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NEW SPAIN'S FAR NORTH:
A Changing Historiographical Frontier?

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- WATER IN THE HISPANIC SOUTHWEST: A SOCIAL AND LEGAL HISTORY, 1550-1850.* By MICHAEL C. MEYER. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984. Pp. 189. \$26.00.)
- HISTORIA GENERAL DE SONORA, Volume 2: DE LA CONQUISTA AL ESTADO LIBRE Y SOBERANO DE SONORA.* Edited by SERGIO ORTEGA NORIEGA and IGNACIO DEL RIO. (Hermosillo: Gobierno del Estado de Sonora, 1985. Pp. 365.)
- THE PRESIDIO AND MILITIA ON THE NORTHERN FRONTIER OF NEW SPAIN: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, Volume 1: 1570-1700.* Edited by THOMAS H. NAYLOR and CHARLES W. POLZER, S.J. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986. Pp. 756. \$50.00.)
- HISPANIC ARIZONA, 1536-1856.* By JAMES E. OFFICER. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987. Pp. 462. \$45.00.)
- THE PUEBLO INDIAN REVOLT OF 1696 AND THE FRANCISCAN MISSIONS IN NEW MEXICO: LETTERS OF THE MISSIONARIES AND RELATED DOCUMENTS.* Edited by J. MANUEL ESPINOSA. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. Pp. 313. \$27.95.)
- NUEVA VIZCAYA: HEARTLAND OF THE SPANISH FRONTIER.* By OAKAH L. JONES, JR. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988. Pp. 342. \$32.50.)

David Weber suggested recently that borderlands scholars need not become intellectually marginalized merely because they study administrative peripheries.¹ In his opinion, neither the lack of self-definition in the field whose name historians cannot agree upon² nor the markedly pro-Spanish tendency in the works produced by students of Herbert Bolton and John Bannon have precluded the writing of histories of the region that are methodologically diverse and innovative.³ Weber points out, however, that very few of the nontraditional scholars designate their specialty as "borderlands," opting instead to identify expertise with core areas. One reason is that few academic institutions, especially those with doctoral programs, have teaching positions that fit the category of "Spanish borderlands," but another is that the newer generation of scholars has

not drawn its inspiration from the tradition so closely identified with the Bolton-Bannon school.⁴ In fact, these students have shunned certain aspects of the legacy that could be considered uncritical or even biased in either a pro-Spanish or pro-religious direction. James Sandos has illustrated how the process of allegedly professional historical inquiry concerning the canonization of Junípero Serra, in which Bolton himself participated, was tainted by advocacy and presentism.⁵

Although exceptions occurred,⁶ the older borderlands historiography was concerned largely with conquest, exploration, political administration, biography, missions, presidios, and international rivalry. Important as these themes are, excessive concentration on them produced static, unidimensional pictures rather than thicker, integrated slices of regional history. When Spanish-Indian relations were studied, they were viewed mostly from the perspective of official Spanish policy. The concerns of the "new social history" were thus slow in coming to scholarship on the borderlands. Yet as Weber points out, examination of socioeconomic and ecological themes did take place during the 1980s, yielding a number of regional and local histories that employ multidisciplinary analysis to examine ethnic relations, demography, land tenure, labor relations, material culture, gender relations, and environmental relationships.

Nonetheless, several weaknesses in the more traditional historiography seem unduly resistant to remedy. The pro-Spanish bias is particularly stubborn in a frontier region that is still characterized as a cultural meeting place between *civilización y barbarie*. In temporally and spatially broad regional studies, political administration and institutions continue to be emphasized to the neglect of social and economic themes. Another curiosity in a field with long-established archival bases is the persistent dominance of descriptive narrative over analytical work. Finally, except for studies by Weber and more recent work by Thomas Hall employing the world-systems paradigm,⁷ borderlands history remains remarkably devoid of theory. This characteristic is all the more peculiar when one considers the richness of comparative frontier history.

At the least, readers need not be concerned about lack of study of the region by U.S. scholars. Books continue to appear, particularly under the auspices of the university presses of Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. In quantitative terms, Mexican scholarship on the northern provinces is less evident. Except for Manuel Espinosa's documentary history of the Pueblo Rebellion of 1696, all the works under review cover long chronological periods. The studies by Michael Meyer and James Officer consider both the Spanish and Mexican eras.

