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History and Text—The Documentary Record of the Past: A Review Essay

CHARLES R. CUTTER

Text in its classic form—the written record—has been the traditional wellspring of New Mexico history. Especially among those who treat the Spanish colonial period, there exists a long-standing love affair with these classic texts, one that demands a mastery of paleography, linguistic competence, and a commitment to long hours of breathing archival dust or, worse, enduring microfilm-induced headaches. While members of this coterie have used the documents in their own work, they also have a deep-rooted tradition of making these texts more accessible to a wider audience. Carrying on this tradition, John L. Kessell and his staff at the Vargas Project have approached the task with a methodological sophistication and scholarly excellence that places the effort on the cutting edge of historical editing.

Pioneer historian Herbert Eugene Bolton, and others like him, found in the archival collections of Mexico, Spain, and the United States

Remote Beyond Compare: Letters of don Diego de Vargas to His Family from New Spain and New Mexico, 1675–1706. Edited by John L. Kessell, et al. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. xiv + 596 pp. Illustrations, maps, glossary, notes, appendix, bibliography, index: \$32.50).

Charles R. Cutter is an assistant professor of Latin American history in Purdue University. His primary interest is in Spanish colonial law and its implementation in New Spain.

the stuff from which they would fashion epic narratives of New Mexico and the Spanish Southwest. But just as important as their prose was their work in making available to others the documentary treasures that they mined. In this regard, various guides to archival collections have proved to be invaluable contributions in the study of New Mexico history. One simply cannot embark on a serious research project without consulting the likes of Bolton, Charles E. Chapman, Henry Putney Beers, Myra Ellen Jenkins, Albert Díaz, or, more recently, Daniel Tyler.¹

Although archival guides eased the work of specialists, New Mexicanists also produced printed editions of transcriptions and translations of the documentary record in order to bring the colonial texts to those who lacked the linguistic and methodological skills necessary for hands-on archival work. These editions have increased dramatically the range of those able to comment on the nature of New Mexico's unique past. Especially notable is the work of Alfred B. Thomas, Charles W. Hackett, and J. Manuel Espinosa.² In team efforts, George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, and Eleanor Adams and Fray Angelico Chavez set standards worthy of emulation.³

1. Herbert E. Bolton, *Guide to Materials for the History of the United States in the Principal Archives of Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1913); Charles E. Chapman, *Catalogue of the Materials in the Archivo General de Indias for the History of the Pacific Coast and the American Southwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1919); Henry Putney Beers, *Spanish and Mexican Records of the American Southwest: A Bibliographic Guide to Archive and Manuscript Sources* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979); Myra Ellen Jenkins, et al., *Calendar of the Spanish Archives of New Mexico, 1621-1821* (Santa Fe: State of New Mexico Records Center, 1968); Albert James Díaz, *A Guide to the Microfilm of Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1960); Daniel Tyler, *Sources for New Mexican History 1821-1848* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1984).

2. Alfred Barnaby Thomas, *After Coronado: Spanish Exploration Northeast of New Mexico, 1696-1727* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935); Thomas, *Forgotten Frontiers: A Study of the Spanish Indian Policy of Don Juan Bautista de Anza, Governor of New Mexico, 1777-1787* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932); Thomas, *The Plains Indians and New Mexico, 1751-1778: A Collection of Documents Illustrative of the History of the Eastern Frontier of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940); Thomas, *Teodoro de Croix and the Northern Frontier of New Spain, 1776-1783* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941). Charles Wilson Hackett, ed., *Historical Documents Relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya, and Approaches Thereto, to 1773, Collected by Adolph F. A. Bandelier and Fanny R. Bandelier*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1923-37); Hackett and Charmion Clair Shelby, *Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Otermin's Attempted Reconquest, 1680-1682*, 2 vols. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1942). J. Manuel Espinosa, *First Expedition of Vargas into New Mexico, 1692* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940); Espinosa, *The Pueblo Indian Revolt of 1696 and the Franciscan Missions in New Mexico: Letters of the Missionaries and Related Documents* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

3. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, *Don Juan de Oñate, Colonizer of New Mexico*,

Recent shake-ups in the canon have widened the scope of inquiry and participation in the field of southwestern history.⁴ A new generation of scholars, asking different questions of the past, has brought to the conversation alternative ways of looking at the dynamics of cultural interplay. Issues of race, class, and gender, interdisciplinary approaches, the inclusion of other forms of "text" as evidence, and so forth—such innovations color the recent scholarship. Perhaps because of the wider circle of participants, the tradition-laden documentary translation now plays a more crucial role than ever. Lacking the linguistic and methodological training to interpret colonial documents in raw form, many of the newcomers must rely on good English translations. Yet their dependence limits them severely to only a small fraction of the available colonial documentation.

