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GOOD NEWS AND BAD ON THE MEXICAN FRONTIER: A REVIEW ESSAY

ELIZABETH A. H. JOHN

THE MEXICAN FRONTIER, 1821-1846: THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST UNDER MEXICO. By David J. Weber. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. Pp. 496. Illus., maps, bibliog., index. \$19.95 cloth; \$9.95 paper.

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT David Weber's latest book is extraordinarily good news. *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* is a successful attack upon a long-standing, nearly intractable problem of Hispanic Borderlands history. Although Mexican dominion spanned no more than a quarter century in the present American Southwest, there are at issue the four markedly diverse historic entities of Texas, New Mexico, Hispanic Arizona (then northern Sonora), and California, each with a complex array of indigenous peoples in various stages of acculturation. They must be understood in the contexts of the political and economic agonies that marked the early decades of Mexican independence from Spain and of the contemporaneous westward surge of the Anglo-Americans.

That segment of Mexico's history has yet to be satisfactorily studied, much less comprehended. In contrast, there is a plethora of materials on the Anglo-American frontier, but pervasive ethnocentrism limits their usefulness concerning the contiguous Hispanic frontier. Each of the four states has spawned a considerable assortment of historical materials running the gamut of quality and accessibility, but much of the basic documentary research has yet to be done on key questions. Here has been a veritable Catch-22: research and publication in the field were hardly ripe to support a valid, unifying construction; on the other hand, important specialized investigations floundered for lack of a framework within which to formulate inquiry and construe findings.

Weber spent the 1970s cracking the dilemma, with the remarkably useful result embodied in this volume. He nearly makes a virtue of the unevenness of the materials as he judiciously leads the reader through the problems of evaluation and construction, warning of limited or unsatisfactory evidence and pointing out where further investigation is needed, carefully refraining from claiming too much even while persuasively presenting his construction. The outcome is a historiographic and bibliographic tour de force. Careful attention to the bibliographical essay and footnotes will repay the reader with an unusually thorough, up-to-date (1981) assessment of materials available on the Northern Mexican Borderlands and pointers on topics for research. It will be for many years an indispensable tool for any student of the region.

As the latest in the distinguished Histories of the American Frontier Series,

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this volume should reach a wider audience among students of American history than do most Hispanic Borderlands studies and thus foster better comprehension of the Hispanic dimension of this nation's history. With its 1821-1846 time span, it would appear to complete for that series the coverage of the Hispanic frontier that began with the equally indispensable *Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513-1821* by John Francis Bannon (New York, 1970; Albuquerque, 1974), but a word of caution is in order.

Bannon's task was the very different one of building upon Herbert Eugene Bolton's seminal volume of 1921, *The Spanish Borderlands*, and incorporating the vast new knowledge developed in the intervening half century of vigorous Borderlands scholarship. Bannon was famously successful in that task, but his volume deals very little with the years beyond 1795, reflecting the continuing paucity of scholarship on the first two decades of the nineteenth century and the dubious quality of much of the material then available on that period. For the Frontier Series, the practical result is a gap of some quarter century in its coverage of the Hispanic Borderlands, unfortunately spanning a critical time of tumultuous change and little-known progress. Even such a sophisticated scholar as Weber is thus left to perpetuate the misconception that the struggle for independence left few scars in the Far North, when Texas was in fact devastated during the second decade of the century; his interpretation of events on the Nacogdoches frontier suffers particularly from that notion.

Weber's analysis is essentially topical: missions and church, presidios and other military aspects, political development, economy, each examined in light of the Spanish colonial roots and traced, locale by locale, through the changes and continuities of the Mexican era. Specialists in the several geographic and subject areas will surely question some interpretations and offer amplifications; such exchanges should accelerate development of the field. The fundamental soundness of Weber's construction, however, seems to be such that the dialogue will run more to "yes, but" than to "nay."

Although Weber warns that we have yet an imperfect understanding of the workings of government in Mexico's Far North, he explains very well the practical difficulties suffered and the solutions improvised in the frontier polities while federalists and centralists fought to control, even as they wrecked, the national government. Particularly useful perspectives emerge from his treatment of the much-studied Texas revolt in the context of the less known contemporaneous revolts in California, Sonora, and New Mexico, and the regional and personal rivalries that rent each of the four.

