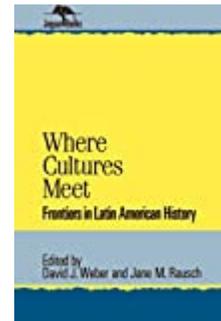


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**David J. Weber, Jane M. Rausch.** *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History* (Jaguar Books on Latin America). Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1994. xli + 233 pp. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2477-8; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2478-5.



**Reviewed by** Lynne Guitar (Vanderbilt University)

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*Where Cultures Meet* is not an update of George M. Foster's examination of conquest culture. The focus of the collection of essays is on the "where," not on culture, as such. The title comes from the editors' definition of the term "frontier." David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch define frontiers (and their synonyms: borderlands, peripheral or fringe areas) as "geographic zones of interaction between two or more distinctive cultures... places where cultures contend with one another and with their physical environment to produce a dynamic that is unique to time and place" (xiv). This expanded definition of frontiers permits the editors to include works that examine a wide variety of historical experiences, mostly in Latin America, including those in areas that fit the traditional concept of remote regions as well as non-traditional areas, such as urban *favelas*. Each of the twenty essays in the collection represents a different interlinked "place and process" (xiv) in a different frontier.

As the sixth in a series of Jaguar Books on Latin America by Scholarly Resources, Inc., *Where Cultures Meet* was designed as an academic tool. Weber and Rausch have done a fine job of gathering together and introducing the essays in the collection; eight of the authors are Latin Americans, so the work is not plagued by the common problem of a "Latin American" collection by primarily U.S. scholars. Weber and Rausch's in-

troductory essay does more than introduce the authors and essays, it coherently summarizes the historiography on frontier studies, particularly as they apply to Latin America. (This introductory essay alone would be a great resource for a lecture on borderlands or for a comparative lecture on frontiers.) The individual introductions to each essay provide biographical information about the authors, as well as information relevant to each study and its main points. The essays—individually chosen or as a whole collection—provide stimulating reading that is appropriate for undergraduates, graduates, and post-graduates alike for a wide range of courses, whether colonial or modern, specifically focused on Latin America or comparative.

Understandably in a collection focused on frontiers, the figure of historian Frederick Jackson Turner looms large. His thesis that the continual westward advance of the U.S. frontier, "a steady movement away from the influence of Europe" (4), was the most important factor in the shaping of both the American concept of individualism and of democracy, forms a contrast and point of departure to examine a variety of mostly Latin American frontiers and their respective settlement dynamics.

Turner's 1893 address from the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* is the first essay presented in "The Significance of the Frontier," the first of the

five parts into which the essay collection is subdivided. Although Turner's essay is more than a century old, its inclusion is important, for Turner's seminal thesis is one that is more often talked about than read. Reading it, one can more easily understand the attraction of Turner's "frontier thesis" as a positive myth for America to build upon, an America that was trying to assert its new status as a world power—but one can also see how dated such sweeping theories as Turner's have become. He supplied lots of *theory* but precious little documentary substance. The next selection is an essay written in 1940 by Arthur S. Aiton, who was influenced by his professor at Berkeley, Herbert Eugene Bolton, to compare Latin American frontiers to North American frontiers, using Turner's methods. Unfortunately, Aiton's essay is not as convincing as Turner's, perhaps because Turner envisioned the American frontier period as a relatively short, uniform, completed historical experience, whereas Aiton attempted to compress together more than four hundred years of a great variety of ongoing Latin American experiences and was unable to develop uniform conclusions about them and their effects on Latin Americans or Latin American institutions. Essays by Victor Andres Belaunde, a Peruvian historian, and Silvio Zavala, a Mexican historian, are also included in this section. They both found that Latin American frontiers were very different from the U.S. frontier. Belaunde concluded that the restrictive nature of landholding in Latin America restricted the development of its people and its institutions; Zavala concurred, noting, however, that northern Mexico appears to have been exceptional, to have been more like the U.S. The only un-Turnerian essay included in Part I is that by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, which makes sense since it was written several decades before Turner presented his thesis. Instead of portraying frontier regions as having a positive influence, the Argentine scholar and statesman saw them as barbaric regions embodying the antithesis of "civilization, law, and liberty" (32).

The second set of essays, gathered together under the rubric of "Latin America as a Frontier of Europe," represents yet another offshoot of the sweeping Turnerian thesis. The first of these historical essays, by Walter Prescott Webb, presents a thesis that is even more sweeping than Turner's. Envisioning all of Europe as one unified "Metropolis" and all of the Americas as "A Great Frontier," he wrote: "What happened in [North] America [as explained by Turner] was but a detail in a much greater phenomenon, the interaction between civilization and the vast raw lands into which it moved" (54). Like Turner, Webb provided lots of theory about

how the frontier of the New World created "a boom" in the Metropolis that swept away "the ideas and institutions of a static culture," creating "a dynamic and prospering society" (60), but he provided no documentary support. Following up on Webb's Great Frontier theory, William H. McNeill observed that Webb was overly idealistic. McNeill did not discount the sweeping nature of Webb's theory, just the beneficent nature of it: "The most salient characteristic of the Great Frontier created by the combined ravages of civilized diseases, alcohol, and firearms on indigenous populations was that human numbers were or soon became scant in the contact zone," he wrote (65). In his revisionist essay, McNeill explored the interfaces between native demographic decline and immigration, between market demands and exploitative slavery/labor systems in the Americas. Finally, Walter Nugent, in an essay published in 1992 (one of the most recent of all the essays in the collection), brings the Great Frontier forward into the late nineteenth century, the era of massive European immigration. His essay compares the settlement and migration patterns of European immigrants to Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States. Nugent's essay asks more questions than it answers, for it has a dual aim: to stimulate the comparative history of frontier settlement, but, more important, to stimulate studies that promote understanding between peoples of different cultures—what Nugent calls "peace history" (82-83).

