

The Conquest of the Illinois

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[George Rogers Clark](#)

The Conquest of the Illinois, also known as "Clark's Memoir", is one of the most noteworthy of the 28 books — Sep 2010 — on American history on this site: it's a first-hand account by the chief participant, and thus a key primary source for the early history of the United States.

The document is an extraordinary one. The extraordinary part starts with its author, 21 years old at the opening of his narrative and not yet 27 when he and his men take Vincennes. The campaign he describes was his own creation, and was executed by him and not much more than a handful of men with minimal outside support, and its success insured that it would be the United States, and not Great Britain, who would control what would become the Northwest Territory: Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, with an aggregate area of about half the Thirteen original States, but more importantly forming a bulwark for them against foreign incursion, and guaranteeing American access to the Mississippi River, quickly to become crucial in the new country's exports and economic power.

Even more interestingly, it seems to me — I had never read the work until I input it here — The Conquest of the Illinois is a strikingly modern account, with its constant awareness of and emphasis on psychological warfare: out-psyching the British and the Indians, but also winning the hearts and minds of many of the native American and the pioneer French inhabitants of this vast area. In today's terms, Clark led a special forces unit, in which infiltration, engineering, psyops, and of course the more standard ingredients of military success, good generalship and physical training, all contributed to produce victory. The lesson is there to be read by today's Soldier and any who would lead them.

Faced with an account of this kind, in which the author is the chief protagonist of a great success story, we will, as thinking readers, naturally wonder how true it all is: it wouldn't be the first tissue of lies to palm itself onto its public. Indeed, no less a reader than Theodore Roosevelt thought the Memoir was essentially a tall tale: largely because of him, though, the critical faculties of scholars have been brought to bear on the matter and Clark has been vindicated.

I'm glad this is so, since for my part — I'm certainly no scholar — Clark's account fairly breathes truth. First of all, even if the details were false, the success of Clark's self-imposed mission is unarguable — and the difficulties he faced, if not these, solved in the ways he reports, must have been others equally great: *Se non è vero, è ben trovato*. But the text is strewn with all kinds of indications that the account is literally true: for example, the slice-of-life passage (p8) where he and his companion have just walked out of the wilderness at a place they hoped would provide comfort and supplies, but find it abandoned and desolate: in shock they just sit down and

look at each other in silence; and at one point at least, an important one at that (p125), he makes a speech, but writing years later he can no longer remember what he said — an untruthful man, or even a reputable ancient historian, would have invented it; and thruout, repeated regrets for various things (p136, for instance, but also in connection with his much-desired project to take Detroit) where it's clear he's attempted to put them out of his mind but they keep rolling around in him even years later: an experience we can all connect with.

Sure enough, though, we're all human; my gut and a long habit of explication de texte, tell me that though the facts may be true, the face Clark puts on them may be less so. Never once does he report a failure without explaining how in fact he had something good in mind and thus how in some manner it was planned and OK after all: like many writers of reports, he justifies himself. Here and there, too, he protests ever so slightly too much as to his American patriotism — and sure enough, his later involvement in the plans of the Frenchman Genêt shows that in a practical sense he was more of a freewheeling adventurer than a pure patriot; perfectly understandable after all since the United States had barely existed a decade or two.

Yet the most extraordinary feature of Clark's Memoir, making it a thoroughly relevant document for our own time, has to do precisely with being American.

There are of course the obvious advantages that allow an enterprising twenty-something to make history: but with generations of striking examples behind us, it hardly needs to be pointed out that the American climate of opportunity for all leads to personal success for far more of us than would be possible elsewhere, especially to the extent that the government stays discreetly out of our way, as was planned by the Founding Fathers.

Above all, though, Clark spells out clearly the advantages to the Soldier in being American, that he must have been one of the earliest to see: repeatedly, he notes the persuasiveness of the American ethic and the American way of government. Decency, honesty, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance for people's religion, respect for our property (even, as much as possible, in wartime) and the lack of covetous designs: to a good psyops man, these are weapons more powerful than muskets or nukes, and he records how they won over much of the French and the Indian population. Without such advantages, without winning over that civilian population, Kaskaskia and Cahokia could not have been taken, and ultimately the Northwest Territory would have become part of Canada — and the world a very different place.

