PROJECT MUSE®

Masters of All They Surveyed. Exploration, Geography, and a
British El Dorado (review)

Karl H. Offen

Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 1, Number 1, 2002, pp.
114-116 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2007.0026>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/215270>

Bravo) boundary work that created so many difficulties for both commissions.

The premise for mapping what is now the current United States and Mexico border was, of course, the conflict between the two countries and the subsequent loss by Mexico of a great part of national territory. Rebert, although careful not to stretch the importance of this loss, provides a balanced context for understanding how painful the loss of this territory was for Mexico. Despite the low concentration of Mexican nationals established "north" of the current border, the Southwestern Borderlands had long been occupied by indigenous peoples, Spanish settlers, and the "mestizo" society so prevalent in the core of Mexico. The presence, and absence, of those settlements was of crucial importance in the mapping of the border region. On more than one occasion, errors were made that excluded or trapped Mexican towns on the US side of the border.

The greatest challenge to both commissions was mapping and understanding the changing nature and morphology of the Río Grande (Río Bravo del Norte) in establishing the boundary between the two countries. On more than one occasion surveyors tore their hair out, as shifting watercourses and sand breaks created serious discrepancies in field maps, sometimes on a daily basis. Such difficulties are portrayed by Rebert concisely in the example of El Chamizal, a Mexican community that ended upon the US side of the border because of the Río Grande's shifting water channels. Rare still in this case was that the Mexican map of the area was recognized as the only authentic and original map.

Rebert's final chapter analyzes the importance of the US-Mexican boundary, on both legal and physical terms. The author is able to portray the political implications of map interpretations, and how later jurisprudence regarded the physical boundary as paramount, even when mapping errors had occurred. Further notes, an appendix on map authorities, and 45 maps accompany the text as supplement for the interested reader. While the representations of historical maps are greatly appreciated, and are works of art in their own right, the small format of this book is a disadvantage in portraying such huge stretches of territory and terrain. This volume will be of interest mainly to historians of cartography, border scholars, and historians interested in the matter of political boundaries. The devil of cartographic details inherent in such a text will most likely fend off use by undergraduates. This reviewer, however, does plan on using several sections in a field methods class, to illustrate how difficult field mapping was in the past, and what techniques were typical at the time the border was created.

Key words: *Cartography, borderlands, boundaries, history*

Masters of All They Surveyed. Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado. D. Graham Burnett. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. xv + 298 pp., 18 color plates, 33 halftones, and index. \$45.00 cloth (ISBN 0-226-08120-6).

Reviewed by Karl Offen, Geography Department, University of Oklahoma

Masters of All They Surveyed details how Guiana became a mapped and bounded British colony during the first half of the nineteenth century. But the book does much more than this. D. Graham Burnett, an Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University and the 1999 winner of the Nebenzahl Prize in the History of Cartography, weaves together accounts of exploration, cartographic authority and land marking, to narrate how maps and myths constitute colonial possessions. Charting a course of "cartographic deconstruction" (206), Burnett grounds his study in the ongoing renaissance in the history of cartography, and especially the work of J. B. Harley, Paul Carter (*Botany Bay*, 1987), Thongchai Winichakul (*Siam Mapped*, 1994), and Mathew

Edney (*Mapping an Empire*, 1997). This handsome and impeccably edited volume is a welcome addition to the exemplary Cartography and Geography series of the University of Chicago Press.

The book is comprised of seven chapters that include an introduction and a brief conclusion. The story revolves around the traverse surveys in the British colony of Guiana carried out by the “anglicized Prussian” Robert Herman Schomburgk between 1836-1839 and 1841-1844. In this sense, Burnett’s work is much more a study of Schomburgk and the nature of survey work than about Guiana or its people.

In 1835, Schomburgk received a commission from the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) to explore the interior of Guiana. After a rocky start that almost cost him his commission, Schomburgk arrived in England in 1839 and received the RGS Gold Medal in 1840. At this time, the Hakluyt Society asked Schomburgk to edit a new volume of Sir Walter Raleigh’s 1596 *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Emphyre of Guiana*. The 1840 edition contained a new map drawn by Schomburgk which purports to show Raleigh’s course of travel at the same time it named Schomburgk as the locator of Raleigh’s El Dorado. While in England, Schomburgk also wrote *Twelve Views in the Interior of Guiana*, a book that took advantage of the latest publishing technology to pictorially, graphically, and textually represent Guiana. (All the original color plates are reproduced in the present volume.) According to Burnett, Schomburgk’s *Twelve Views* commanded the “power to evoke the geographical character of British Guiana” (161) and, in this capacity, his views became the views of the British elite and the colonial office. With fame secured, the British government commissioned Schomburgk to return to Guiana to map the boundary of the colony. Schomburgk’s new map, which received wide circulation in modified form as part of the Tallis Atlas (1851), overstepped the operational boundaries of the times. This act proved disagreeable to Guiana’s three neighbors and significant boundary definitions remain unresolved to this day.

