



## *The Mark of Rebels: Indios Fronterizos and the War of Independence*

by Barry Robinson.

Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2016. Pp. xii, 191. ISBN 978-0-8173-1920-5.

Review by Stephen Neufeld, California State University-Fullerton (sneufeld@exchange.fullerton.edu).

---

The violent transformation from New Spanish colony to Mexican nation entailed a long guerrilla struggle that devastated much of the land. The initial popular revolt, soon quashed by Royalists, became a long sporadic insurgency. The vagaries of the War of Independence shaped the rebuilding of a nation. In *The Mark of Rebels*, historian Barry Robinson (Queen's Univ., Charlotte) illuminates this process with close attention to the people the new state left behind and history books omitted—the indigenous frontier communities that took part in the uprising—and the emerging political culture that deprived them of their previous status and privileges, thus planting the seeds of social inequality and political exclusion that have plagued Mexico's history. “With the onset of the 1810 insurrection, the indigenous pueblos of Colotlán mobilized local legacies of resistance, and social upheaval convulsed the entire region and overflowed outward in a broad confluence with the ‘Hidalgo Revolt’” (2). The revolt erased indigenous colonial *fueros* (legal privileges) and redefined local social relationships in favor of *criollo* (American-born) networks.

Robinson draws on his expertise in racial identities and colonial politics<sup>1</sup> to open a new perspective on “the making and breaking of empire, and the rich local sociocultural settings in which the long-term trajectory of Spanish America was determined” (29). He concentrates on the disparate ethnic communities of the Colotlán region, northwest of Mexico City, first establishing the frontier character of the area and then explaining how indigenous concepts of loyalty and authority reflected notions of conquest and military service.

Robinson also traces the changes that took place in Colotlán as outsider groups arrived and settled, altering patron-client relations and other social expectations that then became customary “law.” Fundamental arguments over land intensified the importance of patronage as the source of legitimacy. The war itself forged ties between Colotlán's native militias and Fr. Miguel Hidalgo's insurgents. The goals of *criollo* rebel officers and indigenous warriors diverged sharply under the strains of battle and political maneuvering that, from early on, discounted indigenous expectations. Robinson details how the *indulto* (executive pardon) enabled national elites to reconcile with *criollo* rebels, while relegating indigenous communities to an inferior position on both local and federal levels. He concludes by sketching the position of the *indios fronterizos* in the aftermath of independence.

Robinson's insightful and well written book proposes intriguing interpretations that need closer scrutiny, particularly regarding the characterization of frontier indigenous identity, local community politics, and the meanings of the War of Independence for marginalized groups. A leitmotif of *Mark of Rebels* is that an ethnic indigenous identity bound Colotlán together as a community. This identity centered on specific ideas of place and historical memory, particularly of the frontier and conquistador experiences. Robinson argues that the residents of Colotlán, being outside the central valley, acquired

---

1. See, e.g., Jane Landers and Barry Robinson, eds., *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: U New Mexico Pr, 2006).

a sense of rugged independence that contrasted with nearby Spanish mining or mission settlements (22–23). Tensions between center and periphery, mestizo-Spaniard and mestizo-indigenous, and civilized frontier and barbaric indigenous wilds, colored the local political landscape. Indigenes on the frontier asserted themselves as the cultural center, not the periphery of New Spanish society (9). This sense of importance, rooted in historical memory, fostered local pride and political engagement.

The Colotlán indigenous groups' persistent claims to be conquistadores in their own right affected their political outlooks. Recent studies have shown that the Conquest extended throughout the colonial era with indigenous participation in legal systems, tribute economies, and military service.<sup>2</sup> Colotlán is an archetypal case of early interventions by Tlaxcalan forces acting for the Spanish and settling in the area after the 1541 Mixtón Rebellion. These groups did the actual work of "Conquest" for the Crown in return for exemptions from taxation and sumptuary laws (23–24). They also gained significant social status. Not to be outdone, indigenes in Colotlán formed and served as *indios flecheros* (archer Indians) in defense of the Spanish colony from the early Mixtón through the 1720s Nayarit rebellions; they did not formally disband until the late eighteenth century, and then only under protest (24). Thus, they too enjoyed special status and privilege in the community in recognition of the sacrifices their militias had made. They kept that historical memory alive well past the era of independence.

The chief elements of indigenous politics in Colotlán reflected its unique frontier identity and legacy of armed service, but not without complications. Robinson admits that "frontier" is a hard concept to pin down. Hal Langfur's work on "hollow frontiers" in the Brazilian interior<sup>3</sup> revealed the fluidity of the designation, which Robinson understates. Historians must take into account how people deploy ideas, symbols, and images in their politics and arts. Conversely, if the term connotes denigration of the community by outsiders appealing to old stereotypes, then the loss of historic agency thereby implied matters as well. The author does not clarify whether the frontier aspect of politics still counted in the same ways by the time of independence, when locals well knew they were living close to the centers of national power.

Robinson discusses the importance of military service but not in its broader, more global setting. If indigenous service was not inherently different, then Robinson could have made a better case by contrasting republican notions of citizenship and military service in other contexts.<sup>4</sup> He spells out the significance of tax and sumptuary exemptions as motives for indigenous warriors, but glosses over the potent allure of service as masculine work and an honorable duty (40). Nor does he fully identify just what induced men to fight either for the Crown or as rebels. Some consideration of Republican notions of military service, so prominent in European and American historiography, would have facilitated a deeper understanding of the unique case of the *indios fronterizos* at war and the ties between masculine behavior, honor, religion, and politics.<sup>5</sup> Spanish sources denigrated Colotlán indigenous identity and culture, focusing instead on natives' marriage practices, pagan dances, and fractiousness (23, 46, 49). Indigenous accounts are only briefly mentioned.

---

2. See, e.g., Raquel E. Güereca Duran, *Milicias indígenas en la Nueva España: Reflexiones del derecho indiano sobre los derechos de guerra* (Mexico City: Nat'l AU of Mexico, 2016).

3. *The Forbidden Lands: Colonial Identity, Frontier Violence, and the Persistence of Brazil's Eastern Indians, 1750–1830* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2006).

4. See, e.g., Ben Vinson III, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2001).

5. See Claire R. Snyder, *Citizen-soldiers and Manly Warriors: Military Service and Gender in the Civic Republican Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), and Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 1976).

Robinson's emphasis on pardon records, carefully compiled and collated in a database, affords a fascinating view of Royalist and early national policies of reconciliation vis-à-vis *criollo* networks. But these sources elide the indigenous leadership that figures so prominently in *The Mark of Rebels*. This exclusion of the majority of the population from the new schema of national power reflected a deliberate racial policy with echoes in the aftermaths of other Atlantic Revolutions. For the natives, "family, pueblo-level community, ethnic identity (including that of indio fronterizo), patron-client relations, and other relationships continued to supersede any adherence to broad proto-national identities or patriotism" (86).

In *The Mark of Rebels*, Barry Robinson offers a valuable new perspective on the role of indigenous communities in late colonial politics, the independence struggle itself, and the resolution processes that undergirded postwar Mexico. His thesis that the long-forgotten Colotlán warriors were a critical native element in Colotlán politics is salutary and extremely well reasoned. While he is less persuasive on matters of indigenous culture, his book will enlighten scholars, students, and interested lay readers concerned with indigenous politics, militia service, and the comparison of revolutions.