Weber's treatment seems strongest in the economic dimension, which figures importantly throughout the book, notwithstanding his surprising assertion of the "advantage" of "proximity to the dynamic economy of the United States." Since he traces processes by which involvement with that economy fostered class distinctions in once egalitarian frontier societies, especially debt peonage, and ultimately cost Mexico a third of its patrimony, making the *pobladores* "foreigners in their native land," one may question the cost-benefit analysis. More persuasive is his exposition of the nineteenth-century Mexican dilemma in the context of the

continuing difficulty of under-developed nations today: how to attract but still control foreign capital and trade.

The social aspects fare less well. Although the declining role of the institutional church is ably expounded, the powerful continuing role of the faith as a fundamental force in Borderlands life is neglected. The Indian dimension of the study suffers from overriding emphasis on "constant warfare" with *indios bárbaros*, although peaceful interaction with Indians as neighbors, coreligionists, comrades in arms, fellow citizens, and trading partners characterized the "inclusive frontier" of the Hispanic Borderlands during the Mexican as during the Spanish era. That imbalance reflects problems inherent in the sources available to Weber as well as uncertain grasp of the regional ethnology. Satisfactory treatment of southwestern social history demands fuller use of cultural anthropology than was deemed practicable in this pioneering effort.

While the book's potential as catalyst is impressive throughout, it is especially evident in the concluding chapter, "The Mexican Frontier in Perspective." Given the constraints of the series format, Weber touches only lightly, but most provocatively, upon the issues of comparative frontier history, towards which this study contributes a wealth of material. If students of other frontiers now rally with Weber and his fellow Borderlanders to exploit the analytical possibilities raised by this volume, comparative frontier perspectives should soon be much enriched.

How does the book relate to existing works? It stands alone as pioneer construction, much as did Bolton's *The Spanish Borderlands* fifty years ago. The extent to which it relies upon, corroborates, or casts doubt upon other published works is so thoroughly and fairly treated by Weber himself in the bibliographic essay that it will be more useful here to examine its potential as foundation and stimulus for new work on the long neglected Mexican frontier.

Not the least of its virtues is its timeliness. Concomitant with the surge of Hispanic population in the Southwest is a burgeoning interest in the relevant historical background. Meanwhile, there is in progress a massive growth in the availability of documents for research.

Only recently have published works begun to reflect the progress sparked in the 1960s by the calendaring and microfilming of the Spanish and Mexican archives of New Mexico and the Bexar Archives of Spanish and Mexican Texas, both under the auspices of the National Historical Publications Commission. Just now underway at the Texas State Archives is a complementary two-year program to calendar and microfilm the Nacogdoches Archives, thanks to grants from the Brown Foundation of Houston and the Kathryn Stoner O'Connor Foundation of Victoria. Already in press at the same institution is a new calendar of documents bearing principally on the Mexican period that were lately identified as a long-misplaced segment of the Lamar Papers. Various other microfilming and calendaring projects are underway, or marking time till funded, on both sides of the international border.

Greatest of all in long-range potential is the development of a comprehensive new facility for the Archivo General de la Nación in the unlikely setting of the

old Lecumberri prison in Mexico City, now ingeniously remodeled to house all the long-scattered materials of the archive and provide secure, convenient access to them. Fortunately, the AGN continues with all practicable speed its development of finding aids. Its leadership is said now to be addressing also some long-standing problems of lesser archives throughout the country, the northernmost of which are vitally important to Borderlands research.

The situation is a rapidly changing one in which scholars must be alert for current reports such as that presented by Dan Tyler at the Western History Association meeting in October 1981 upon Mexican archival materials for research in New Mexican history. That paper was a partial, interim report upon a guide now in preparation with grant support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Fortunately, Borderlands scholars have an incomparable, on-going resource in the *Newsletter* of the Southwestern Mission Research Center, which published its volume 15, number 50, in December 1981. From their base at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, the SMRC staff maintain close contact with the archival situation in Mexico and with a wide range of developments of interest to Borderlanders, all of which are reported in their *Newsletter* along with a comprehensive, interdisciplinary bibliographic service.

Yet another major contribution came from SMRC in 1981, with publication by the University of Arizona Press of *Northern New Spain, A Research Guide* by Thomas C. Barnes, Thomas H. Naylor, and Charles W. Polzer. It is at once the most comprehensive and the most concise compilation of information needed by scholars in tackling the vast documentary legacy of the Hispanic Borderlands. Fortunately, it is so modestly priced as to be a feasible, as well as essential, part of every scholar's equipment.