Masters makes at least three important contributions to our understanding of the relationship among exploration, cartography, and colonialism. First, Burnett invokes the classical rhetorical term *metalepsis* to discuss the explorer’s dialogic task of subtly validating but necessarily surpassing all previous explorations and prior geographic knowledge. The explorer’s authority and identity are thus established only by invoking the historical geographies of others, yet stripping them of their authority and content at the same time—a tricky business that creates its own kernel for future contestation. According to Burnett, these “metaleptic cycles” authorize geographical exploration at the same time they ground colonial territorial claims. Second, the traverse survey, which fixes landmarks to establish sight lines on a cartographic field, creates problems when a single surveyor is charged with both delimiting and demarcating a given boundary. Indeed, Burnett asserts that the nature of the traverse technology, which tends toward territorial expansion, is largely responsible for Schomburgk’s boundary embellishments during his second survey, and are not the product of some innate imperial greed as claimed by Venezuelans and Brazilians. Finally, Burnett shows how landmarks, once invested with meaning through myth, narratives, maps and pictorial representation, and assigned values in political, scientific and cartographic frames of reference, become “nodes in the geographical construction of a colonial territory” (15) and icons of the colony. These nodes cum icons, Burnett argues, “contribute to the ‘saturation’ of colonial space by making possible legacies, pilgrimages, and the cycles of *metalepsis* that . . . root colonial possession” (p. 130).

A couple of critical remarks are in order. Despite the wealth of historical maps reproduced, the book demands a simple map locating places named in the text. While aesthetically pleasing, historical maps have neither the clarity nor the specificity to

allow the reader to follow the detailed intricacies elaborated. Second, although Burnett suggests his book explores the cross-cultural encounter between Schomburgk's survey party and the Amerindians who made it possible, the book does not live up to its claim. The presence of Amerindians are ubiquitous throughout the book but they receive little of the detailed attention Burnett devotes to Europeans. (Africans are completely absent.) Although Burnett apologizes for this lacuna, I expected more from an expanded dissertation whose title included "the Amerindians of British Guiana." Third, the periodic but constant digressions to deconstructivist theory in each chapter prevented a rich narrative from being even richer. By invoking theory so often I felt Burnett was prone to the same "metaleptic cycles" he so astutely described. Finally, the book seems to collapse the multifaceted notion of territorial possession into the discursive act of producing a map. While this is an important part of the picture, how cartographic possession relates to demonstrated land uses, contemporary notions of property rights, counter-claims or even activities on the ground, are all themes most conspicuous by their absence.

These caveats aside, this is an excellent study of cartographic history and the nuanced workings of colonialism in British Guiana. The book also includes an understated wealth of information about how boundary disputes are contested, as well as some of the recent diplomatic intrigues underscoring the Venezuela-Guyana dispute. As a historian of science, Burnett shows geographers the power, but also the limitations, of looking for geography in imperial archives, mundane correspondence, and forgotten maps.

Tamed Frontiers: Economy, Society, and Civil Rights in Upper Amazonia. Fernando Santos-Granero and Frederica Barclay. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000. xiv and 386 pp., maps, tables, photos, glossary, appendices, and index. \$88 cloth (ISBN 0-8133-3717-8).

Reviewed by Thomas Perreault, Geography Department, Syracuse University

In this important and engaging book, Fernando Santos-Granero and Frederica Barclay set out to dispel some widely held "myths" about the social, economic, and political histories of the northern-eastern Peruvian department of Loreto. These myths, based on studies of other, mainly Brazilian, portions of the Amazon Basin, hold that Amazonia's economy is highly dependent on extractive industries, a condition that has perpetuated both the region's underdevelopment and its pre-capitalist relations of production. Moreover, the myth holds that state presence in the region is either weak or subservient to the interests of local elites, compounding the region's economic marginalization. By contrast, in *Tamed Frontiers* Santos-Granero and Barclay assert that the history of Loreto is much too diverse economically and socially to fit into these simple, monolithic characterizations, and that the region's development has been marked by considerable, if spatially and temporally uneven, state involvement. Of central importance to their argument is the assertion that, "The process we are calling the 'taming of the frontier'...implies the suppression or containment of the worse [sic] traits identified with frontier economies. Above all, it involves the extension of civil rights and the empowerment of previously disenfranchised and oppressed sectors of the population, such as took place in Loreto beginning in the 1960s" (p. 5).

In the book's introduction, the authors juxtapose the case of Loreto to what they term the 'violent frontier' approach to Amazonian studies which, they claim, has become the dominant perspective owing to the tendency among scholars to privilege areas of recent colonization, social conflict, and environmental degradation. This