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La Gran Línea: Mapping the United States-Mexico Boundary,
1849-1857 (review)

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backward to theories on prehistory as well as forward to future use of both regions.

I highly recommend this book to anyone working in the region or within the theoretical issues discussed. Others should be sure that their institutional library obtains a copy since it will be a key reference to the next several generations of scholars.

Key words: *Amazonia, Andes, landscapes, cultural ecology.*

La Gran Línea: Mapping the United States-Mexico Boundary, 1849-1857. Paula Rebert. Austin: University of Texas Press. Xvi and 259 pp., maps, photos, notes, appendices and index. \$22.95 paper (ISBN 0-292-77111-8)

Reviewed by Eric P. Perramond, Department of Geography & Environmental Science, Stetson University.

The mapping of geo-political boundaries has always been of primary interest to applied and political geographers. The boundary between the United States and Mexico, and the history of its mapping, is the central issue in Rebert's concise volume. This book, however, provides a service to the history of cartography not accomplished in previous studies of the border's creation.

In six chapters Rebert summarily discusses the importance of the international field surveys, the boundary offices maintained by both the US and Mexico, the cooperation and conflicts arising from surveying and mapping work, and the final products and controversies created by the mapping commissions. The author systematically canvases the importance of joint and separate survey work performed by the U. S. and Mexico field teams. Here, it is clear that less conflict appeared between the two commissions, although later conflicts arose when the actual field mapping occurred and discrepancies were apparent. This book also clarifies the roles of the Boundary Offices for each country, and how they were shaped by their respective national governments. Finally, the work of both commissions is put into perspective, in terms of the technical difficulties that each team faced to calculate an interminably long boundary that stretched across rugged, arid and complex terrain.

Rebert not only discusses the difficulties and differences of 19th century mapping technologies, she also successfully analyzes the structural causes of this difference, in essence explaining much of the turmoil in the Mexican Commission due to the lack of funding. Although Mexico had been independent as a sovereign nation for almost thirty years by the time the boundary work was initiated, the young nation-state was faced with internal political conflict, and limitations of technical instrumentation available to the mapping team. To be sure, the author is careful in portraying the struggles, while never failing to appreciate the final work that was produced by the Mexican field survey team. Previous studies of the mapping commissions had severely underestimated, or summarily dismissed, the contribution of the Mexican Commission in constructing the border. Rebert does indeed follow these previous authors in so far as describing how the Mexican authors in so far as describing how the Mexican team was occasionally dependent on the US Commission for producing maps. But unlike previous contributors to this issue, the author clearly describes the vast effort spent by the Mexican surveyors and cartographers in accurately portraying topographical and cultural features. For the US Commission, mapping the boundary was fixated on establishing a line in the sand, so to speak. For the Mexicans involved in this work, this was clearly an issue of extant place recognition, and understanding, and understanding how the boundary would disconnect natural landscapes and physiography. This issue becomes central in the Río Grande (Río

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