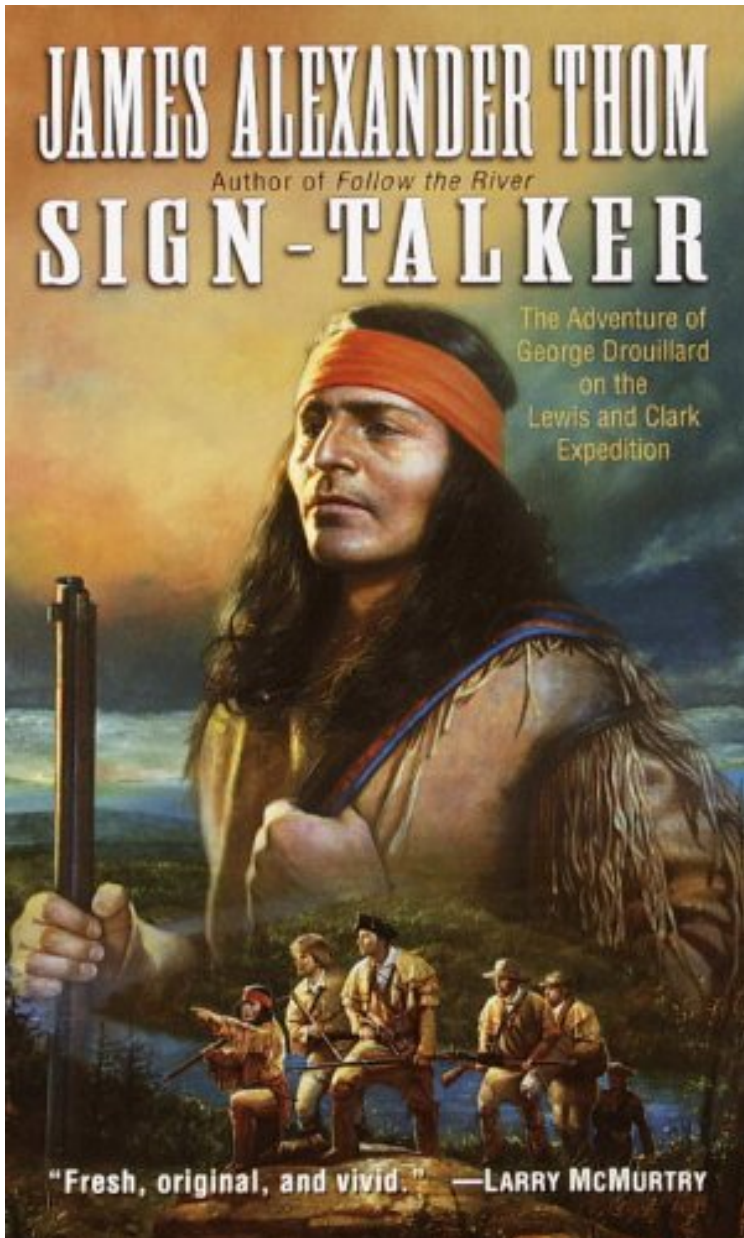


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# Sign-Talker: The Adventure of George Drouillard on the Lewis and Clark Expedition



*Par James Alexander Thom*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn his extraordinary body of work, James Alexander Thom does more than bring the past to life; he makes us experience history as if we were witnessing it for the first time. Thom's new novel is an enthralling adventure with fascinating real-life characters--and a heart-grabbing narrative that casts a vivid light on a momentous chapter in American history.Sign-Talker begins just after the Louisiana

Purchase. Thomas Jefferson has sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to penetrate the newly acquired territory, journey up the Missouri River, cross the Rocky Mountains, and reach the glimmering sea in the far West. To survive, the two captains need an extraordinary hunter who will be able to provide the expedition with fresh game, and a sign-talker to communicate with the native tribes. They choose George Drouillard. It

is Drouillard, an actual historical figure, who becomes our eyes and ears on this unforgettable odyssey. Drouillard, a metis raised among the Shawnee, cannot fathom what drives the two men. Nor can he help but admire their ingenuity and courage as they tackle the journey into the unknown. Along the way, he watches as they shrewdly shape and discipline their force, adding French-Canadian rivermen--to guide the expedition up the Missouri--and an Indian woman, Sacagawea, who will play a crucial role in negotiations with the Western tribes. After plunging into an unforgiving land and near madness, the two captains celebrate a triumphant achievement. But the glory will soon be eclipsed by an overwhelming tragedy that will touch not only Meriwether Lewis and the frontier tribes but George Drouillard himself. A magnificent tale told with intelligence and insight, Sign-Talker is full of song and suffering, humor and pathos. James Alexander Thom has created the rarest reading experience: one that entertains us even as it shows us a new vision of our nation, our past, and ourselves. From the Paperback edition. Extrait November, 1803 October, 1804 11th