Historical Introduction

By far the most brilliant figure in the Revolution in the West was George Rogers Clark, whose conquest of the Illinois country was the factor chiefly responsible for giving the Old Northwest to the new-born American nation in the treaty of 1783. To orient Clark's conquest in its historical setting, and to give some account of his

narrative of it, which forms the subject-matter of the present volume, is the purpose of this introduction.

The region between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes, the Alleghenies and the Mississippi, which later became known as the Old Northwest, is the territory involved in our story. The beginning of the Revolution found the British, of course, in possession of all of it. The vantage points from which they directed its affairs were, in general, the old French posts, now occupied for the most part by British garrisons. Among these may be named Detroit, Mackinac, Vincennes, Kaskaskia, and Cahokia. By far the most important center of British influence in the Northwest was Detroit, the headquarters of the posts and the key to the control of the fur trade and the Indian tribes of this region. Here was a French and mixed-blood settlement numbering upwards of 2000 souls and mustering over 300 men p. xviiicapable of bearing arms. The fort was defended by a palisade of pickets and contained at the beginning of 1776 a garrison of 120 men. To complete the tale of Detroit's military resources, there floated in the river opposite the fort a tiny navy manned by some thirty "seamen and servants."

Detroit aside, the only other considerable centers of white population in the Northwest were Ouiatanon and Vincennes on the Wabash and the strip of settlements stretched along the east bank of the Mississippi from the mouth of the Missouri to the mouth of the Ohio, on what later came to be known as the "American Bottom." Ouiatanon had, at the outbreak of the Revolution, about a dozen French families. Vincennes had a population of perhaps 500 souls. The Illinois settlements of the American Bottom in 1778 contained about 1000 whites and as many negroes and Indians. The chief town was Kaskaskia with 500 white inhabitants and about the same number of negroes. Next in importance was Cahokia with a white population of about three hundred. At Mackinac and Green Bay, possibly also at St. Joseph, Peoria, and Prairie du Chien, were settled a few French families. For the rest, the country which now teems with a population as enlightened and prosperous as any on the face of the earth was but a splendid wilderness.

Scarcely second to the whites in importance, at least from the military point of view, was p. xixthe Indian population of this region. The several tribes could muster, according to the usual estimates, about 8000 warriors. These were the jury, so to speak, to which the contending white leaders made their appeals, and on whose active aid or passive sympathy they relied as the makeweight to turn the scale in their favor. Most numerous of the tribes was the Chippewa; but our present concern lies rather with certain of the smaller tribes. Around the south end of Lake Michigan, with their principal seat on the St. Joseph River, were the Potawatomi, numbering some 400 warriors. To the south and southeastward of this tribe, in modern Indiana and Ohio, were the Miami, Shawnee, and others, who were to continue the war in the West during long and bloody years after the withdrawal of Great Britain from the contest. At Milwaukee had congregated a nondescript band composed of the off-scourings of several tribes, who, to the scandal of the British officers, usually

maintained friendly relations with the Americans. In Illinois and Wisconsin were the Sauk and Foxes, the Winnebago, and other tribes.

The advancing wave of English settlement pouring into the upper Ohio Valley had precipitated, two decades earlier, the French and Indian War. As yet this tidal wave of civilization had not crossed the Ohio, although it had spread out along its eastern valley as far south as Tennessee. The most important position along this extensive frontier was Fort Pitt at the forks of the Ohio. It was the center, therefore, from which radiated the American efforts to control the Northwestern tribes, just as at a later date, it afforded the principal gateway through which the tide of settlement poured into this region.

The Americans at first strove to secure the neutrality of the Indians in the impending conflict. But the red man could not stand idly by while a war was waging for the possession of his country, and the British more wisely directed their efforts to securing his active support. This policy was shortly copied by the Americans, and soon the perplexed natives were being plied with rival solicitations for alliance. The British urged them to assail the outlying settlements of the American frontier, counselling humanity to the vanquished but largely nullifying this counsel by offering rewards for all scalps brought in. Lieutenant-Governor Hamilton at Detroit was especially zealous in urging the Indians on to this work of devastation. The Americans offered rewards for prisoners, but none for scalps.

