

10-1-1993

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A Bolton for the Nineties—*The Spanish Frontier in North America*: A Review Essay

JOHN L. KESSELL

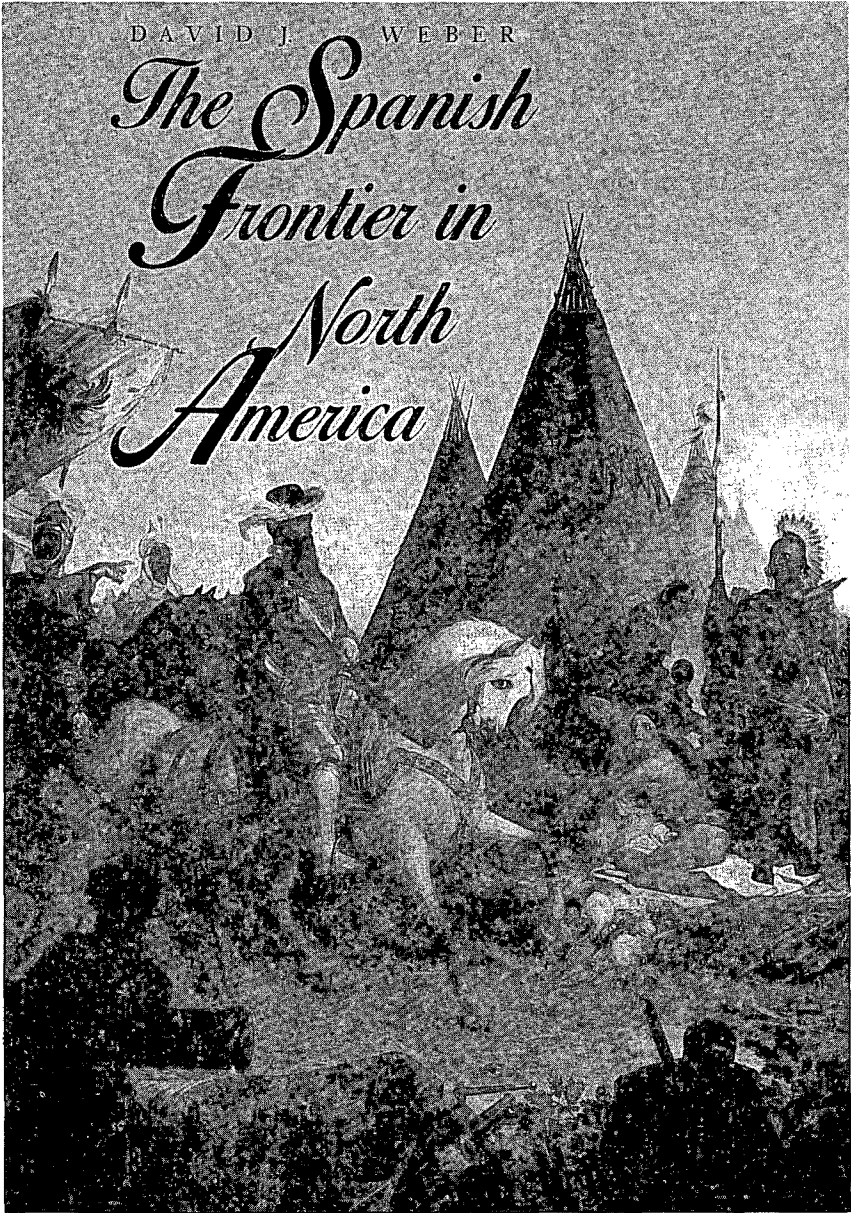
During his long and prolific career, Herbert Eugene Bolton (1870-1953) defined a sprawling, interstate regional field of study that came to be called the Spanish Borderlands.¹ Although a number of scholars, including David J. Weber, would prefer to call it something else, none of us has come up with a catchier or more precise term. Without an epithet, subtitle becomes title, while the region remains the same.

