

The Gentleman Explorer

In 1833, German Prince Maximilian and Swiss artist Karl Bodmer ascended the Missouri River up to Fort McKenzie for the purpose of exploration and adventure. After staying at Fort McKenzie a little more than a month, they descended the River to Fort Clark where they spent the winter before returning to St. Louis. Maximilian kept a journal in which he recorded information on Indians and wildlife. Bodmer's paintings corresponded well with Maximilian's journal and provided a visual record of his verbal descriptions. Taken together, the journal and paintings provided one of the best accounts of the Missouri River and adjacent plains prior to settlement.

Prince Maximilian was the archetype of the gentleman explorer. In the late nineteenth century, many wealthy and well-educated men, particularly Europeans, undertook adventures in the American west and other remote areas of the world. Most of these men were artists, geographers and naturalists, and their journeys were grounded in the pursuit of knowledge. Many of these explorers extensively documented the flora and fauna, the native peoples and the geographic landscape of these areas that were previously unknown by outsiders. These explorers faced many dangers and hardships, although for those of a Romantic mindset, that was part of the allure. Encountering the full power of untamed and unadulterated nature was the ultimate emotional experience, as well as an extreme personal test of man's endurance. The possibilities of heroism were intrinsic in these adventures, as the explorers often strove to be the first European to explore these distant and exotic locations.

History has benefited from the writings and visual materials left behind by these explorers, but not only because of the information these materials provide as documentation of an important part of the nation's history. These texts, paintings and drawings describe the American landscape with an awe and wonderment too easily lost in the modern age.