The most topically broad treatment is Oakah Jones's *Nueva Vizcaya: Heartland of the Spanish Frontier*, which chronicles the civil, ecclesiastic, and military administration of the province as well as the expansion of settlement in this "heartland" of the northern frontier of New Spain. Much of

the story is familiar to those who have read the traditional Spanish-language sources on the region by Francisco Almada, José Ignacio Gallegos, Guillermo Porrás Muñoz, and María del Carmen Velázquez. Jones, however, is the first to provide a synthesis in English that is enhanced by new archival material. He concludes that the insecurity of frontier life made Nueva Vizcayans tough, individualistic, and less class-conscious participants in a dynamic and ever-changing environment. Jones distinguishes between the more stable southern half of the region, whose center was Durango, and the northern half where Indian warfare and raiding never ceased.

Broader geographically but more restricted topically are Meyer's study and the volume edited by Thomas Naylor and Charles Polzer. Meyer's *Water in the Hispanic Southwest: A Social and Legal History, 1550–1850* examines water's influence on the development of societies in the Greater Southwest (an area embracing present U.S.–Mexican border states) and then analyzes the evolution of water law in the region. In the first part, Meyer coins the term *ecolturation* to describe the process of human adaptation to and manipulation of the arid ecosystem. To varying degrees, the location of water sources determined settlement patterns. Native inhabitants had followed nature's logic by choosing dispersed settlements. Spanish urban tendencies and the policy of Indian congregation demanded more manipulation, however. The concentration of population ultimately brought individuals and groups into interethnic as well as intraethnic conflict. Water scarcity contributed to peculiarities in agricultural practices, the shape of land parcels, land prices, military defense, and mind-sets. The second part of Meyer's study analyzes Spanish and Mexican water law in the Southwest by describing its antecedents and presenting case studies of water litigation. After examining the legal relationship of land and water, he concludes that the only cropland designations with implied water rights were *tierras de pan llevar* and *labores* (translated by Meyer as irrigable land and small agricultural plots, respectively). The issue of implied water rights has been vigorously debated by historians and expert witnesses in water rights cases; neither Meyer's arguments nor his definitions are likely to end the controversy. In most cases, water rights had to be acquired through various legal mechanisms, which Meyer describes. In discussing several legal principles applied in adjudicating water disputes, Meyer tends to attribute more weight to equity and the common good of contending parties than to the doctrine of prior use or Indian corporate rights.

Naylor and Polzer's *The Presidio and Militia on the Northern Frontier of New Spain* examines the evolution of the presidio in northern Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (a second volume will carry the study to 1821, and another volume soon to be published focuses specifically on the presidial *visita* of Pedro de Rivera in the 1720s).⁸ During

the latter part of the sixteenth century, the presidio (a protective frontier garrison) became one instrument of Hapsburg policy in conquering the northern region of New Spain. This policy combined persuasion, conversion, and limited force to subdue the native inhabitants. The strategy was applied in varying combinations and achieved varying degrees of success. It was a policy of experimentation dictated by limited human and material resources and was primarily reactive. The documents in this volume illustrate a pattern of haphazard, ad hoc responses to the Indian rebellions and raids that were stimulated by Spanish settlement.⁹

More geographically circumscribed are the works on Sonora and Arizona. The multiauthored second volume of the *Historia general de Sonora* attempts a more comprehensive coverage of Sonora's colonial period,¹⁰ while Officer's account concentrates on the Hispanic history and genealogy of early Arizona. The Sonora volume surveys a broad range of topics: early Spanish exploration and administration of the region; the founding and operation of the Jesuit mission system and indigenous responses to it; the slow growth of Spanish mining, stock raising, and finally commerce; and eighteenth-century political and socioeconomic shifts. A continuing theme is the dialectic tension between the economic interests of the mission system and the Spanish colonists. Jesuit monopolies over agricultural production and Indian labor were not effectively challenged until the order's expulsion in 1767, the socioeconomic watershed in colonial Sonoran history. Except for the Yaquis and Seris, Indian communities eventually yielded to cultural and biological *mestizaje*, and Spanish efforts in agriculture and stock raising began to show profits.

In neighboring Arizona, no such dynamic activity was possible in the Spanish period, which really did not begin in the Pimería Alta until the 1730s. Wearing Spanish lenses, Officer guides his readers through the next 120 years of Spanish and Mexican rule. Mining and agricultural pursuits in southern Arizona were limited less by missionary activity (despite frequent antagonism between colonists and missionaries) than by successive Apache disruptions. Spanish settlers from Sonora (whose genealogies are carefully explored) became farmers, ranchers, miners, and soldiers in the small presidios and towns, vulnerable at first to resident Papagos and later to Americans but always to Apaches and water scarcity. Without sufficient resources from the administrative center in either the Spanish or Mexican period, Hispanic Arizonans had few interludes of peace and economic prosperity. Anthropologist Officer describes their socioeconomic life and demographic patterns episodically. Using primary and secondary accounts, he looks at the impact of Bourbon frontier policies, Sonoran gubernatorial politics, the Mexican War, and the California gold rush on the Spanish outposts at Tucson, Tubac, and Tumacacori. After the Gadsden Purchase, the claims of most Hispanics to sizable land grants in southern Arizona did not hold up for a variety of

reasons: defective surveys and titles, political considerations, and the fact that many of the grants had been abandoned for long periods because of Apache warfare.

