

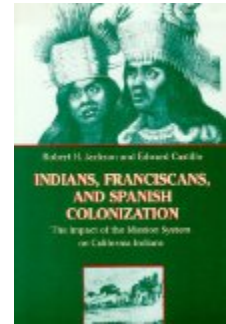
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert H. Jackson, Edward Castillo. *Indians, Franciscans and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on the California Indians*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. vii + 214 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1570-0.

Reviewed by Jack S. Williams (Center for Spanish Colonial Archaeology, and Anita Cohen-Williams, Arizona State University)

Published on H-LatAm (October, 1995)



Several generations of scholars have explored the relationship that existed between Indians and Europeans on the frontiers of colonial America. Fifty years ago, researchers emphasized that the Iberian missions introduced a relatively benevolent form of Old World civilization. The missionaries were seen as idealistic holy men. The natives were docile and cooperative. In particular, the Franciscan program in California was portrayed as a model of enlightened policy. It resulted in a short-lived Indian utopia. Today's generation of "Indian-focused" historians generally take the opposite point of view. The Spanish empire is seen as the moral equivalent of the Nazi Third Reich. Franciscans play the part of the jack-booted SS. The mission facility is portrayed as a kind of frontier prison camp. Junipero Serra is seen as the Heinrich Himmler of a program of organized, systematic genocide.

Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization presents yet another vehement indictment of the mission program. Unfortunately, it offers very little new information in support of its revisionist thesis. The facts provided in the text cover the same basic ground as every writer since Zephyr Engelhardt. Jackson and Castillo's goal of intergrating the California mission story into the larger framework of Latin American history is not achieved. This volume offers almost nothing that has not been said a dozen times before, except a slightly revised radical interpretation.

Jackson and Castillo bring to the task of writing this work a distinctively anti-missionary, anti-European, anti-colonialist perspective. They take a particular delight in attacking Junipero Serra, and the advocates of his canonization. Virtually every page of the study is colored

by their advocacy of modern Native American agendas. This work is clearly meant to be a politically correct diatribe against the pro-missionary perspectives offered by traditional Catholic historians, and their allies among the "Bolton" School. There is a great deal of smoke here, but very little fire or analysis.

Jackson and Castillo would like to bolster their opinions with eyewitness testimony. The dilemma that they face is that the Indians have not left a written record of their views. Few colonial critics levelled complaints at the missionaries. Their statements can almost always be recognized as directed toward other political agendas. Furthermore, they have been reprinted with such regularity during recent years that they have taken on the character of cliches. Time has rendered the validity of oral history at best questionable. The modern situation of California has created great discontinuity for Indian people. What independent evidence exists to confirm the anti-European suppositions of modern Indians who are seeking to assert political rights? Furthermore, mission critics almost never consider the pro-Catholic views of Indian peoples who have been assimilated into the modern Latino community. The most damaging evidence that can be cited about the missions is the statistical data on Indian death rates. However, here again, Jackson and Castillo provide no new information. They simply reiterate the data and comments by Henry Dobyns, Sherburne Cook and Woodrow Borah.

One fact that has become clear through recent mission studies is that Indian peoples were not simply passive recipients of European culture. Jackson and Castillo are quick to note that some Indians violently opposed the

missionaries (Chapter 4). However they are extremely reluctant to recognize the fact that some Indians sided with the newcomers. The truth is that the California missions could have never been created without Indian cooperation. Why did some Indians choose the missions? The answers are complex. It seems reasonable to note that Indian society, like all human societies, treated some individuals with preference, and others with discrimination. Furthermore, some Indians simply liked things that were new or different. Many Indians worked with the Spaniards to better their lives. Others manipulated the newcomers to achieve traditional political or social objectives. Some Indians were drawn into the mission by accident. An unclear number were brought in through coercion. To understand the missions, a researcher needs to consider all these factors.

Anyone who wants to deny that Indians had any interest in adopting traits introduced by the newcomers needs to account for the testimony of people such as Fray Vicente de Santa Maria. In 1795, in connection with a visit to the San Fernando Valley, he notes:

“...In this place we came to a rancheria near the dwelling of said Reyes - with enough Indians. They take care of the field of corn, beans, and melons, belonging to said Reyes, which with that of the Indians could be covered with two fanegas of wheat. These Indians are the cowherds, cattlemen, irrigators, bird-catchers, foremen, horsemen, etc. To this locality belong, and they acknowledge it, the gentiles of other rancherias, such as Taapa, Tacuyama,...who have not affiliated with Mission San Gabriel.