It is as vast for Weber as it was for Bolton. The latter, in his introductory *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (1921),² painted colorful word pictures, envisioning an artist's canvas of mural size. Sketching in quick strokes, Bolton recalled Spaniards in heroic proportions: exploring, laying claim, and planting Spanish institutions from the Chesapeake to San Francisco Bay. These hearty Hispanic pio-

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1. For a sympathetic biography of Bolton, see John Francis Bannon, *Herbert Eugene Bolton: The Historian and the Man* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978). See also David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 91 (Feb. 1986):66-81; David J. Langum, "Herbert Eugene Bolton," in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. John R. Wunder (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988):130-46; John L. Kessell, "Bolton's *Coronado*," *Journal of the Southwest* 32 (Spring 1990):83-96; and Donald E. Worcester, "Herbert Eugene Bolton: The Making of a Western Historian," *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991):193-213.

2. Originally published in 1921 by Yale University Press as Volume 23 of the "Chronicles of America" series, *The Spanish Borderlands* is soon to be reprinted by the University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, with historical introduction by Albert L. Hurtado.



The Spanish Frontier in North America. By David J. Weber. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. xx + 579 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

neers, he preached, should be as well known to educated citizens of North America as were their English or French colonial counterparts.

Captivated by his own sketches, the master set about finishing some of them in rich scholarly detail. He especially liked portraying individual explorers, missionaries, and presidial captains,³ almost all of them white males of European origin, as revisionists remind us today. Indians, mestizos, and women did figure, but mostly as featureless faces in the background.⁴ The devastating effects of smallpox or deforestation showed not at all.

Bolton, meanwhile, presided over a teeming academic workshop, whose graduates turned out to be, for the most part, avid particularists. Dozens of unrelated vignettes, drawing as Bolton insisted on archival sources, came to dot the Borderlands canvas and, eventually, find their way into Weber's bibliography. Then, a decade and a half after Bolton's death, his student and biographer John Francis Bannon, S.J., sought to recapture the big picture in *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513-1821* (1970), a much busier but thoroughly Boltonian overview.⁵

The next generation split despite Bannon. Enlivened since the 1960s by new concerns, interests, and alliances—historical archaeology, ethnohistory, cultural anthropology or geography, demography, social history, and the like—scholars did not turn their backs on the Borderlands. Still, those who brought innovative points of view to the canvas in Spanish Florida lost touch with their colleagues at work on Spanish New Mexico.

It was probably the Columbus Quincentenary, upcoming in 1992, and the hope of funding for research on all aspects of the encounter between Old World and New, that suggested again the wisdom of a wider vision. Two scholars in particular, both active in the 1980s, stood back from the canvas and took its measure: anthropologist David Hurst Thomas, who had

3. For example, *Coronado, Knight of Pueblos and Plains* [1949] (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990); *Rim of Christendom: A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino, Pacific Coast Pioneer* [1936] (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984); and *Outpost of Empire: The Story of the Founding of San Francisco* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931).

4. Although Spaniards were unquestionably Bolton's primary focus, he wrote a lot about Indians, contributing, for example, more than a hundred entries on the native peoples of Texas and Louisiana to the *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 30, 2 parts (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907, 1910). The book-length manuscript Bolton wrote on the Hasinai Indians, deemed worthy of publication two generations later, has appeared as *The Hasinai: Southern Caddoans as Seen by the Earliest Europeans*, ed. Russell M. Magnaghi (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

5. Bannon's *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513-1821*, published first by Holt, Rinehart and Winston (New York, 1970), was reassigned, along with the rest of the "Histories of the American Frontier" series, to the University of New Mexico Press (Albuquerque, 1974). For Weber's view of Bannon's place, see "John Francis Bannon and the Historiography of the Spanish Borderlands: Retrospective and Prospect," *Journal of the Southwest* 29 (Winter 1987):331-63.

grown up amid the romance of the California missions but found himself excavating Santa Catalina de Guale off the Georgia coast,⁶ and historian David J. Weber, an accomplished synthesizer trained in the Bolton tradition and tenured at Southern Methodist University—with half the Borderlands to the east and half to the west.