Two courses of action were open to the Americans in view of this situation. They might endeavor to punish the hostile Indians by launching retaliatory measures against them; or they might by capturing Detroit, from whence issued alike the supplies for the marauders and the zeal which instigated them to their bloody task, destroy the opposition at its fountain-head. The latter course was urged by Colonel Morgan, the Indian agent for the Middle Department and a man of much experience among the Indians of the Northwest. The reasons advanced by him in support of the policy he advocated were unheeded. Seeing this, and believing a general Indian war was about to be precipitated, he resigned his office. The control of the Western Department passed into less competent hands and the western frontier seemed about to be overrun by the British and Indians when a diversion of much importance occurred. The advent of George Rogers Clark in the Illinois country compelled the British at Detroit to turn their attention to the defense of the Northwest, and shortly of Detroit itself, against the bold invader.

Clark was a native of Virginia who, like Washington, fitted himself for a surveyor and began his active career in the upper Ohio country. In 1776 he had cast in his lot with the young settlements of Kentucky, and although not yet twenty-five years of age, in the crisis of their fortune he put himself forward as their leader. The Kentucky settlements were nominally a part of Virginia but in fact they were too remote from the mother country to receive much protection from that source. It was congenial, too, to the spirit of the frontiersman to depend upon himself, and Clark, who had come to the conclusion that the only means of obtaining safety for

Kentucky was to carry the war into the enemy's country, was one of those who favored action independently of authorization from Virginia.

Other counsels prevailed, however. The protection of the parent colony was sought and as a result the Virginia Assembly declared the extension of its authority over the region and in December, 1776, created the county of Kentucky. The next summer Clark learned from spies whom he had sent into the Illinois country that the French settlers were lukewarm in their allegiance to Great Britain and that only a few of them were participating in the raids against the Americans, which, fomented from Detroit, made these settlements their starting-point and base of operations. Fired by these reports with the purpose to conquer the Illinois settlements, he proceeded the same summer to Virginia. There he laid his project before Governor Henry and received that official's authorization to raise and equip a force of troops for the work. Armed with this and a scanty supply of money and ammunition he returned to Kentucky and launched the enterprise.

There is no need here to tell the story of Clark's invasion of the Illinois in the months of 1778 and 1779, for Clark's own narrative of his momentous campaign is spread before the reader in the pages that follow. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the morning of February p. xxiii25, 1779, witnessed the climax of the campaign in the surrender to Clark at Vincennes of Lieutenant-Governor Hamilton and his entire garrison. Therewith the American hold on the Illinois country was assured, for the time being at least. Permanent control of the Northwest, and peace for the troubled frontier, could be won only by the capture of Detroit, and this was at all times the ultimate goal of Clark's endeavors. But he was too weak to move upon Detroit at once after the capture of Vincennes; while waiting for reinforcements he applied himself vigorously to the work of governing the newly-won territory, establishing satisfactory relations with the Indians and preparing the way for the greater exploit which he was destined never to perform. Obstacle after obstacle arose to postpone or prevent the fulfillment of his design. The British again resumed the offensive and the season of 1780 witnessed a comprehensive attack upon the American and Spanish positions in the West. A large force of traders and Indians which descended the Mississippi and fell upon St. Louis was repulsed and forced to beat a hasty retreat. Another British-Indian army under Captain Bird made a descent upon the Kentucky settlements, destroying Ruddle's and Martin's stations and carrying off to Detroit upwards of one hundred captives. The magic of Clark's name seems to have been a potent influence in causing the withdrawal from St. p. xxivLouis. He retaliated upon the invaders with vigor, sending a force of 350 men under Colonel Montgomery to ravage the villages of the Sauk and Foxes on Rock River, who had been active allies of the British. Himself hastening back to Kentucky upon the news of the British attack in that quarter, Clark organized a force of 1000 men for the punishment of the Shawnee, who had participated in the recent invasion of Kentucky. From the mouth of Licking River, opposite the present city of Cincinnati, the army proceeded to the Indian towns of Old Chillicothe and burned the one, which had been abandoned, and stormed and burned the other. Although the issue of the campaign was not decisive, the punishment accorded the Indians sufficed to

free the Kentucky settlements from further molestation by them for the remainder of the year 1780.