In the most narrowly focused of the studies considered here, Manuel Espinosa translates civil and religious reports to tell the story of the aftermath of Diego de Vargas's reconquest of New Mexico. Although Vargas reconquered the region for Spain in 1692 following twelve years of indigenous autonomy after the Pueblo Rebellion of 1680, repossession was not secured until the Spanish provided effective support for the reestablished Franciscan missions and crushed a round of revolts in 1696. This outbreak marked the Pueblos' last serious effort to drive out the Spaniards. Espinosa lauds the achievements of Vargas, the military support of loyal Pueblo Indian leaders, and the efforts of Franciscan missionaries.

All these works offer some original contribution—either by making archival documents accessible in the case of the documentary histories or by uncovering new pieces of the historical record. But the degree of innovation in their methods and interpretations varies considerably. One must ask how well they address the historiographical weaknesses identified earlier in this essay.

The Spanish bias is particularly evident in the works by Espinosa, Jones, and Officer. Even the others, which are sensitive to ethnicity in examining Spanish-Indian relations, convey more cultural understanding of the invaders than of the dominated. Perhaps Officer could be excused from this criticism because his work is the only one that does not claim to study more than the history of the *gente de razón*. Yet it strikes this reader as surprising that an anthropologist who has spent much of his life studying indigenous cultures would not want to use cultural contact as a means of explaining social change and enhancing understanding of a region in which cultures confronted each other daily. Yet the Papagos and particularly the Apaches appear in Officer's account primarily to the extent that they were obstacles to Spaniards.

Indians in the studies by Jones and Espinosa are more than nuisances, ranging from fickle to savage. Both these authors point out reasons for indigenous resistance to Spanish control, which included exploitation of labor, physical punishment, and restriction of native religious practices. Yet the Spanish view of the Indians as unreliable, devious, and murderous gets more play because the Spaniards' documentation is allowed to tell the story without the corrective that an ethnohistorical approach might provide. This tendency is most glaring when the Apaches are portrayed as little more than barbarians without culture. Nor are the symbiotic processes of acquiring Indian captives as slaves and retaliatory raiding explored.¹¹ Against the nameless Indian marauders are juxtaposed Spanish priests and officials who actually had pedigrees and

thoughts and aspirations that readers can know and share. The old ghosts of missionaries and soldiers as heroes will not fade, as evidenced by Espinosa's high praise for the achievements of the Franciscans. Although the data will always be skewed by Spanish cultural assumptions, some possibilities exist for hearing the Indian voice through ethnographic materials and legal records, especially in the case of Indian rebellion.¹² Indians are not the only groups without history. Even marginal non-Indians do not appear in these mostly elite accounts, which are replete with mini-biographies and intra-elite squabbles.

In the works dealing with Sonora, presidios, and water, the Indian "other" is better represented. The authors of the Sonoran volume seem most aware that they must try to compensate for the overwhelmingly Spanish documentation and to understand Indian responses to Spanish intrusion with cross-cultural models (p. 72). Meyer considers indigenous beliefs and practices concerning water as a way of contrasting different "ecolourative" patterns. He also examines ethnicity as a variable in adjudicating water disputes, concluding that Indians did not get much mileage out of prior use. Meyer's bias in favor of the concept of equity and the common good, however, may carry him too far when he argues that most contests pitted Indians not against hacendados but against Spanish and Indian towns. I suspect that the lack of cases simply reflects the fact that many instances of landowners' encroachment on Indian lands were not litigated. The story of presidios has a built-in bias, of course, because their very existence implies the Spanish need to dominate recalcitrant Indians. Nonetheless, the editors' selections and their annotations evince concern for providing ethnographic information. These documents are presented both in Spanish transcription and English translation.

