

# H-Net Reviews

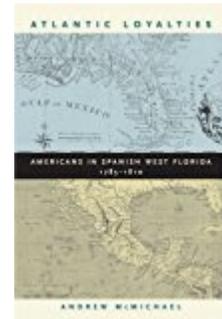
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Andrew McMichael.** *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. xii + 226 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3004-4; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3023-5.

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Published on H-LatAm (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



## West Floridians' Frontier Pragmatism

As a historical phenomenon, the concept of loyalty is a fruitful area for investigation because it so clearly resonates with the polarizing politics of the border today. In this study of the lives, experiences, and attitudes of British settlers in West Florida, Andrew McMichael sets out to answer several questions. Why were Anglo-Americans so willing to declare their loyalty to Spanish Crown? Why did they not desire independence or even union with the United States until after 1810? What sorts of calculations did they make when determining their loyalty? And why did they wait so long to switch their allegiance? McMichael concludes that Anglo-Floridians operated according to a sort of “frontier pragmatism” that led them to assess which European regime best protected their local interests and accepted its imperial dominion accordingly. When the Spanish government could no longer guarantee stability or defend their property in 1810, West Floridians switched their loyalty to a national administration that could—the United States. To be clear, the author states that his book is “a study of the motivations for revolutions, and not an analysis of the events” that led up to the independence and incorporation of West Florida (p. 5).

McMichael wishes to challenge several assumptions that exist about the history of the Baton Rouge and West Florida region. He chides nationalist and Whiggish U.S. historians for assuming that the ouster of a foreign pres-

ence and incorporation of West Florida into an expanding American territory was somehow both broadly desired and inevitable. In fact, he notes, the real situation was much more complicated and contested. He also demolishes the Anglophone tendency to see Spanish government in West Florida (and by extension, the rest of the Spanish borderlands) as brutal, ineffective, or irrelevant. With his archival research, McMichael clearly proves that the majority of Anglo-American settlers preferred to live under Spanish laws because they were fairer, reliably enforced, and offered a more stable environment for their businesses and families to thrive. He is also curious about the suggestion of 1803 and the Louisiana Purchase as the overwhelmingly significant date in the region’s history and rightly points out that this was not, in fact, the end of European power there. McMichael does stress that he is writing the social history of loyalty, not a diplomatic one. To that end, he used local history documents, letters, wills, marriage records, and court cases to show a “more textured picture” of Anglo-Americans’ loyalty to Spain, and he is largely successful in the endeavor.

One useful element of McMichael’s study is his willingness to foreground an explicit discussion of his methodology and the theories that underpin his study. He tells readers that he intends to use a “four-squared model of history” (pp. 6-7). First, he notes that his subjects are unique in North American borderlands history

because the local residents' cultural background was different from that of their colonial governors. They were British but remained loyal to Spain. Second, McMichael explicitly aims to situate his case study within the growing field of "cis-Atlantic" history, emphasizing how much of West Floridians' lives were determined by people and forces far beyond their control. Third, he takes on Ned Landesman's challenge to rethink the meaning of borders within an imperial British system. One could, presumably, extend that concept to challenge the notion of Spanish imperial borders, and also the expansion and entrenchment of America's border (a subject that has implications for political debates over citizenship, loyalty, and the border today).

Finally, McMichael identifies his methodology with an approach called "contextualism," meaning that the documents themselves suggest the sort of discussion that emerges out of them. For example, where information found in the archival tends toward explicating the primacy of political events, that would be the focus of the chapter; in contrast, where case studies or social history seem more suitable, those methodologies are used. In the specific case of *Atlantic Loyalties*, early chapters are structured as straightforward discussions of broader trends in West Florida's settlement patterns, extension of land grants, and slave ownership while later chapters offer much more focused individual stories drawn from prominent court cases related to property and crime, filibustering, and slavery. McMichael proves himself equal to the task of handling both broad, imperial political history and local, case-based social history, but overall the strategy does tend to undercut the project of producing of a monograph-length argument. The chapters could very easily stand as individual self-contained articles, which lends a certain choppyness to the book and distracts from the overall power of the argument.

The book's chapters are distinct and mainly self-contained. The first chapter constructs a context in which Spain's generous land settlement policy first attracted, and then retained, the loyalty of non-Spanish-speaking residents and immigrants to West Florida. The second chapter discusses the relationship between slavery and the accumulation of wealth, noting that under the Spanish system, slaves had a "small degree of comparative freedom" and more legal and human rights, albeit within a still-brutal institution (p. 41). The third and fourth chapters ramble over the various expeditions for "exploration and control" that passed through the region in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase, including those of Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, and Aaron Burr. The fifth and

sixth chapters are devoted to case studies of "strains on the system," namely slavery and the law, and property and crime. These are micro-histories of individual cases where McMichael argues that the interminably bureaucratic Spanish system so often criticized by historians of the United States and the British Empire was actually quite thorough, fair, and reflective of the letter of the law. The final chapter seven discusses the breakdown of Spanish authority in the region as encapsulated in three events related to the Napoleonic Wars: the commercial embargo, the increasing wartime demands, and the recall of popular Governor Carlos de Grand-Pré to Havana (p. 149).

One interesting, and perhaps problematic, element of the book's discussion of loyalty is the very close relationship asserted between wealth, property, and loyalty. Indeed, the chapter titles contain words that underscore this connection: land, wealth, loyalty, working, owning, system, property. In the epilogue, McMichael asserts his conclusion more baldly than he dared to do in the introduction, namely that loyalty did not come from any sort of sense of national identity or patriotic feeling of being Anglo or American, but rather it represented a conscious choice made preferable because of the dissolution of Spain's ability to provide stable government. It was a revolution by "default, rather than one driven by ideology" in which the "residents of Baton Rouge and West Florida, then, became American because they had nowhere else to turn" (pp. 174-175). These conclusions, while no doubt accurate for the specific kinds of people and individual case studies that McMichael traces, surely do not reflect the entire spectrum of motivation or action across all residents of the region, not least among those who had no property to gain or lose. In fact, micro-histories and case studies can often obscure large-scale processes at the same time that they illuminate individual personal experiences, and therein lies the central methodological contradiction inherent in writing about global processes from a local perspective. His subtitle's designation of "Americans in Spanish West Florida" is also problematic, as many of the people emigrating into the region at that time were actually British or Spanish and only became American at the end. To be fair, though, these problems of national identification arise from the nature of the period itself and obliquely indicate just how anachronistic the concept of loyalty can be.

McMichael displays an extensive and impressive familiarity with U.S. borderlands history and the outlines of the new Atlantic world paradigm. By invoking the concept of "frontier loyalty" to refer to West Florida with

a terminal date of 1810, McMichael unintentionally reveals just how quickly the geo-spatial aspect of the border was changing as well. By the 1820s, the frontier had moved significantly westward, and by the 1840s even farther still. Presumably frontiers are always liminal spaces where meanings are contested and boundaries more porous than those who guard them might like to

think. This is an interesting, timely, and suggestive book whose individual case studies suggest that there are rich veins of borderland history still to be explored, all the more so because the loyalty of people who dare to question or cross the border today is impugned and deemed suspect.

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**Citation:** Karen Racine. Review of McMichael, Andrew, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

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