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## Virginia M. Bouvier, *Women and the Conquest of California, 1542-1840: Codes of Silence*

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*Women and the Conquest of California, 1542-1840: Codes of Silence.* By Virginia M. Bouvier. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001. xvii + 266 pp. Illustrations, maps, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 cloth.)

Warfare is the most male of all activities. In popular culture, the battlefield and the scene of conquest are populated exclusively by men. This may be especially true of the written history of war and conquest, because the raw material of history is a record left by the male protagonists in past events. In faithfully representing the self-serving accounts of elite men,

historians have usually chosen to forget what imperial strategists recognized—that women played a necessary role in empire building.

From Moorish Iberia to the north of New Spain, the Spanish Empire brought women and families to frontier areas, as founders of Christian communities and as guardians of popular morality. The Spanish recognized that abuse of Indian women by soldiers and settlers hindered colonization. They sent Spanish women to America in the belief that their presence would make rape of Indian women, so to speak, unnecessary. Imperial strategy, thus, acknowledged that both Indian and Spanish women were central to the business of colonization. Few men, then or now, have been so willing to concede the point.

Virginia Bouvier writes that she began to investigate the lives of the women of colonial California after others failed to answer her most basic questions about them. *Women and the Conquest of California* began as her attempt to "articulate a female presence on the California frontier" (p. ix). In the end, her study does much more than add the women's side to California history. Bouvier makes good use of the limited documentation that specifically addressed the lives of women. More importantly, she analyzes colonial California from a gendered perspective, reading traditional documents for what they say of women and of gender roles.

Bouvier argues that gender ideologies shaped the actions of Franciscan missionaries as well as soldiers, settlers, and strategists. But they also influenced the ways in which the native peoples of the frontier reacted to the Spanish, their collaboration, flight, and resistance. She looks at early accounts of Alta California, the initial colonization and settlement, and the missions, as well as at Indian responses.

When Bouvier turns to a description of the missions, she leans heavily on interviews of Spanish women taken late in the nineteenth century. According to their testimonies, these women gained some status within the missions and were proud of their standing in the colonial, racial hierarchy. Their status, as they remembered it, may make them somewhat atypical for Spanish women, but it also gives their testimony an added value. They occupied a privileged, but still circumscribed, position in mission society. Their station illustrates the limits of what a Spanish woman could be: superior to Indians of all kinds but subordinate to the priests and barred from pursuing callings considered to be exclusively within the realm of men.

Ultimately, Bouvier is a prisoner of limited sources. Even the interviews of Spanish women are bounded by what Bouvier calls "codes of silence" about women. The illegal abuses of the missions, the cultural biases of the Spanish, and Indian prohibitions against sharing some knowledge all contribute to the seeming invisibility of women. Whatever limitations it may have, *Women and the Conquest of California* is a very valuable addition to the historical literature.

Precisely because there are limited documentary sources, no magnum opus is ever likely to address all of the questions addressed by Bouvier. Instead, an accumulation of studies like these, regional in focus and limited in scope, are needed to bring the story of women into the study of history. *Women and the Conquest of California* expands our knowledge of colonial California considerably and contributes greatly to the analysis of the role of women in colonialism.

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