The emphasis on administrative and institutional history—particularly military history—is still strong in several of these books. Defense against Indians and foreigners was a key element of Spanish policy on the northern frontier, and insecurity must have been a dominant feature of everyday life for many inhabitants of the borderlands. But life did go on, and historians still need to know much more about social and economic interactions, gender relations, demographic change, material culture, and relationships between human beings and the land. Little information of this sort is found in the documentary histories that by choice of subject emphasize warfare and policy rather than probe the sources of conflict. Jones's *Nueva Vizcaya* provides some demographic information for non-Indians and examines economic activities in mining and agriculture, but this information is presented without statistical analysis, often in the form of descriptions by official visitors. Jones's archival sources are predominantly official reports from top administrators, not local sources that yield the detailed information needed for thicker description and more complex analysis of changes over time.

Despite a chronological approach that lends itself to endless repetition of certain themes, Officer's *Hispanic Arizona* provides episodic glimpses of gender roles, material culture, social life, and land tenure. Meyer's *Water in the Hispanic Southwest* begins to fill a huge gap in environmental history and also examines social conflicts produced by water scarcity. Assembling cases from a large area over a long period produces an overall picture that resembles a collage lacking firm interconnecting parts and much sense of change over time. One suspects that this approach does not invalidate the general conclusions of this pioneering work on water and water law practices, but more detailed examination of a smaller area would produce a more nuanced picture.

The *Historia general de Sonora* is a solid example of regional history that integrates political, economic, social, and cultural themes in a holistic way, despite the repetition that results from adopting a combined thematic and chronological approach divided among several authors. Although all the authors are familiar with archival sources on Sonora, which their analyses draw on, the citations are largely secondary. Nonetheless, the synthesis of previous work and new research provides a reasonably complex and balanced picture, especially when one considers that the *Historia general* is intended for a broad audience that includes nonspecialists.¹³ A number of remaining gaps reflect the need for further research on ethnohistory, land-tenure patterns, the growing regional market of the late colonial period, and the composition of elites and other social classes.

The only books considered here in which descriptive narrative does not overwhelm analysis are the colonial history of Sonora and the water study by Meyer. The aim of the documentary histories is to make primary sources for the study of the Southwest's Hispanic heritage widely available. Although this goal is laudable, one wonders whether it is a luxury the field can ill afford given the enormous database and the necessity of imposing arbitrary criteria for selecting documents. The overall project headed by Polzer and Naylor, the generation of an index to archival ethnohistorical materials for the region, serves a more useful function. If the primary goal of the documentary histories is not analysis, scholars might expect a more serious effort by the editors to connect their subjects to historiographical trends, both thematic and regional, within the context of U.S. and Mexican history.¹⁴ This omission is more evident in the works by Jones and Officer, where the failure to establish historiographical links verges on antiquarianism.

Even in the more analytical works on Sonora and water, one finds a relative lack of theory that might have provided a broader context for the themes studied, thus enhancing the degree of critical inquiry. Neither of the two works ignores theory entirely, however. The authors of *Historia general de Sonora* employ dependency and other neo-Marxist concepts,

although they are not developed systematically. Meyer draws upon Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*¹⁵ in establishing links among water, power, and sociocultural evolution. Meyer applies the theory loosely to precontact societies but does not attempt to employ it when discussing Hispanic water law and administration. The ways in which aspects of Wittfogel's theory can deepen understanding of social and environmental relationships are evident in Donald Worster's examination of water history in the western United States.¹⁶

Finally, the absence of frontier theories in these works is remarkable, given the substantial body of literature on comparative frontiers. David Weber has suggested reasons why the Turner thesis has not had much appeal in borderland studies.¹⁷ But other approaches have been ignored as well: inclusive versus exclusive frontiers, unbalanced frontiers, disease frontiers, frontiers as process, and the duality of frontiers.¹⁸ Oakah Jones reaches some conclusions that have Turnerian elements, but he does not discuss theory explicitly. Moreover, his notion that Nueva Vizcayan society was more egalitarian than that of central Mexico is unsubstantiated by his own evidence and contradicted by other recent studies that find compulsion and legally reinforced social norms to have been stronger in this frontier society.¹⁹

Perhaps all these criticisms reflect too much impatience on the part of this reviewer with traditional narrative history and the cautious avoidance of theory and model by many borderlands historians. Even those scholars who sympathize with postmodern critiques of the inadequacy of overarching systems of explanation will have to admit that the borderlands field is lacking in attempts to organize diversity. One recent exception deserves mention here. In *Social Change in the Southwest*, Thomas Hall demonstrates, at least for New Mexico, how systematic examination of local variables in the process of incorporating into a world system can provide sound historical synthesis that analyzes complex cultural, social, economic, and ecological interactions. The resulting study renders the many pieces more comprehensible. One hopes that some historians of the borderlands will accept Hall's challenge "to dig for new information to settle some of the issues raised" by his testing the applicability of world-systems theory to the region (p. 241). All the works reviewed here represent years of archival research, and all furnish new information. Some even bring fresh perspectives. This particular historiographical frontier is advancing, most often in minute steps but occasionally at a pace that is swift and pioneering.

