

The Civil War on the Rio Grande, 1846-1876

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Review

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Bacha-Garza, Roseann, Christopher L. Miller, and Russell K. Skowronek, editors. *The Civil War on the Rio Grande, 1846-1876*. Texas A&M University Press, 2019. ISBN 9781623497194.

This is an unconventional book on a sub-region of Texas, known today as the Lower Rio Grande Valley. While the main focus of the bulk of the essays are on social, economic, and political affairs that pertain to the standard Civil War period, the editors attempt, with some success, to enlarge the story using the idea that the region's history should be viewed in the context of the consolidation of the United States as its army and citizens marched South and West. The authors address key themes from the Mexican American War to the 1870s. Strictly speaking, three essays address military matters, two social history, two race relations, and two archaeology. In addition, two of the longer essays cover the general background history of the region from its Hispanic origins and war and politics in Mexico and the U.S. for the period 1846-1876. The latter essay ends with the rise of the dictator Porfirio Diaz, who terminated Mexico's endemic civil wars and commenced the process of national consolidation.

While the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas was distant from the main theaters of the Civil War with a few minor engagements, the essays bring a clear focus that demonstrates how the conflict played out in the region. The Lower Valley's proximity to Mexico enhanced the significance of the Civil War because Confederates used Mexico to export cotton and import necessities and war material to the Southern army and citizenry. This thesis is well supported by the essays in the collection.

Some of the themes in the various essays have been well covered by standard history of Texas and Mexico, such as Irving W. Levinson's account of political and military developments in Northern Mexico and the United States during the Civil War and Jerry Thompson's account of regional caudillos, Santos Benavides of Laredo, and

Juan N. Cortina of Matamoros. However, some of the authors add new information on some aspects of the Civil War in the Lower Valley.

Roseann Bacha-Garza's essay provides a social history of a few white men who left the North and South and settled in the 1850s in the Lower Valley. Married to Black women who had been formerly enslaved or to Native American women, they found a refuge in the distant borderland. These families evidently assisted runaway slaves who sought to reach Mexico, though no number is provided. During the Civil War years, some of these men obstructed local Confederate troops that sought to protect the flow of Southern cotton to Mexico. She also shows that, by marrying local Hispanics, the initial community grew and diversity increased. Identifying as Hispanics today, they also recognized their Black origins.

Combining social and economic data, M. M. McAllen writes an account of one of her ancestors, Irishman John McAllen, a merchant who operated several enterprises at Brownsville and Matamoros during the Civil War. Relying on his own determination and skills as well as his wife's Mexican family members, John McAllen, a British subject, operated without much difficulty despite the constant changing of armies and authorities on both sides of the Rio Grande during the Civil War. He was evidently quite successful in making a profit from his mercantile work as did those who engaged in the Confederate cotton trade. It would be interesting to know how much wealth came from that important economic activity and its related components, such as carting of goods and sea traffic. When the fighting ended, McAllen returned to ranching, a long-cherished pursuit of Mexicans and Tejanos. His story is a good example of how the Texas-Mexican borderland could be at turns transnational, while at other times the two countries went their separate ways.

Some of the essays suffer from reliance on old historiography of the region and consequently some matters are poorly presented. For example, in the essay by Thomas A. Fort and Karen Gerhardt Fort the discussion of the Confederate cotton trade merits more careful attention to the literature on the merchant class that engaged in that critical business. Both sides of the Rio Grande and adjacent districts, such as Monterrey, had a good share of merchants, some who had made invaluable contributions to the commercial expansion of Texas and Northern Mexico by linking this greater region to the important

Atlantic world economy since the 1820s. Men such as Charles Stillman of Connecticut and José San Román, a Spanish immigrant, both initially based in Matamoros and then Brownsville, had such critical roles that they deserve greater attention because they learned to negotiate their economic and political activities in the bi-national setting of the Texas-Mexican border. The authors' discussion of the early mining of salt as an economic resource in the Lower Valley is also too general and not wholly accurate. A few essays similarly required a bit more primary sources and relevant secondary sources to solidify the scholarship.

Despite these shortcomings, there are some benefits. A good number of relevant subjects are presented in one collection, with some of essays being well crafted based on solid research and clear writing. Additionally, because several of the essays cover the experience of Black troops and others who settled in the Lower Valley, a few to be sure, the collection is timely as the country examines its relationship to Black Americans.

Of particular interest is historian James N. Leiker's conceptualization of the events that transpired in the Lower Valley within the context of U.S. national history. He asserts in his essay on Negro troops stationed in the Lower Valley that, in place of finite eras, such as Civil War and Reconstruction, the process that shaped the country through a series of internal conflicts sparked by western expansion should be viewed as one of Greater Consolidation. He argues that all of those conflicts ended with greater centralization, achieved through the impact of the Mexican American and Civil Wars. According to Leiker, it was these events that in effect made possible the transformation of the U.S. into a modern, industrial country. However, there is a consensus that the War with Mexico served as a background to the eventual coming of the Civil War, and that causation of the latter conflict was based on the more immediate sectional issues between the North and the South. Perhaps too much emphasis is placed on the Mexican American War as a sort of precursor. For one, consolidation of the West and Southwest would take a while before Anglos dominated Tejanos, who were important stock-raisers until the last decade of the 19th century and before Native American power could be crushed in the plains of north Texas in the 1870s. Also, the commercialization of ranching in Texas after 1867 greatly accelerated the economic integration of the state in the U.S.

One of the editors, Russell K. Skowronek, an anthropologist, makes it a point in the concluding essay that historical writing gains from a multitude of sources and disciplines. He is particularly interested in the archeological dimension of the Civil War in terms of material culture, battle sites, and human interactions. It is a point well taken and underscored by the essays in this collection.

Armando C. Alonzo is an Associate Professor of History at Texas A&M University. His current book project is a social and economic history of Texas and Northeast Mexico from its colonial roots to 1942. He is the author of *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900* (Albuquerque, 1998).