...Here we see nothing but pagans passing, clad in shoes, with sombreros and blankets, and serving as muleteers to the settlers and rancheros, so that if it were not for the gentiles there would be neither pueblo nor rancho; and if this be not accepted as true, let them bring proof. Finally these pagan Indians care neither for the Mission nor for the missionaries...” (quoted in Engelhardt 1927)

The mission as “concentration camp” advocates, such as Castillo and Jackson, also need to explain how the Europeans controlled the Native people of California. How did a handful of Latino soldiers, armed primarily with lances, swords and flintlock weapons, hold in check the thousands of Indians that made up the California neophyte population? A modern army, with a larger number of soldiers, could not achieve this objective. Furthermore, the mission Indian people were trained to fight using European military technology and concepts by the soldiers. From the outset of the California mission pro-

gram, the financing of the project was considered an integral part of defense spending. The Indians provided the backbone of regional security. Only an extremely foolish person would arm and train slaves.

Like many authors with similar agendas, Castillo and Jackson emphasize that California was a region where Indians were being exploited for economic, rather than overt military purposes (Chapter 1). If this is true, then why did the Crown never achieve so much as a single real of profit from the colony? From a financial perspective, the colonization of California made absolutely no sense. As noted by generations of scholars, Spanish California was a strategic possession occupied as part of a broad defense initiative. The role of California in a policy of defensive expansion is one of the major, obvious differences that set the region apart from more valuable economic zones in the colonial heartland.

Jackson and Castillo reiterate evidence gathered by Archibald (1978) that the role played by the mission Indian was primarily that of a labor force. The chief benefit of the missions was that they supplied goods to the presidios. However, archaeological evidence suggests that the presidios experienced a super abundance of food. Although the official record rarely makes mention of them, wild food resources, including shellfish, wild birds, fish, sea mammals, deer, and antelope, played a large part in presidio diet. Further, abundant documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that the presidios enjoyed their own infrastructure of ranching and farming. While they may have found mission goods useful, the Franciscans’ supply of food was of secondary importance to the tiny defense establishment deployed in the province. Archaeological and documentary evidence indicates that between 1810 and 1821 the military experienced various shortages in consumer goods, but could hardly be said to have been “completely dependent” on the mission (page 28).

Jackson and Castillo portray the construction programs at each mission as manifestations of forced labor. Not mentioned by these authors is the fact that none of the California missions share architectural features with contemporary European prisons. Instead, they appear to represent proto-urban settlements, designed to replicate the form and character of colonial town life seen elsewhere in Latin America. The periodic abandonment of the missions by large groups of Indians demonstrates the fact that the Spaniards lacked the ability to control the neophytes as slaves. Unlike the situation in the more settled parts of the Spanish Empire, a large and success-

ful non-mission Indian community could be found in the proximity of the California outposts. For example, in a recent conversation, Florence Shippek, one of the most vocal anthropologists-critics of the missions, suggested that as many as half of the Kumyaay population in the area dominated by San Diego Mission, lived in traditional villages in the coastal zone, outside the limits of the Franciscan system.

The only features that have ever been associated with jail-like conditions are the monjerios (women's dormitories). These buildings are extremely poorly known from either literary or archaeological sources. It is far from clear that they were comparable to jails. The idea of segregating young women from family life offends contemporary values. However, the lack of privacy between the sexes found in the one-room houses typical of both missions and presidios should be kept in mind. Furthermore, in eighteenth-century Spanish society, "...only by living in seclusion did one gain the good name that was all-essential for candidacy to marriage" (Martin Gaité 1991:14). If the institution at the mission was oppressive of Indian women, it was no less oppressive in Latino society.

Castillo and Jackson's discussion of mission life offers no comparisons with any aspects of Latino society. Ironically, the people who made up the non-Indian population of colonial California were for the most part not Europeans. Instead they were biologically and culturally diverse. Many settlers were Afro-Hispanic, Hispano-Indian, and Hispano-Asian. Archaeological and historical studies of Hispanic settlers suggest that the people who lived at the presidios ate a diet dominated by Mesoamerican foods. They made and used chipped stone tools. They manufactured hand-coiled plainware and redware pottery. Some settlers retained knowledge of Nahuatl legends. Philipino sailors introduced new fishing technologies. Many of the settlers were descendents of Sonoran Indians who retained a sense of tribal identity. How can anyone begin to understand mission culture change (Chapter 2) without reference to the culture that was brought to California? Furthermore, a brief study of the presidio populations indicates that the anti-European rhetoric of this book is really also aimed at modern African, Indian, Latino and Asian people who took part in the Spanish colonial experience.