November Arrived at Massac engaged George Drewyer in the public service as an Indian Interpreter contracted to pay him 25 dollars pr. month for his services. Mr Swan assistant Millitary agent at that place advanced him thirty dollars on account of his pay. Meriwether Lewis, Journals Chapter 1 Fort Massac, Lower Ohio Valley November 11, 1803 An eagle soared westward above the river bluff against a gray overcast, as if leading the lean hunter toward the fort, though the fort was where he was going anyway. He would see the big mysterious boat moored below the fort, he thought. It should be there by now. Eagles often seemed to lead the hunter, even though his personal Shawnee name was Nah Sgawateah Kindiwa, meaning Without Eagle Feathers. The name by which he was known was George Pierre Drouillard. The tawny skin of his face was taut over jutting bone, his mouth wide, thin-lipped. His hazel eyes were paler than his skin, which gave a strange brightness to his gaze that sometimes made people uneasy, as he knew it did. It was not good for a mtisa half-breed to make white people uneasy, so hunting and trapping alone was suitable work for him, away from the towns. Drouillard rode a bay horse, and led an army mule that carried the boneless venison of three deer and the meat and fat of a bear, all bundled neatly in their own hides and hung on a packsaddle. He watched the silhouette of the eagle as he rode. Already he smelled wood smoke from the fort: hickory, oak.

And he smelled latrine. He sent a thought up: Without Eagle Feathers follows you, kindiwa. There was a reason why that was his name, and it was a sad and sorry reason, no fault of his. Still, eagles often led him. Led by Eagles, that would have been a better name. If only there remained a shaman to do a new name ceremony for him, that could be his personal name. One could change to a truer name, with shaman help. Then another name came into his memory and made him laugh. Once when he was drunk a whiteman had asked him his Indian name and he said, Followed by Buzzards. The fool had believed him, though that would be a true name for him too, appropriate for a hunter. He was a good hunter. Not just a tracker and stalker and sharpshooter. In boyhood he had learned the voices and sounds of all the animals and birds, and could call and decoy them in their own languages. He was such a good hunter that Captain Bissell, commander of Fort Massac, employed him to bring game to the fort to feed its soldiers. He was paid for the meat by the hundredweight. He took his pay in gunpowder, lead, soap, and the printed paper that the americains called money. The army provided the pack mule. Followed by Buzzards. He rode along laughing. It was a laugh just slightly bitter, the taste of much Shawnee peoples laughter these days. He rode the curving path through leafless woods, and the river below was green and wide. The woods opened ahead onto a stump-studded clearing, in which the fort stood massive on its earthworks, log and stone. Originally it had been a French fort, now garrisoned by soldiers of the United States, who had rebuilt it from ruins. From its promontory on the north bank of the Ohio, one commanded a view of some thirty miles of the river, from the mouth of the Tennessee almost down to the Mississippi. It was almost like seeing as an eagle sees. There was a spirit in the place that was much older than the age of the fort. Drouillard knew this would have been a lookout place of the Ancients, those who had built the great, silent hill-mounds everywhere along these rivers, then had died or gone away before white- men came. But of course the eagle could look down with scorn even at this high, proud place, and see farther horizons. Out of the woods now, he looked down to see if the big mystery boat was moored below the bluff, and it was. He had seen it yesterday while hunting opposite the mouth of the Cumberland, had stood watching it pass below with four soldiers rowing and one on the tiller and another on the bow. It was a long, black-hulled galley keelboat with a sail mast forward and