Thomas, frustrated by the inaccessibility of basic published materials on the Borderlands, thought up *The Spanish Borderlands Sourcebooks*, a twenty-seven-volume series of reprinted scholarly articles and translated primary documents, each volume compiled and introduced by a recognized expert.⁷ Next, calling for what he termed cubist perspectives, “to view past events from manifold directions concurrently,”⁸ Thomas appealed to dozens of Borderlands scholars to present original papers during interdisciplinary symposiums at the 1989, 1990, and 1991 meetings of the Society for American Archaeology. The resulting, three-volume *Columbian Consequences* bore subtitles that reflected the prevailing schism and Thomas’s hope of reunification: *Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands West* (1989), *Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands East* (1990), and *The Spanish Borderlands in Pan-American Perspective* (1991).⁹

Meantime, David J. Weber, fresh from a survey of the Southwest under Mexican rule,¹⁰ had begun planning a new, third-generation synthesis of the colonial Spanish Borderlands. Skillfully employing a computer database, he sought and achieved unprecedented control over the vast literature of secondary and printed primary sources, a mastery that shows on every page of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*. I doubt that there is a more substantial treatment of any European nation’s colonial experience within the borders of what has become the United States.

6. Curator of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Thomas plans a scholarly series on Santa Catalina. Meantime, consult his popular *St. Catherine’s: An Island in Time* (Atlanta: Georgia Endowment for the Humanities, 1988).

7. “A Twenty-seven Volume Set with More than Four Hundred Fifty Articles in Facsimile,” the series, under the general editorship of Thomas, is published by Garland Publishing, New York. The initial volume, *The Idea of the Spanish Borderlands* (1991), was edited with an introduction by Weber. Because the publisher simply reproduced directly whatever the individual editors sent in, the result is often sloppy at best.

8. David Hurst Thomas, “Cubist Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands: Past, Present, and Future,” in Thomas, ed., *Columbian Consequences, Volume 3: The Spanish Borderlands in Pan-American Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991):xx.

9. The Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., brought out all three of these richly detailed and diversified reference volumes with remarkable dispatch. Unfortunately, because of deadlines and budget, none has an index. The third volume contains a fourteen-chapter section, “The Native Context of Colonialism in Southern Mesoamerica and Central America,” that offers not only an opportunity for comparison, but also a demonstration that Central Americanists are no less parochial than their Spanish Borderlands counterparts.

10. *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

The book contains 360 pages of text, 130 pages of two-column notes in smaller type, and a 60-page select bibliography. Exceptionally clean and informative maps by cartographer Don Bufkin and dozens of well-chosen illustrations provide a complementary graphic dimension. Yet it is the writing, uniformly refined and often graceful, that most delights me.

"In southeastern America," Weber explains, "where relatively fewer Hispanics live today [than in the Southwest] and where most of the visible remains of the Spanish occupation have disappeared, the region's Hispanic origins have been largely forgotten—buried in historical memory, several levels below magnolias, juleps, and the War Between the States" (p. 5). Preferring the adjective "eclectic" (to Thomas's "cubist") to describe his approach, Weber catalogues in a remarkable paragraph on page 11 a variety of ways that scholars have perceived the Spanish Borderlands: in terms of European discovery and expansion, invasion, or infestation; steel-age, literate state society dominating stone-age, preliterate tribal societies; periphery of a world economic system or outer fringe of empire; cultural and class struggle for limited resources; or elaborate fiction revealed by discourse analysis. "There are many viewpoints," he reiterates in conclusion, "some of them contradictory and all of them valid, even if not of equal merit" (p. 359).

The author also uses with discretion the apt words of others, quoting only to season the text, never to carry the story. About don Juan de Oñate's ill-starred New Mexico enterprise, Weber lets the viceroy fret, "This conquest is becoming a fairy tale" (p. 84). But lest the grateful reader forget that she is expected to learn, Professor Weber drops in a didactic "then" every few pages: "Native peoples, then, must be understood as more than a mere 'challenge' to Spaniards, as an earlier generation of historians suggested" (p. 13). "Most of the articles in the *Reglamento of 1772*, then, offered traditional European military solutions to uniquely American problems" (p. 219).

Weber's notes are nothing short of marvelous. In them, he not only cites and candidly evaluates his sources, offering additional background, definition, and detail, but also reflects on history as craft. "Explanation in this book is embedded in narrative—a practice that seems to have regained respectability as the crudeness of the old narrative/analysis dichotomy has become clearer" (p. 366 n. 38).

