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notes on readings

The Missions of New Mexico, 1776. A description by Fray Francisco Antanasio Domínguez; translated and annotated by Eleanor B. Adams and Fray Angelico Chavez; University of New Mexico Press, 1956. $15.00

All of us who have become intrigued with the history of the American Southwest have found the missions of New Mexico to be particularly fascinating. This has been true not only in regard to the architecture of these early missions, but also for the light which they throw on the social, economic and religious organization of New Mexico in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a subject in itself the architecture of these churches has been extensively treated in The Religious Architecture of New Mexico by George Kubler published in 1940, but this book is now out of print and difficult to obtain.

To a considerable extent this present publication supplements Kubler’s study, through the presenting of a series of “contemporary” reports prepared by Fray Dominguez, who was sent to New Mexico by his order in 1775. He was dispatched as a canonical visitor with orders to submit a “detailed report on both the spiritual and economic status of the New Mexico missions, and this entailed the gathering of much geographical and ethnographical data as well.” (Author’s Historical Introduction,” p. xv) The main body of the book contains his report and a very detailed description of all the important missions such as Pecos, Taos, Isleta, San Ildefonso, and Albuquerque. His descriptions of the individual church buildings are as precise as anyone could ask. For example of the church structure in Albuquerque he says that it is of adobe, single naved, measures 32 varas long, 7½ varas wide and is 7½ varas high. He then goes on to outline other features such as the choir loft, the roof and its construction, the placement of its doors and windows and so forth. Similar detailed pictures are presented of each of the mission churches, together with more general descriptions of the villages or pueblos, the state of the church and its organization at each mission, and a census of the community. Fray Dominguez’s basic description of the missions has been augmented by related letters and observations and documents, and a list of Franciscans and settlers who lived in New Mexico during this period. The text itself is supplemented by simple perspective drawings of each of the mission churches by Horace T. Pierce, and also there are a number of early Spanish maps of New Mexico and the Southwest.

continued—page 26 readings
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readings — continued from page 10

As with many of the University of New Mexico Press publications the book is sumptuously designed and printed. The only reservation which this reviewer would make is that it would have been more helpful for the general reader if the author’s historical introduction could have presented a broader and more detailed historical picture of this period. But this is really a minor criticism when one considers the book as a whole. The Missions of New Mexico, 1776, should certainly find its way into the library of all those interested in the early architecture and history of New Mexico.

David Gebhard

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