longer in rambling and in the pursuit of my favourite studies," and even to go abroad to search for gold in the employ of "Pharaoh King of Egypt."³⁵ This last prospect happily combined two impulses: his urge to continue testing and even scourging himself in the wilderness, and his urge to make a great deal of money.

James also expressed interest in finding a middle ground between the wilderness and the East. In one letter he stated that he had "several times been on the point of relinquishing all thoughts of returning to the east, and yoking myself to a little Kentuckian with whom I made an acquaintance last winter." He alluded more than once to moving to one of the "new and flourishing villages of the Arkansas, Washita or some of the western rivers. Life and health being continued I should not expect anything but success to result from such an undertaking." Continuing in this optimistic vein, he even urged his brothers John and Henry to join him out West.³⁶

Throughout James's consideration of settling in the West runs a recurrence of what he called his philosophy, a fitful effort to understand and rationalize the contrasting urges that pulled at him. As he had while in New York, James again vowed that he had no ambition except to avoid hunger. He would be "rich and contented" if he knew where his next meal was coming from. "I consider myself a philosopher in my own school," he wrote. Wintering at Fort Smith, Edwin wrote to his brother that he had "nothing in either expectations or possession," yet "by the aid of my wisdom or stupidity which ever you please I pass with myself for one of the richest men on this side of the

Alleghany Mountains."³⁷

James's disavowals of worldly ambitions ring half-true at best. He still devoted the greater part of his correspondence and passions to the most tedious, niggling financial details. Similarly, he can be taken no more than half-seriously when he writes of studying nature not to make his mark upon human affairs but to engage in a kind of communion with the higher forces behind geological and botanical subjects. From the very beginning of his involvement with "the Missouri business," though, James maintained he had no interest in turning his experiences during the expedition to his own professional and financial gain. Writing from Philadelphia shortly after signing on with Long, James wrote that he would take notes on his travels

solely for the purpose of making my tour more interesting and usefull to myself. Nothing is more foreign to my thought and wishes than to attempt to come lumbering before the public reeling under the weight of 'ponderous tomes.' I have learned a great deal during the last winter [of 1819–20 in New York]. I have grown an old man and a philosopher and have cured myself of the miserable and hopeless vanity of ambition.³⁸

In 1823, however, James did indeed come "lumbering before the public reeling under the weight" of the expedition's official account, a thousand pages in two volumes bearing his name in the role of compiler and co-author. He had pursued a third option—to return to the New York-Philadelphia orbit and chase the success he alternately renounced and coveted. As early as the winter of 1820–1821, while he regained his strength following his return from the plains, James asked his brother to send him the works of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Amos Eaton, and other prominent students of American geology and exploration. Contrary to his initial dismissal of the expedition's achievements, he began to show signs of believing that "[t]he information which I have relative to the Botany, Geology, Mineralogy etc. of the country embraced in our rout, appears to me vastly interesting and important."³⁹ He made an entry into the professional arena in April 1821 with two articles describing his geological and botanical findings from the expedition.

James had put himself in a bind. On the one hand, he equated the virtues of natural simplicity and independence with the West. As he neared Philadelphia on his return east in August 1821, he

36. *Ibid.*, July 13, May 18, 1821.

37. *Ibid.*, December 7, March 21, December 7, 1820.

38. *Ibid.*, March 21, 1820.

39. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1821.

40. *Ibid.*, August 14, 1821.

41. *Ibid.*, April 6, April 15, April 29, 1822.

42. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1821, October 28, December 10, 1824, January 20, 1825.

43. For more on Edwin James's later life and career see Benson, "Edwin James."

wrote, "I already condemn myself for not having had resolution enough to settle down in the Western country," and resolved to return there. He claimed that he would "rather tenant the trunk of a hollow sycamore on the Arkansas or Missouri and live in independance than do as I have done in the eastern states."⁴⁰ On the other hand, there were opportunities in Philadelphia for professional advancement, acclaim, and a better eastern life than New York had offered him. Such attractions exerted the stronger pull, drawing him east to Philadelphia.

By late 1821, when Long formally asked James to edit the surviving papers of the expedition into an official account, James was eager for the project. In fact, he was soon complaining to his brother that his collaborators, Major Long and Thomas Say, were fools, that Long was "pirating" material from him, that he was doing all the good work and not getting enough credit, and that his own vanity disturbed him.⁴¹ He did not like the title of "compiler," perhaps because it gave too definite an impression that the ponderous weight of the tome was shared among several authors. While he worked on the account, James had a chance to immerse himself in the scientific milieu of Philadelphia—putting together the account, weighing offers of employment, hobnobbing with Schoolcraft, corresponding with Eaton. His budding career thoroughly overshadowed his earlier pronouncements against ambition and self-seeking.

Upon completing the expedition's account, James nonetheless made good his resolve to turn west again, eventually accepting a posting as army surgeon at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin Territory. Having managed a modest success with the account—and having perhaps suffered further injury to his dignity courtesy of his collaborators—James was ready to pursue his career in the West. True to form, he was soon complaining to his brother that he was "wasting his life," that Wisconsin was a "dismal abode." All he wished to do was "fly the country." He begged John to send some Vermont flowers for him to plant, which would be like "old friends."⁴²

Edwin James's letters to his brother are those of a young man finding his feet in the world. A look at his subsequent life and letters would yield a very different portrait: James went on to become a respected naturalist and linguist, eventually settling in Iowa and participating vigorously in the two great moralistic crusades of his century—temperance and abolition. The letters of a young Edwin James to his brother John yield a view of one man's first encounter with the West, and the Edwin James who emerges from this autobiographical fragment shapes and intertwines with the letters as documentary contributions to the history of the Long expedition.⁴³ M

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Samuel Seymour's lithograph, *Distant View of the Rocky Mountains*—from the official account of the Long Expedition compiled by Edwin James—with its dry plains in the foreground and shining mountains in the distance would have equated easily with Edwin James's subjective view of the West.

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