In directing our attention once again to the whole increasingly detailed Borderlands canvas, Weber encourages comparisons. He asks us to note the variety of Native American peoples and physical environments and the ways they influence, and are influenced by, Europeans. We see patterns of resistance and accommodation, blending and extinction, experimentation and adjustment, and, through it all—and here is the book's central theme—the endurance of Spanish families, institutions, plants, and animals. "However much Spaniards might eat Indian foods, wear Indian footwear, take Indian wives or concubines, produce mestizo children, learn Indian lan-

guages, or live beyond the civility of Spanish urban life," Weber concludes, "the core of Hispanic frontier culture and society remained recognizably Hispanic and clearly intact" (p. 333).

Given the notable similarity of tables of contents, how, then, are Bannon (1970) and Weber (1992) different? The latter obviously benefits from a generation of additional scholarship. Weber's book is bigger than Bannon's. Moreover, his coverage of Indians and Europeans and of Southeast and Southwest is better balanced, and he draws many more connections and contrasts between them. "At Pensacola, in June 1784, several Spanish officials signed a treaty of alliance with 'the Creek nations.'... Written treaties with the southern tribes represented a departure from prior Spanish policy and were followed by treaties signed with Comanches in Texas and New Mexico in 1785 and 1786" (pp. 282-83). Weber, too, offers illuminating asides, often from disciplines other than history: about the Little Ice Age that explains the colder weather and shorter growing seasons from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, or about the specialized muscles of life-long hunters that enabled Florida Indian archers to awe audiences in Spain with their skill.

In his timely Chapter 11, "Frontiers and Frontier People Transformed," Weber treats topics that did not occur to Bolton or Bannon as such: direct and indirect cultural change; ecology and the environment; Hispanic dress, foodways, medicine, architecture, and city planning; and race, class, and family. Some of this is more suggestive than certain, as the author admits, since research in several of these areas has barely begun.¹¹ A challenge to the fourth generation will be to develop such themes further and integrate them in the narrative. As scholars bring new theories to bear on old material and look in mundane places for further data (corporate, judicial, notarial, and parish archives), they will do well to remember Bolton's insistence on an accurate reading of the documentary record: know what the document says at face value first, then tell us, or interpret, what it really means.

Already, the image on Bolton and Bannon's Spanish Borderlands canvas is vastly more complex than they could have imagined. Also different is the tone, or as an artist might say, value, the degree of light on a scale from pure black to pure white. Because they embraced European superiority and great men, Bolton and Bannon highlighted Spaniards. Weber, on the other hand, seeks a middle course between casting them as the villains

11. To offer one small example: as yet unpublished research (by the Vargas Project at the University of New Mexico) on the origins of the colonist recruited in Mexico City in 1693 for the recolonization of New Mexico shows that almost all of these people were considered españoles, not mixed bloods.

and putting a gloss on their behavior. In his words, "The well-known false dichotomies of the 'Black Legend,' which portrays Spaniards as uniquely cruel, and the 'White Legend,' which ennobles them, only distorts understanding" (p. 9). But what about Native Americans on a scale of black-to-white?

Weber definitely brings non-Europeans out of the shadows and into the light. As a Bolton for the 1990s, he makes them neither villains nor passive victims, nor does he intend to put a gloss on their behavior. Yet, if only by contrast with Europeans—"unruly soldiers" (p. 74) and "opportunistic Franciscans" (p. 108), who doubtless were just that—Indians appear uniformly more noble, higher in value on the tonal scale. For how many generations, we might ask, do ethnic Spaniards have to live in New Mexico among the Pueblo Indians to shed the label "intruders" (p. 134) or "invaders" (p. 137)?

In the end, the tones we see in Weber's panoramic work, still reside, it would appear, in the eye of the beholder. "Mr. Weber," comments writer Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. in *The New York Times*, "leaves no doubt that the Black Legend was no exaggeration, although he points out that at times the British and French behaved no less cruelly toward the Indians."¹² On the other hand, ethnohistorian Thomas E. Sheridan, in an especially discerning review, observes that Weber "avoids both 'Black Legend' and 'White Legend' interpretations of Spanish history."¹³

The Spanish Frontier in North America is this generation's masterpiece on the subject. At an imaginary unveiling, I should like to think that Herbert E. Bolton and Father Jack Bannon, once they regained the power of speech, would be first to congratulate the artist.

12. Alvin M. Josephy Jr., "The Forgotten Empire," *New York Times* (January 10, 1993).

13. Thomas E. Sheridan, Review, *SMRC-Newsletter* 26:93 (December 1992):1-2.