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In Memoriam

DAVID J. WEBER (1940–2010)

John L. Kessell

On 20 August 2010, internationally acclaimed historian David J. Weber died in a Gallup, New Mexico, hospital, not far from his summer home, his *querencia* (the place where one's soul is most at peace), in the Zuni Mountains. Carol, his wife of forty-eight years, son Scott, and daughter Amy were with him. Together, the family had fought his multiple myeloma for nearly three years, never giving up hope of a remission. Even during the last days of his life, he continued dictating e-mails to Carol, ever sharing with colleagues and encouraging students.

Born in Buffalo, New York, on 20 December 1940, Weber graduated from the State University of New York, College at Fredonia, where he had changed his focus from music (he and Carol played the clarinet) to Latin American history. He earned both his MA (1964) and PhD (1967) in history from the University of New Mexico, the latter under the guidance of Prof. Donald C. Cutter. Weber's dissertation appeared in book form as *The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade in the Far Southwest, 1540–1846* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1971). Between 1967 and 1976, he taught at San Diego State University, moving in fall 1976 to Southern Methodist University (SMU), his academic home for the next thirty-four years. There, Weber became Robert and Nancy Dedman Professor of History in 1986 and founding director of the William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies in 1995.

Weber specialized in the Spanish Borderlands, Mexico, and colonial Latin America. More than any other scholar, he revitalized historical study of the Borderlands and led the field into the twenty-first century with style and grace. Comparisons with Herbert E. Bolton (1870–1953), pioneer promoter

of the Spanish Borderlands and the epic of Greater America, are inevitable. I entitled a 1993 review essay of Weber's masterful *Spanish Frontier in North America* "A Bolton for the Nineties."¹ Inspired teachers, keen mentors, and prolific writers, both men lent themselves unselfishly to their profession. Bolton served as president of the American Historical Association in 1932; Weber became vice president of the Association's Professional Division in 2008. Bolton presided over a hub of research at the University of California's Bancroft Library; and Weber founded SMU's Clements Center, fostering fellowships, scholarly conferences, and academic publishing. Bolton wrote or edited some twenty-four books; Weber was working on his twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth when he died.

And while his formal bibliography runs to 124 entries, the conspicuous centerpiece is by all measures *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (Yale University Press, 1992; and *The Brief Edition*, Yale University Press, 2009).² Weber inherited the field in its third generation, by then greatly expanded in scholarly production if not in geographical area. Geographically, in fact, post-Bolton scholars had split the Borderlands between Spanish Florida and the Southeast on the one hand and Spanish California and the Southwest on the other. At SMU in Dallas, with half the field to the east and half to the west, Weber was perfectly situated to reunite and resynthesize the Spanish colonial history of North America.

That monumental undertaking he accomplished as never before. Mastering computer technology, Weber achieved unprecedented control over the enormous body of secondary and published primary sources, extending his interdisciplinary reach to archaeology, ethnohistory, and beyond. He mediated skillfully between the so-called "Black Legend" of unique Spanish cruelty and the no less distorted "White Legend" of Spaniards as civilizing saviors. Despite the daunting diversity of Native American peoples, their physical worlds, and their varied responses to Spaniards—all of which Weber considered with fresh insight and clarity—the Spanish imprint on the continent proved indelible. "However much Spaniards might eat Indian foods, wear Indian footwear, take Indian wives or concubines, produce mestizo children, learn Indian languages, or live beyond the civility of Spanish urban life," Weber concluded, "the core of Hispanic frontier culture and society remained recognizably Hispanic and clearly intact."³

Like Bolton, Weber was drawn to comparative studies. In a 1986 essay, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," which appeared in *The American Historical Review*, Weber wrote admiringly of scholars who had "moved well beyond the simple notion of the frontier as a line between 'savagery and civilization' to remind us that a variety of indigenous societies can exist in a

frontier zone and that different host societies have different impacts on the cultures and institutions of intruders.”⁴ Already he was framing a challenge for himself, one he met grandly with *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2005).

Toward the end of the colonial era, a notably more secular time than earlier centuries, Spaniards cared less about saving Comanche souls than about enlisting Comanche fighters. As Weber pointed out, independent (as opposed to incorporated) Indians still held sway over more than half the land mass claimed by Spain in the western hemisphere. *Bárbaros* relates in engaging detail the many ways self-interested Spanish administrators, captains, and traders got on with equally self-interested, unconverted Indian peoples across multiple frontiers, from the Great Plains of Texas to the pampas of South America. More often than not, on-the-ground pragmatism trumped the Spanish Crown’s vacillating policies. Telling quotations, a Weber trademark, abound. On the point of death, an old Araucanian Mapuche in Chile told a missionary priest, “Padre, do not tire yourself, because it is an inviolable custom and law of my forefathers not to believe anything that Spaniards say.”⁵

In 2006, with a profound sense of fulfillment, Weber read in *The New York Review of Books* the qualities assigned to him by world-renowned historian of the Spanish empire J. H. Elliott, who referred to both *The Spanish Frontier* and *Bárbaros* as: “a mastery of the literature and impressive erudition; a capacity for the patient teasing out of the truth from sources that are often incomplete and partisan; and a lucid narrative style that carries the reader along. . . . To have subsumed so much information into so clear and comprehensive a survey is a formidable achievement.”⁶

Weber’s many achievements were widely recognized. Spain and Mexico, along with his native United States, inducted him into elite societies: the Real Orden de Isabel la Católica in 2002, the Orden Mexicana del Águila Azteca in 2005 (in both cases the highest honor bestowed on a foreigner), and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2007. Fellows of the academy are recognized for “preeminent contributions to their disciplines and to society at large.” Other inductees that year included former vice president Al Gore, Israeli biochemist and Nobel laureate Avram Hershko, former Supreme Court associate justice Sandra Day O’Connor, New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, and actor and producer Robert Redford.⁷

Yet none of this acclaim went to Weber’s head. Always a thorough gentleman, David lent his soft-spoken assurance to all around him: students, colleagues, friends, and family. Less than a year before he died, he mailed me a copy of his latest book, *The Spanish Frontier in North America: The Brief Edition*. The generosity and warmth of his inscription celebrate the man:

“Inscribed for John Kessell, who has led me in the long journey to understand the Spanish frontiers in over 4 decades of friendship.” Thanks, David, but you led us all.

Notes

1. John L. Kessell, “A Bolton for the Nineties—*The Spanish Frontier in North America: A Review Essay*,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 68 (October 1993): 399–405.
2. David J. Weber, “Curriculum vitae academicae,” <http://faculty.smu.edu/dweber/CV.htm>.
3. David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 333.
4. David J. Weber, “Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands,” *The American Historical Review* 91 (February 1986): 71–72.
5. David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 126.
6. J. H. Elliott, “Barbarians at the Gates; *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment*,” *The New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2006, pp. 36–38.
7. “Historian David J. Weber Inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,” <http://smu.edu/newsinfo/releases/06159a.asp>.