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The Comanche Empire (review)

Joaquín Rivaya-Martínez

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clad friars and New Mexico's governors, for example, and manifest themselves in different approaches to native religion, native labor, and other key issues. Kessell takes care not to present either the Spaniards or New Mexico's Indians as homogenous, acknowledging the diversity within these populations.

Despite their differences, all of New Mexico's residents faced numerous common trials during the century in question. The 1660s exemplified the century's many challenges. Drought led to poor harvests and hunger, which in turn exacerbated the impact of epidemic disease, especially among native populations. Non-Pueblo Indians responded in part by attacking their erstwhile trade partners, and Spaniards and Indians alike found themselves forced to consume the cowhides they had used in their homes. Though they beseeched the heavens for rain, each additional day of hardship further undermined the Spanish deity's appeal. The resurgence of Pueblo religions represented a logical response to these trying circumstances, and ultimately set the stage for the chain of events that would lead to the Pueblo uprising and attendant massacre of Spanish colonists and friars. The book's trajectory understandably moves towards the Pueblo Revolt of 1680; however, in at least one place, Kessell seems to regard the revolt as inevitable: "Now, so much hardship, compounded by recent outrages, galvanized anti-Spanish caciques and war captains in dozens of pueblos, swung most of the undecided, and brought on—a decade after don Esteban Clemente was executed for imagining it—the holy war of Pueblo revitalization that finally drove Spaniards out of the kingdom." (118)

True to his previous scholarship, Kessell sprinkles the narrative with lively anecdotes, making this an extremely accessible text for general readers and undergraduates alike. Jargon-free and engaging, Kessell's prose seamlessly incorporates definitions of key concepts into the narrative. Based on published primary and secondary sources, the well-read specialist will not find much that is new here; however, this volume will serve well those looking for a succinct, colorful, and up-to-date introduction to the key themes and persons in early New Mexico.

Evanston, Illinois

MARTINA WILL DE CHAPARRO

The Comanche Empire. By Pekka Hämäläinen. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. 508. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780300126549, \$35.00 cloth.)

This provocative book breaks away from simplistic historiographic paradigms that have presented the Comanches as a military barrier to Euro-American expansionism, or merely as a doomed people inconsequentially fighting for its survival. Instead, according to Hämäläinen, "Comanches created a centralized multilevel political system, a flourishing market economy," so that, "roughly from 1750 to 1850, the Comanches were the dominant people in the Southwest" (2).

Comanche ascent on the southern Plains materialized over the course of the eighteenth century at the expense of the Apaches. The abundance of grasses and game on the southern Plains, along with their proximity to horse-rich northern New Spain, permitted Comanches to become thriving equestrian bison hunters and

accumulate unprecedented wealth in the form of horses. As Hämäläinen soundly argues, the Comanches' horse affluence, along with their strategically privileged geographical location allowed them to benefit from the intricate trade networks of the region, and play diverse Euro-American powers against one another in the Comanches' own interest. In time, Hämäläinen contends, Comanches spread their ascendancy over present-day New Mexico, Texas, and much of northern Mexico. They, however, could not subsist indefinitely in an ecosystem increasingly damaged by overgrazing, recurrent drought spells, and overhunting. Weakened by epidemics, hunger, and warfare, Comanches finally succumbed to the overwhelming resources and military might of the United States in the 1870s.

In the introduction, Hämäläinen declares his intention to "recover Comanche motives and meanings" (13). However, he downplays the militaristic ethos of Comanche society in favor of almost exclusively materialistic considerations. Perhaps the author could have incorporated Comanche voices and ethnographic evidence to a larger extent, especially in chapter six, which is a discussion of Comanche society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Instead, the book draws mostly on secondary works and published primary sources.

Some of Hämäläinen's views are debatable, as when he interprets Euro-American trade and political gifts to Comanche leaders as a form of tribute (e.g., 184, 196, 213, 349), or his statement that Comanches "transformed themselves into large-scale slaveholders" (223). The book also contains a number of unlikely assertions. For instance, that in the early 1700s "the Comanches were a small tribe" (1), or the implication that the Big Horses were a pan-Comanche military society, which actually contradicts Hämäläinen's own source on the subject. Indeed, Comanche interdivisional associations were temporary, and probably did not involve all Comanches until reservation times. Some of the author's speculations seem farfetched, as when he states that "it is likely that the public rapes [of female captives] were a way to generate markets for captives" (45) in colonial New Mexico. That Comanches "lived almost half of each year in large, nearly stationary villages" (283) is hard to reconcile with his discussion of the ecological constraints that horses imposed on Comanche camps (242–243). Hämäläinen's conclusion that Comanche power collapsed because "There had simply been too many Comanches (and their allies) raising too many horses and hunting too many bison on too small a land base" (261) relies on questionable estimates of the carrying capacity of the southern Plains biotope (293–294), problematic estimates of Plains Indians' horse (75) and hide (294) needs, a hypothetical Comanche belief in the inexhaustibility of the bison (298–299), and over-inflated figures of Comanche population (e.g., 242, 303).

All in all, this book meritoriously recognizes the decisive influence of the Comanche Indians over a vast portion of North America astride the Rio Grande before the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, the "imperial" nature of Comanche ascendancy remains open to debate. After all, "Comanches were not . . . self-conscious imperialists" and they "established their preeminence . . . responding often in an ad hoc fashion to circumstances" (352).