It is true that if we compare the conditions found at the missions with those found in modern suburbs, then life in the earlier settlements can be said to have been harsh. Compared to modern Californians, mis-

sion inhabitants suffered from cramped living conditions, poor health standards, and shortfalls in diet. However, when we examine contemporary "Spanish" settlements, we find that their settlers also experienced similar conditions. As noted by earlier scholars, compared to other regions, such as the Pimeria Alta in Sonora, the California situation was mild. For example, Sherburne Cook and Woodrow Borah state:

"...One question of considerable interest concerns the length of time they (Indian people) would have survived if they had remained in their aboriginal culture and had not been gathered into missions - even more if they had not had any contact with the Europeans. There is, of course, no basis at this time for an answer. The unavoidable establishment of contact with Europeans would have brought the diseases of the Old World in any event. If the coastal Indians of central California had not experienced the perhaps benign regime of the Franciscan missions, their fate might have been even harsher under a civil regime of some kind, or under another European subculture." (Cook and Borah 1979:211)

For most of those with a multi-disciplinary, or a Latin-Americanist perspective, both the pro- and anti-missionary points of view provided by extremists such as Jackson and Castillo will probably appear to be grotesque over-simplifications of the colonial reality. The evidence that has accumulated in the last one hundred years suggests that the Franciscan missions were neither heaven on earth nor concentration camps. The reality of Indian/non-Indians interaction in the colonial context is far more complex than the cartoon version provided by either the "Bolton school," or the equally extreme "anti-Bolton Indianists" scholars. Both groups of extremists depend on a suspension of disbelief by their readers. The existence of contrary evidence that contradicts their point-of-view is inevitably dealt with by a barrage of political rhetoric. The publication of distorted perspectives is often justified among more moderate researchers by the argument that scholarship is inherently linked to the idea of balance. Today, it has become fashionable in some scholarly circles to suggest that everyone's point of view, irrespective of the facts, is equally valid. As pro- and anti-missionary rhetoric has reached a fevered pitch, the reality of Latino-Indian relations at the missions has all but disappeared.

Other aspects of this book provide additional disappointments. It is an extremely short volume (213 pages). The text's internal organization is odd at best. Over a third of the data are presented as semi-coherent appen-

dices and tables. Occasionally information in the appendices directly contradicts the text (see for example p.27 and p.138). The fourteen pages of separate illustrations inserted into the text have almost no connection to the rest of the work. Some picture notes provide insightful examples of the authors' prejudice. For example, a note on Cardero's illustration of Monterey Presidio includes the statement that "...Indian workers, usually forced labor prisoners, are seen working in the foreground." No evidence exists that mission Indians significantly contributed to the work completed at the site. Another photograph shows a building at Santa Cruz Mission State Park, and notes that it was "a wing of cell-like rooms built to house Yokuts families." No mention exists of the fact that Latino settlers lived in virtually identical adobe buildings at the presidios. The use of pictorial images reminds us of Cold War Soviet publications that showed benign photographs of farms in rural America. These often included notations such as "...the oppressed workers in the United States suffer from endless exploitation by their capitalist task master."

For a book that takes as its focus the transformation of Indian people, Castillo and Jackson's volume includes almost nothing about aboriginal society. A single page of superficial description was apparently grafted into the preface at the last minute in order to offset this deficiency. The character of California's native peoples, including their extreme diversity, is glossed over in order to get to the real story - a largely imaginary expose on a chamber of horrors version of life at the missions.

Jackson and Castillo's anti-Iberian, anti-missionary rhetoric is more extreme than some, but nothing new. The blind hatred of Indians that sadly affected so many colonial writers, has in this volume been replaced by a blind hatred of Latino people. Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization echos the often simplistic tone of many other revisionist works designed to provide alternative perspectives. While it is true that the University of New Mexico Press published without comment the often racist and imperialist words of eighteenth-century missionaries such as Ignez Pfefferkorn, their willingness to put into print the equally distorted words of contemporary anti-missionaries, cannot be applauded. It is time that someone stopped the endless addition of branches to what Philip Wayne Powell called "the tree of hate."

References Cited

Archibald, Robert. "Indian Labor at the California Missions: Slavery or Salvation?" *Journal of San Diego History* 24(2):172-82, 1978.

Cook, Sherburne F., and Woodrow Borah. *Essays in Population History: California and Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

Engelhardt, Zephyrn. *San Fernando Rey: The Mission of the Valley* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1927).

Martin Gaité, Carmen. *Love Customs in Eighteenth-Century Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Jack S. Williams. Review of Jackson, Robert H.; Castillo, Edward, *Indians, Franciscans and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on the California Indians*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 1995.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=191>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.