For the year 1781 plans were conceived on a large scale by Clark, Governor Jefferson of Virginia, and General Washington for the reduction of Detroit, but the settlers of western Pennsylvania and Virginia largely refused to respond to the call for troops; discord developed, too, between Clark and Colonel Broadhead, the American commander at Pittsburgh, and the settlers of Kentucky were either unequal or unwilling to undertake the task to which Clark eagerly invited them. So the matter dragged on and the Revolution finally came to its close with the British still in control at Detroit, whence they still continued to exert an effective control over most of the tribes of the Northwest. Not until a dozen years more of bloodshed along the Ohio frontier, concluding with the most serious Indian war in which the American nation has ever engaged, was the grip of Great Britain relaxed, and peace restored to the long-troubled frontier. The army of Mad Anthony Wayne triumphantly concluded the contest for the control of the Northwest which Clark almost twenty years earlier had so brilliantly begun.



The First Page of Clark's Memoir

Photographed from the original in the Draper Collection at Madison

With this hasty résumé of the military situation in the West we may turn to a consideration of Clark's story of his invasion of the Illinois. In the autumn of 1779 Clark prepared, in the form of a letter to his friend, George Mason of Virginia, a somewhat lengthy sketch of his Illinois campaign. With the passage of years the whereabouts of this letter became lost to knowledge and when, in the summer of 1789, at the instance of James Madison, Clark was urged to write out the story of his western campaigns for the benefit of posterity, he sought in vain to find the document. Nevertheless in response to much urging Clark set about composing a new narrative of the period, the resultant product being the famous memoir reproduced in the following pages. The original document is a manuscript of 128 pages, at least 100 of which were written during the years 1789 and 1790. For half a century, beginning with Mann Butler's *History of Kentucky*, published in 1834, historians generally regarded and utilized the Memoir as a trustworthy narrative of events, while such novelists as Winston Churchill in *The Crossing* and Maurice Thompson in *Alice of Old Vincennes* drew heavily upon it for the substance of their volumes. Theodore Roosevelt, however, in his *Winning of the West* vigorously questioned the value hitherto accorded to Clark's narrative. He supposed it to have been written "thirty or forty years" after the events described, and "by an old man who had squandered his energies and sunk into deserved obscurity." On the painful period of Clark's later years, here alluded to, there is no present necessity for entering. It is sufficient for our present purpose to note that the strictures of Roosevelt induced Professor James, the scholarly editor of Clark's Papers in the Illinois Historical Collections, to undertake a careful examination of the entire subject. His story established the fact, already noted, that the Memoir was chiefly written in 1789 and 1790, when Clark was still in full possession of his mental and physical powers; and led to the conclusion that the Memoir, far from being "the reminiscences of an old man who strove for the dramatic in his presentation of facts," is to be regarded as a generally trustworthy and highly valuable historical narrative of the events with which it deals.

p. xxvii With our faith in the narrative thus reestablished, it remains for those who have a fondness for our western history to enjoy it. Unfortunately, from the viewpoint of the average man, as contrasted with the professional scholar, Clark's mastery of the pen by no means equalled his facility in the use of the sword. His education, viewed in the light of present-day standards, was necessarily defective. Even the trained scholar at times finds his efforts to determine Clark's meaning baffled, and it is probably safe to say that, professional scholars aside, very few persons have ever had the interest or perseverance to read the Memoir through. For such a document to remain comparatively unknown to the great mass of people in whose behalf Clark labored, is a great pity. Accordingly the effort has been made to give it an increased measure of publicity by reprinting in *The Lakeside Classics*. This determined upon, it seemed clear that instead of reprinting the Memoir literally the editor should undertake to turn it into clear and grammatical English. Such a reprint will not interest the professional scholar, of course, but for him there is already ample accommodation in the *George Rogers Clark Papers* published by the

Illinois Historical Society, and W. H. English's Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio. If the present rendering awakens in the constituency of The Lakeside Classics a renewed appreciation of the toils by which our country was won, and therewith an increased sense of its value to us, the present possessors, the hopes alike of publisher and editor will have been realized.

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