For this reviewer, Part III of *Where Cultures Meet* is the heart of the collection. Instead of generalizing, the essays here examine the historical experiences of particular groups of Amerindians, Africans and mixed-blood peoples in Latin America. Subtitled "Frontier Peoples and Institutions," selections in this section include essays by David G. Sweet on the role of Ibero-American Frontier Missions, Elman R. Service on the role of the *encomienda* in Paraguay, Louis de Armond on the Araucanians of Chile, Franklin W. Knight on maroon communities in the Caribbean, and Alida C. Metcalf on frontier families in Santana de Parnaiba, Brazil. Sweet's is a revisionist essay that focuses on the Indians who were supposed to be served by the missions, rather than focusing on the missionaries, as most other studies have done. As such, it not only informs, it also suggests that this approach can be usefully applied to other frontier institutions and processes so that we can gain a less restrictive view of their historical roles. (The editors note that the Sweet and Nugent essays are the only two that were written particularly for this book.) Although it was written in 1951, Service's article appears revisionist in that it asserts that,

at least in Paraguay, the institution of *encomienda* did not isolate Spaniards from Indians as has been described elsewhere; instead, because of the “poverty and scarcity of markets” in Paraguay, the institution “helped bring Spaniards and Indians into a symbiotic relationship” and was “very important in promoting the mixing of the two cultures” (104). Are there other areas in Latin America where, for their own particular reasons, institutions like *encomienda* promoted transculturation? Armond examined the case of the Araucanians, a people long considered to be exceptional among Amerindians for their successful adaptation of European techniques and material objects into what remained, undeniably, their own unique cultural realm. But was the Araucanians’ success at holding off Spanish encroachment until the late nineteenth century really an anomaly? Perhaps other Amerindian groups “successfully”—in their own way and for their own purposes, which often makes success difficult to recognize—absorbed chosen pieces of European culture into their own. Knight’s essay, excerpted as it was from his *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*, is a little more general than the others in this section. But its theme is similar. Knight suggests that more in-depth examinations of maroon communities—which were rife throughout the less-accessible regions of the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean—will provide a better understanding of the creative resilience of African and African-American peoples. In a similar, but very particular, vein, Metcalf’s study examines the stages by which capital-poor mixed-blood families in a former frontier region west of Sao Paulo adapted to local conditions, seeking to improve their class and economic status. Like the other essays in this section, Metcalf’s study suggests that it is but one small piece in a giant jigsaw puzzle that, if we were to put all the pieces together, would provide a much clearer picture than we have ever had of the “varying strategies for survival” (137) that have proven successful in Latin America.

Part IV, “Frontier Peoples and National Identity,” explores conceptualizations of the Argentine gaucho and Brazilian bandeirante as archetypes that, like the North American pioneer, “have come to embody the highest national virtues in the minds of their respective countrymen” (141). Hebe Clement’s piece, which explores these archetypes in the literature of the U.S., Brazil and Argentina, is comparative, while Richard Slatta’s focuses on Argentina; like Clement, however, Slatta uses literary

examples to support the changing ideology he outlines. Vianna Moog’s essay comparing North American pioneers and Brazilian bandeirantes has only literary conjecture, no historical documentation whatsoever—but then he was a statesman like Sarmiento, not an historian like the other contributors in the first four sections.

Examining patterns of settlement that are too recent to legitimately qualify as “history,” the final part of *Where Cultures Meet*, “Contemporary Frontiers,” gathers together essays by three anthropologists—James Sewastynowicz, Alcida R. Ramos, and Emilio Willems—and one political scientist, Joe Foweraker. The patterns of “Two-Step’ Migration” that Sewastynowicz examines in modern Costa Rica are not that different from those patterns that Metcalf found in Brazil. The violence and exploitation that Foweraker and Ramos have discovered in modern Brazil may not be too different from the violent, exploitative confrontations that occurred throughout Latin America in the colonial and post-independence eras. Willems’ provocative essay on social change, that brings up the post-revisionist concept of “urban frontiers,” is a fitting work with which to close the collection. Willems spent several decades studying resource-poor peoples in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and has found common patterns and continuity with resource-poor people throughout the history of the continent, for he equates creative, dynamic “exploitation of the political resources of the city” (221) with the creative, dynamic exploitation of vacant lands to which Turner attributed so many positive characteristics.

It is worth repeating that this collection comes highly recommended as a stimulus for the understanding and discussion of historical processes among undergraduate students or graduate students, as well as post-graduate-level scholars. To add to the essays’ use as academic tools, each has a section of endnotes that is a guide to further reading on a particular topic, and the collection is supplemented by sections at the back of the book on “Suggested Readings” and “Suggested Films” that deal with the general topic of Latin American frontiers. Perhaps the only criticism that can be made about *Where Cultures Meet* is that it relies too heavily on older “classic” works—it does not introduce enough of the ideas of today’s scholars; only four out of the twenty essays were written in the 1990s, and only six more in the 1980s. A sequel could easily fix that problem. Are you listening Scholarly Resources? I’d buy it.

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