That research guide evolved as a tool for an even more ambitious SMRC project: the Documentary Relations of the Southwest Computer Access Bibliography. There is already a substantial beginning on their long-range program of indexing the major archival sources for the Hispanic Borderlands from earliest times to 1850. The initial concentration is upon the colonial era, but as speedily as funding and time permit, the project will offer for the Mexican era too a virtual explosion of accessible primary documentation.

Another significant Borderlands enterprise may well germinate next October at an informal session on problems of translation that is scheduled for the Western History Association meeting at Phoenix. Scholars will then consider the cooperative development of a comprehensive Northern Borderlands lexicon. Preliminary inquiries indicate an enthusiastic response from scholars; SMRC has in place the requisite computer capability. The question of funding seems the only likely deterrent to early realization of a long-needed research tool.

Why harp on funding? That, of course, is the bad news. Most of the progress discussed above, including Weber's work, has been made possible, or at least greatly facilitated, by support from federal agencies that have now fallen upon hard times. There is every danger that the funding crisis will balk for many years the progress that should follow speedily upon the advances of the last decade.

Some remedy may be found in the private sector, as seen in the support of the Brown and O'Connor foundations for the Nacogdoches Archives project. Can Borderlands scholars convey the importance and the current relevance of their enterprise so urgently as to amass the large funds required for major documentary projects on the one hand and, on the other, secure the relatively small sums so sorely needed to facilitate the work of individual scholars?

Whatever the rate of progress in our understanding of the Mexican Borderlands in coming decades, it will owe much to the foundation David Weber has laid. How very fortunate that his book is eminently politic in two senses: not only an astute exercise in the art of the possible, but also *in diplomacy*. Much of the anticipated progress depends upon the active cooperation of Mexican scholars and their government. Weber's sensitive, fair treatment of a period fraught with pain for Mexico will surely help to foster the scholarly interchange so essential to historical comprehension on both sides of the border.

CALVIN HORN CONTEST AND HISTORY DAY

This year the Calvin Horn contest and History Day were combined. More than 500 students entered regional competitions throughout the state. Sixty-six were finalists in the state contest.

Calvin Horn winners were:

First place, \$350: Jennifer C. Pixton, Eldorado High School, Albuquerque, "The Mormon Battalion"

Second place, \$250: Jenette Gatewood, Dora High School, Dora, "John S. Chisum's Role in the Lincoln County War"

Third place, \$150: Delisa Belcher, Dora High School, Dora, "History of Roosevelt County Schools"

First place History Day winners included:

Senior paper, open category: Randy G. Walker, Eldorado High School, Albuquerque

Junior paper: Maxine M. Stelling, Grant Middle School, Albuquerque

Senior paper: Kelly L. Knuth, Eldorado High School, Albuquerque

Junior individual project: Kristi Caudill, Lovington

Senior individual project: Gretchen Yanz, Cibola High School, Albuquerque

Junior group project: Sandy J. Gardner, Sue Fellingham, La Plata Junior High School, Silver City

Senior group project: Melissa A. Arciero, Karla Serna, Marla Serna, Lydia Romero, C. C. Snell Junior High School, Bayard

Junior project, open category: Stewart Pratt, Lea Elementary School, Lovington, New Mexico

Senior project, open category: Craig A. Alcone, Shawn Stomp, Lauran Harrison, Eldorado High School, Albuquerque

Senior individual performance: Ruth A. Long, Eldorado High School, Albuquerque

Senior group performance: Maria E. Cordova, Kassandra Ponzio, Denise Garcia, Ruby Rios, C. C. Snell Junior High School, Bayard

Junior media presentation: Paul D. Chambliss, Taylor Middle School, Lovington

Senior media presentation: Mark Nowak, Lou Rose, Rick Overbay, Mary Mayer, Julie McCormack, Sandia High School, Albuquerque

Outstanding teachers honored include Jeannette French of St. Pius High School, Albuquerque, and Patricia Thatcher of Dora High School, Dora.

The theme for next year's history day will be "People, Places, and Events That Have Changed History." For further information contact Dr. Lynette Oshima, Mesa Vista Hall 3033, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 87131 or call 277-4115.