NOTES

1. "John Francis Bannon and the Historiography of the Spanish Borderlands: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of the Southwest* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1987):363. This perspective is

- reinforced by Thomas D. Hall in *Social Change in the Southwest, 1350-1880* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1989), which demonstrates how a peripheral area, in this case the "Greater Southwest," provides an excellent arena for studying social change.
2. The disagreement centers on difficulties in spatial and temporal definition. The Spanish Borderlands, Western Borderlands, Eastern Borderlands, Greater Southwest, Hispanic Southwest, Arid America, U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, and New Spain's Far North all carry differing time and space delimiters.
 3. See Weber, "John Francis Bannon," 356-62.
 4. This point was argued by José Cuello in "Beyond the 'Borderlands' Is the North of Colonial Mexico: A Latin Americanist Perspective to the Study of the Mexican North and the United States Southwest," *Proceedings of the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies* 9 (San Diego, Calif: San Diego State University Press, 1982). For a recent critique of the Bolton-Bannon school, see David Hurst Thomas, "Columbian Consequences: The Spanish Borderlands in Cubist Perspective," in *Columbian Consequences: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands West*, edited by David Hurst Thomas (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 1:1-14.
 5. "Junípero Serra's Canonization and the Historical Record," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Dec. 1988):1253-69.
 6. Among the exceptions are the works of Homer Aschmann, Sherburne F. Cook, Henry Dobyns, and Robert C. West.
 7. Weber looks at the degree of incorporation of the region into the world economy in *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest under Mexico, 1821-1846* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982). He has also examined the failure of borderlands historians to apply the Turner thesis to their subjects in "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (Feb. 1986): 66-81. In *Social Change in the Southwest*, Hall explicitly tests the utility of world-systems theory in explaining the different trajectories of incorporation of nonstate societies by various states (Mesoamerican, Spanish, Mexican, and U.S.).
 8. For more information on this project, the Documentary Relations of the Southwest, see Elizabeth A. H. John, "Crusading in the Hispanic Borderlands: An Essay Review," *Journal of the Southwest* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1988):190-99.
 9. This picture is also the one presented in the earlier study by Guillermo Porras Muñoz, *La frontera con los indios de Nueva Vizcaya en el siglo XVII* (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 1980).
 10. In addition to the two editors who have contributed chapters, the authors are Ana María Atondo, Patricia Escandón, Edgardo López Mañón, Martha Ortega Soto, and Juan Domingo Vidargas del Moral.
 11. For excellent examples of how Apache-Spanish relations in the borderlands can be presented as more than a chronicle of raiding and pillaging, see Hall, *Social Change in the Southwest*; and William B. Griffen, *Apaches at War and Peace: The Janos Presidio, 1750-1858* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), and *Utmost Good Faith: Patterns of Apache-Mexican Hostilities in Northern Chihuahua Border Warfare, 1821-1843* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).
 12. For varying views on ethnohistorical methods, compare Thomas E. Sheridan, "How to Tell the Story of a People without History: Narrative versus Ethnohistorical Approaches to the Study of Yaqui Indians through Time," *Journal of the Southwest* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1988); and Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774-1880* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980).
 13. The colonial volume is accompanied by a profusion of charts, maps, and illustrations. Some of the background material on Spanish empire and conquest seems unsophisticated when compared to the sections on Sonoran history.
 14. The bibliography for *Nueva Vizcaya: Heartland of the Spanish Frontier* contains no citations of works published after 1983, indicating an isolation from recent trends.
 15. *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957).
 16. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*

(New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). Meyer's discomfort over the concept of water or environmental determinism perhaps explains his caution here.

17. See note 7.
18. See, for examples, Marvin Mikesell, "Comparative Studies in Frontier History," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50 (1960); Owen Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," in *Theory in Anthropology*, edited by Robert A. Manners and David Kaplan (Chicago: Aldine, 1968); William H. McNeill, *The Great Frontier: Freedom and Hierarchy in Modern Times* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978); and Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar, "Comparative Frontier History," in *The Frontier in History*, edited by Lamar and Thompson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981).
19. For examples, see Robert McCaa, "Calidad, Clase, and Marriage in Colonial Mexico: The Case of Parral, 1788-1790," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (1984): 477-501; and Deeds, "Rural Work in Nueva Vizcaya: Forms of Labor Coercion on the Periphery," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 69, no. 3 (1989):425-50.