



**David J. Weber.** *The Spanish Frontier in North America: The Brief Edition.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xiv + 298 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-14068-2.

**Reviewed by** F. Evan Nooe (University of Mississippi)

**Published on** H-Florida (February, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

In 1992, the scholarly community met David J. Weber's publication of *The Spanish Frontier in North America* with deserving praise. The book received numerous awards and accolades from various committees and historical associations. Its broad scope, both geographically and chronologically, garnered attention from a plethora of academic journals. Reviewers from *American Quarterly*, the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, and the *William and Mary Quarterly* all concluded with lauding Weber's achievements.[1] Kathleen Deagan, writing in the *Journal of American History*, wrote that "it is a book of stunning and meticulous interdisciplinary scholarship" while Susan M. Deeds, in the *Journal of Southern History*, simply stated "Weber's achievement is superb." [2]

Weber's synthesis effectively traced the history of the Spanish Borderlands north of Mexico and spanning from California to Florida from the sixteenth through the twentieth century. Weber's work, following in the tradition of Herbert Eugene Bolton (*The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* [1921]) and John Francis Bannon (*The Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513-1821* [1974]), provides an exemplary assessment of Spanish colonization efforts accentuating the Spanish heritage and legacy of territory

that is presently within the contiguous United States. The book's multicausal analysis and interdisciplinary approach produced a synthesis not attempted in the previous quarter century. Weber's incorporation of ethnographical approaches and archeological evidence strived, and succeeded, to give Native Americans across the Borderlands area agency. Weber examined Native Americans as dynamic, diverse peoples actively shaping their changing world. His sensitivity to economic, cultural, and political motivations produced a near complete picture of Spanish motivations and competing influences. Spanish motives for material wealth shaped expansionist drives as much as stymieing European colonial competitors. With Weber's success and the book's continued relevance in the field, Yale University Press has issued a condensed version almost two decades after *The Spanish Frontier in North America*'s original publication.

While there are no new additions for readers of the original, the 2009 edition is much more nimble and less likely to induce forearm fatigue. The *Brief Edition* is reduced to 320 pages from the original 579. Of the core text, the 2009 edition cuts nearly 100 pages. The major components omitted are those primarily useful to scholars. The original

double column notations that filled 130 pages are completely cut without a replacement of any form. The immense bibliography, which one reviewer of the original edition described as “indispensable,” is also eliminated.[3] The index remains primarily intact, only shortened by a few pages.

Despite the content reduction, readers familiar with the original edition will be pleased that Weber and the publisher have not sacrificed the integrity of the work. For new readers it will, more than likely, be difficult to detect that this is an abridged version. It is reasonable to assume that most would not have realized this was a condensed version if it had not been written on the cover. Readers are still greeted with a thoughtful introduction and insightful, thorough chapters. Although each chapter is reduced from original form, all are still present from the original publication. Chapters read as coherent, solidly supported topics examining the shifting dynamics of the northern Spanish Borderlands spanning across five centuries.

Since the 2009 edition is definitively a slimmer, qualified reincarnation of the original it seems repetitive to vet the work’s thesis and scholarly contribution when numerous reviewers of the 1992 edition have already adequately accomplished this objective. Instead, it seems more pertinent to evaluate Weber’s goal explicitly for the abridged version of showing general readers “Spain’s impact on the lives, institutions, and environments of native peoples of North America and the impact of North America on the lives and institutions of those Spaniards who explored and settled what has now become the United States.” Weber concedes that the original edition possibly told “readers more than they need to know,” and Michael Mathes concurred in the *Catholic Historical Review* by pointing out that it was “not a text for beginners, but rather one for scholars and advanced students familiar with prior historiography”(p. 5). [4]

Throughout the new edition, readers are unencumbered by the historiographical debates that Mathes warned readers about. The one major exception is Weber’s assessment of the Black Legend: the depiction of Spanish colonizers as uniquely vicious Europeans pillaging New World resources and indifferently taking the lives of indigenous peoples. While Weber does not apologize or overlook the oftentimes cruel treatment of Spaniards toward Indians, he stresses that it is important to contextualize actions within their time. Therefore, while a Spanish court in New Mexico may amputate the foot of an Ácomas Indian, similar punishment was meted out in Spain and by competing European powers for comparable offenses. Readers with no other historical knowledge should be able to follow Weber’s narrative with little difficulty.

This condensed version is also befitting utilization in undergraduate classrooms. The text is appropriate for upper-level classes but should also be considered as a supplementary text for introductory classes on early U.S. history. Many survey textbooks covering U.S. history to Reconstruction give much more attention to the Anglo-European colonization efforts focusing on Jamestown and New England compared to the earlier Spanish efforts. Spaniards were not simply the earliest explorers but maintained a continuous, although trying, presence in North America up to 1821. Students will be able to see that when Jamestown was founded in 1607, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés had already established an enduring colony at St. Augustine over four decades earlier. These complimentary views of settling North America offer the potential to show students the uncertainty of the New World and challenge teleological assumptions of British and then American domination of the continent.

Aided by Weber’s dedicated inclusion of a Native American perspective throughout his work, it also offers an opportunity for students to study history through the perspective of space. The Span-

ish Borderlands, in particular, occupied a contested space with no fixed geopolitical line. The Borderlands were not static and at times ebbed and expanded by the decade. Spanish, French, English, Native American, and latter U.S. claims competed over the same space without the benefit of a clear foresight to know how this territorial drama would play out. Although Spanish efforts are the primary focus, Weber lucidly explains the motivations and challenges that each competitor experienced leaving students with distinct images of English goals, Native American goals, and so forth.

The *Brief Edition* is sure to be a successful successor to the original. General readers should find this to be an unintimidating work that is eloquently written. Teachers who assign this book for their class will be pleased that despite the reduction in content, it has not compromised the original scholarly contribution of the 1992 edition or oversimplified the factors shaping the Spanish Borderlands. Perhaps the only drawback, which in no way should deter someone from reading this book, is the addition of a "Further Reading" section intended to replace the bibliography. The new selected bibliography is intended to guide readers and researches to recent books on the Spanish Borderlands published between 1992 and 2007; however, general readers will more than likely be put off by an alphabetically arranged list of titles spanning thirteen pages. The list offers little guidance to the general readers Weber is trying to accommodate; thematic groupings or concise descriptions would surely have been more helpful for those looking to further investigate the interesting topics addressed in *The Spanish Frontier in North America*.

#### Notes

[1]. James A. Sandos, review of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, by David J. Weber, *American Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (December 1994): 595-604; John Jay Tepaske, review of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, by David J. Weber, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (May 1994): 343-344; and Joseph P. Sanchez, review of *The*

*Spanish Frontier in North America*, by David J. Weber, *William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1993): 608-610.

[2]. Kathleen Deagan, review of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, by David J. Weber, *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 1994): 1431-1432, quotation from 1431; and Susan M. Deeds, review of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, by David J. Weber, *Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 1 (February 1994): 113-114, quotation from 114.

[3]. Deagan, 1431.

[4]. Michael Mathes, review of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, by David J. Weber, *Catholic Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (July 1993): 562-564, quotation from 564.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

**Citation:** F. Evan Nooe. Review of Weber, David J. *The Spanish Frontier in North America: The Brief Edition*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30885>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.