

WILLIAM BRANDON: *Quivira: Europeans in the Region of the Santa Fe Trail, 1540-1820*. Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1990.

“This book uses a specific geographical entity — the linear area, lying across the American Southwest, that later became the Santa Fe Trail— as a lens wherewith to view European exploration, colonization, empire, and ultimately the means and ends of the European civilization established in the New World.” This is the tall order presented in the preface, yet what follows hardly fulfills such high expectations. Rather, the book consists of a string of anecdotes about Europeans — first Spanish soldiers and missionaries, then French and English traders— who came to the frontier area south of the Rio Grande in search of gold and legendary cities. The stories are interesting in themselves, but they cannot be said to offer a better, or a novel, understanding of the process of empire-building in the New World. The Santa Fe Trail was a marginal area until late in the nineteenth century. Although modern historiography has taught us that marginal areas — frontier communities, minority groups, remote corners of popular culture— may serve, in the hands of brilliant historians, as important case studies for a deeper appreciation of the past, it is by no means justification to regard any marginal episode as “a lens for viewing major historical chapters.”

In Part One, consisting of seventeen pages, Brandon presents a survey of the human history of the region, from the date of the earliest stone tools found by archaeologists to the eve of the European invasion. The point of this chapter is to demonstrate that “the route of the Santa Fe Trail was in operation long before Europeans appeared in America” (Epilogue, p. 253). It is too brief a chapter to provide useful information about prehistoric times or Indian culture in America, but it suffices to arouse the curiosity of the reader about the extent of existing knowledge concerning the nomadic and village populations of that region.

The following parts deal with a succession of Spanish *entradas* into the Rio Grande country, motivated by visions of immense riches hidden in some legendary kingdom. It is a story of greed, cruelty, slave-hunting, missionary zeal, fratricide, and bitter disillusionment. The focus of this history are the Europeans, who, hoping to find another empire of gold, repeatedly found nothing but war and a bitter struggle for mere survival. In the process, however, they totally changed the life of the region’s Indian nations. Brandon offers a glimpse, not only of the decimation by war and epidemics, but also of population shifts and adaptation to the horse and to crops plantation, the quick way whereby Indians learned to turn European weaknesses to their own advantage.

There are three chapters in the book which are termed “interludes,” for some obscure reason. One of these, “Three Women,” mentions the abbess María de Agreda, the adventurous “nun ensign” Catalina de Erauso, and the poet Juana Inés de la Cruz, and claims that “the Spanish soul may perhaps be silhouetted by sighting along them” (p. 90). But what we are given, in fact, are a few details of

their biography, which may be found in any serious encyclopaedia, and a flimsy argument that their visions, exploits and poems are an indication of the strong hold that New Mexico and its frontiers had on the Spanish imagination during the seventeenth century. The author's style — in this chapter, as in all the rest — is convoluted, pretentious and irritating.

William Brandon's earlier book (*New Worlds for Old: Reports from the New World and their Effect on the Development of Social Thought in Europe, 1500-1800*, Ohio University Press, 1986) constitutes an attempt to revive the obsolete thesis that the discovery of America had evoked utopianism, egalitarianism and aspirations of freedom among Europeans, or, in his own words, that "the conflict between the two strains of the Old World and the New... has been an integral part of the chronic conflict between authoritarianism and liberalism that has burned at the core of Western history since the seventeenth century" (Preface, p. ix). It is just as shallow and unpretentious as the attempt in Quivira to demonstrate that "certain societies are especially prone to illusion" and that "the fantasies — and the realities — of the world being established by Europe in America turned on money" (Epilogue, p. 253). Ohio University Press should have been more discriminating in its choice of authors.

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