a cabin in the stern. This was not quite a real ship, he thought, such as the seagoing ships he had seen down at New Orleans, but it was much more like a ship than the usual flatboats and barges that brought whitemen and their goods down the Ohio to the Mississippi. Days before he had seen it, he heard the rumors and the mysteries about it. People all down the Ohio were talking about the coming of this boat. Rumors moved much faster than boats, and made mysteries that had to be figured out. A rumor said this boat had been sent by the President of the United States, and that its commander was a friend of President Jefferson. Another rumor said that President Jefferson was going to take control of the Mississippi country from the Spaniards. Another rumor, or maybe a part of the same one, was that the americains coming on this boat intended to go all the way west to the ocean on the far side, and make a trading route all the way to the farthest place, called China. To a solitary woodsman like Drouillard, such rumors were merely curiosities, and he could see no way they would be important to him, any more than the rumors three years ago when all the whitemen had expected strange happenings just because their calendar turned to 1800 and a new century. Whitemen presumed that their ways of counting time had power. But there were two things about these rumors that made his instincts tingle, like the sound of a growl in the underbrush: One of the soldier officers on this boat was said to be called Clark, a war name from his childhood memory: memories of shooting, houses burning, women dragging their children into the woods to hide from the Town-Burner soldiers whose leader was the dreaded Clark. The name was still a curse in the house of Drouillards uncle, Louis Lorimier, for Clark had destroyed Lorimiers great trading post in Ohio and ruined him. Was this officer the same Clark, now coming again? The other thing that gave Drouillard a frisson was that word had come that Captain Bissell at the fort wanted him to come and talk to the amricain soldier officers when they arrived at Massac. Why would they want to talk to him? Drouillard rode through the open gate into the fort. A sentry above the gate nodded to him, which was about as much greeting as an Indian could expect to get from a white soldier. Drouillard knew that particular soldier and sensed that if he werent employed in bringing meat, the man would be happy to shoot him, just to be shooting an Indian. Drouillard had hunted, interpreted and guided for the fort officers for years, but many of the soldiers just hated Indians. The quartermaster, on the other hand, was always glad to see him because the meat he brought was always fresh and well-butchered. They worked together unloading and weighing the venison and bear, and the quartermaster wrote the weights on a slip of paper for Drouillard to give to the paymaster. Thankee, Drouillard. And by the way, Capn Bissell wants to see you. Got some important gents in there he wants ye to meet. So I hear. Drouillard finished rolling and tying the deer and bear skins, which he would flense and cure to sell at his uncles trading post over at Cape Girardeau. He left the horse and mule hitched and took his long rifle off its saddle sling and walked across the parade ground toward Captain Bissells quarters. Soldiers were lined up outside the paymasters door. Soldiers were always lined up. There seemed to be something in soldier law that everybody had to do the same thing at the same time, which meant that they always had to line up and wait. Apparently, soldiers werent allowed to have a notion to go and do something alone and get it done while nobody was in the way. Instead they had to wait until they were all told to go to the same place at the same time so that they were all in each others way and had to wait. To Drouillard it seemed like a poor way of doing things, but it did make it possible for soldiers to stand around together complaining to each other, which seemed to be a favorite pastime of the whitemen. Most of the fort soldiers knew Drouillard by sight as the Indian who brought in meat, and they didnt pay much attention to him. But today there were new soldiers here, the ones off the keelboat, and they watched him as he passed, and he could feel them watching him. Young men coming down the Ohio from Kentucky and Pennsylvania usually were from families that had been in the Indian troubles, and according to the rumors, the captains of this boat had been recruiting their men from those places. The flag was stirring in the breeze at the top of its pole. One blue corner contained fifteen little pointed white designs which were said to be stars, and he understood that each star stood for a whitemans land called a state, and that as the whitemen kept coming on into the Indian country, they kept making more states. He had heard that the old homeland of his Shawnee people north of the Ohio River was now becoming a state, and he could scarcely imagine what that meant, except that all the woods and fields and hunting grounds were being marked with lines into squares, which whitemen bought for money, putting the Indians off into tight little places and making them live there. It was a faraway and ominous thing going on back there, and he always felt it like the coming of weather. Most of his understanding of it came from his uncle, Lorimier, who as a trader heard news from everywhere and sometimes told him about it. Lorimier would shake his head with a sad smile and say that it was something that had been going on for many generations, and that many peoples were no longer where the Master of Life had put them. Lorimier, with

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