New views and voices surely can offer insights and sharpen our historical analysis. Every generation must seek in its particular way to understand, comment on, and give renewed meaning to the past, and New Mexico's multicultural heritage provides a fertile setting for lively debate. To ensure widespread participation in this dialogue, we must encourage and support projects that provide high-quality translations. Several such ventures have emerged recently that help meet this need.⁵

At the University of New Mexico, John L. Kessell heads an endeavor that reflects the best of both the old and the new in New Mexico scholarship. *Remote Beyond Compare: Letters of don Diego de Vargas to His Family from New Spain and New Mexico, 1675–1706* is the first tome of a

1595–1628 (2 vols., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1953); Hammond and Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition, 1540–1542* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940); Hammond and Rey, *The Rediscovery of New Mexico, 1580–1594: The Explorations of Chamuscado, Espejo, Castaño de Sosa, Morlete, and Leyva de Bonilla and Humaña* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966). Eleanor B. Adams and Fray Angelico Chavez, *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776: A Description by Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez with Other Contemporary Documents* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1956). I recognize that not only professionals, but also dedicated amateurs, have striven to make available the written records of the past. The various genealogical societies of New Mexico, for example, and energetic individuals, such as Donald Dreissen of Albuquerque have produced useful compilations, which they are always eager to share.

4. For an excellent overview of the recent literature in the revitalized field of Borderlands history, see David J. Weber, "John Francis Bannon and the Historiography of the Spanish Borderlands: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Myth and the History of the Hispanic Southwest: Essays by David J. Weber* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 55–88.

5. An especially important project, which encompasses a wider scope than New Mexico, is the Documentary Relations of the Southwest under the direction of Charles W. Polzer, S.J., at the University of Arizona.

projected seven-volume series and represents the inaugural efforts of the Vargas Project. Housed at the University of New Mexico, the Vargas Project has received financial aid from a number of prestigious institutions, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Historical Publications Commission. Clearly, big things are expected from the project. And, happily, this first effort should more than meet all expectations.

Diego de Vargas is a worthy focal point for such a monumental undertaking. He is a key figure in the history of New Mexico, a figure who represents a true watershed in Spanish colonial administration. In *Remote Beyond Compare* we gain insight into the man who occupied center stage in this crucial period of change. Part I of the book consists of an introductory study that offers the reader an enticing, though fleeting, look at Vargas' life. Vivid prose and painstaking research characterize this brief introduction, which sheds considerable new light on Vargas, especially during his early years in Spain and in central New Spain. Unlike some scholarship of a regional bent, Kessell and his staff understand well the world in which Vargas lived. Attention to context, as well as to detail, lends strength to the effort. But the brevity of the introduction strains under the weight of the obvious erudition and is somewhat frustrating. Considering the meticulous research and the amount of new information that Kessell uncovered, one wonders if don Diego might not have been better served by a much lengthier biographical sketch.

Consisting of sixty-four previously untranslated pieces of personal correspondence between Diego de Vargas and a variety of family members and associates, Parts II and III form the heart of the volume. Culled from an impressive variety of repositories and superbly annotated, the letters themselves reveal the importance of extended family networks and bureaucratic patronage in the late-Habsburg and early-Bourbon Spanish empire. We begin to appreciate the efforts of Vargas the office seeker and family patriarch, who viewed royal service as an honorable means of achieving financial stability in an uncertain age. Although Diego de Vargas referred to New Mexico as being "at the ends of the earth and remote beyond compare" (pp. 168, 376), his bureaucratic climb suggests that this northern "kingdom" was an important appointment that afforded to its holder considerable prestige. Always informative, sometimes petty or poignant, the letters help capture the *zeitgeist* of the Spanish colonial world.

The Vargas Project editorial staff of Kessell, Rick Hendricks, Meredith Dodge, Larry Miller, and Eleanor Adams proves their mastery

of the difficult—and woefully underappreciated—art of translation. Modestly, they state that “Diego de Vargas’s style is a study in convolution” (p. ix). Those who delve into the corresponding Spanish texts will no doubt grasp the difficulties inherent in rendering a reliable and readable final product. Emphasizing the spirit over the letter, the editors mercifully shorten the long rambling passages of the Spanish text. They do so with little sacrifice to the original, and they display a marvelous sensitivity to mood and historical context. Specialists frequently are wary of translations. Drawing upon a methodology devised at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the Vargas staff caters to the hard-to-please by providing a virtually flawless semipaleographic transcription of all sixty-four letters. (In subsequent volumes the editors, upon request, will make available this transcription in microfiche.) On all counts, *Remote Beyond Compare* exemplifies the fine art of translation at a superior level.

The upcoming volumes, which treat Diego de Vargas’ public correspondence while in New Mexico, will no doubt prove to be even more useful as a scholarly resource than this first volume. As noted above, Vargas’ regime signaled not only a return of Spanish sovereignty to New Mexico, but, more important, it also marked a turning point in relations between Hispanics and Indians. Having at our ready disposal extensive documentation from this era, we certainly will come to comprehend more fully the historical dynamics that produced this policy of greater tolerance and pragmatic accommodation. If the forthcoming tomes match the scholarly excellence displayed in the first sample, then we will have an important collection of documents—the classic texts—from which to analyze anew and continue the conversation on the meaning of the Spanish colonial past.

In the tradition of the old school, *Remote Beyond Compare* offers to a wide range of readers important documentation from a crucial period in the history of the region, a time when compromise, rather than heavy-handed domination, became the principal dynamic of cultural interplay. Yet *Remote Beyond Compare* also belongs squarely in the ranks of the best of the new scholarship. It is a sophisticated, sensitive, and highly professional effort, done with meticulous care and remarkable insight, that evokes a vivid image of an age long since past. For those who seek to comprehend the unique cultural heritage of the American Southwest, John Kessell leads us once again to the documentary record—the touchstone of our historical understanding.

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