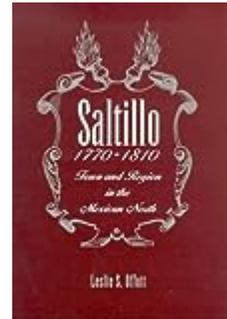


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Leslie Offutt. *Saltillo, 1770-1810: Town and Region in the Mexican North.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001. 290 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2164-7.



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I have a number of major problems with the book being reviewed here. One, it is historiographically weak, and does not place the findings for the region examined into a larger historical context. Moreover, it largely fails to explain why Saltillo is an important topic for study or why other scholars should be interested reading the book. The most interesting interpretations of the development of Saltillo that appear in the study actually come from the writings of Jose Cuello, who wrote a dissertation on Saltillo completed at the University of California, Berkeley in 1981.

In the introduction Offutt argues that this study is significant because it represents a new trend in the historiography of the northern frontier region of colonial Mexico. However, the author does so in an anemic historiographic presentation. Offutt creates the proverbial straw man as the base line from which to measure her book, but in this case the straw man is dated. She refers to the works of H.E. Bolton, and several generations of "Boltonians" who wrote history from the top down, focused on the activities of great men, men of European ancestry, and the role of institutions. Offutt also takes on the 1950s vintage study of Mexican Haciendas written by Francois Chevalier, a horse that was beaten dead several decades ago by many new studies of estates. It is not clearly stated in the introduction, but Offutt implies

that she will focus more on social history. Offutt also argues the need to write more about civil settlements, as versus missions and military garrisons.

To bolster the creation of the straw man, Offutt relies on an essay written in 1988 ("Turner, the 'Boltonians,' and the Borderlands") to strengthen this historiographic critique. The problem is that Offutt's second straw man died and was buried long ago, and a new breed of scholars of the Mexican colonial north emerged and redefined the study of the region. Much of the more recent and innovative literature that appeared particularly in the 1990s is not cited in the introduction or bibliography. Moreover, the author does not cite older studies that were not written in the "Boltonian" mold.

The discussion of the literature on the frontier is just the first example of how this book is not current with the literature. Many of the most recent titles, particularly titles directly related to social history and particularly the experiences of common people, do not appear in the author's bibliography. This is consistent with the author's top-down approach to the history of Saltillo, which is not much different from the focus of the Boltonians who Offutt criticized in her introduction. Let me cite three examples of this social history literature. They are Peter Stern and Robert H. Jackson, "Vagabundaje and settlement patterns in colonial northern Sonora,"[1]; Pe-

ter Stern, "White Indians of the Borderlands,"[2]; Peter Stern, "Marginals and Acculturation in Frontier Society,"[3], and these by no means exhaust the list of truly innovative studies written by the current generation of specialists in the history of northern of New Spain that do not fit into Offutt's myopic view of the historiography of the region. Curiously, one of Offutt's own articles does not make it into her study, which is unfortunate given that it provides clues that help make sense of some of the author's assertions. The article is titled "Hispanic Society in the Mexican Northeast: Saltillo at the End of the Colonial Period,"[4] As is discussed below, Offutt discusses the volatility of the market for land in Saltillo region haciendas at the end of the colonial period, but provides little to substantiate or explain what she means by volatility. The 1991 article, on the other hand, does have a table that summarizes land transactions in two haciendas, data that should have but was not included in the book or at least that should have been cited. It suggests sloppiness on the part of the author exhibited in other sections of the book.

Offutt also tries to use the study of a region dominated by an urban center and a unique period in time as a justification for the study. Here again the author falls well short. Offutt provides a weak and ill-defined concept of region as the basis for her placement of Saltillo. I would liked to have seen a somewhat more detailed analysis of the social, economic, and institutional links between Saltillo and surrounding areas such as Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon, Nuevo Santander, and Texas. Offutt argues the need to link the Mexican north more closely to the history of the rest of Mexico, but this is not a new intellectual imperative and Offutt herself does not do a convincing job of it herself. The author also states that the time period examined, 1770-1810, provides a snap shot of a region in the Mexican north on the eve of the outbreak of the Mexican independence movement in 1810. What is the significance here? One could argue that the entire 300 years of Spanish domination of Mexico is important because it came before the failed 1810 golpe de estado that escalated into a caste war. Did anything important happen during the last decades of the Spanish colony to entice the reader to want to learn more about Saltillo? Did significant changes occur? The introduction gives no hint of possible changes in Saltillo during the period the author has chosen to study. Offutt notes demographic growth, simplistically linked to economic expansion, and the establishment in the city of important royal bureaucracies. Did these changes have any relationship to other events in Mexico? While Offutt claims

that her study draws an important region in northern Mexico into the mainstream of Mexican history, her introduction misfires. The "B" word, the Bourbon reforms, does not appear in the introduction, which is odd given that Jose Cuello wrote an article on Bourbon Saltillo that appears in Offutt's bibliography. Scholars of the Mexican north, scholars not cited in the author's bibliography or introduction, have pointed to the importance of the drive for reform in the transformation of the region, and it should be noted that Jose de Galvez and a generation of reforming royal bureaucrats who followed him spent considerable time, effort, and money trying to bring the northern region of New Spain in line with the rest of the colony. This major reform program, that explains the creation of new bureaucracies in Saltillo and social transformations such as the arrival of large numbers of Spaniards from Iberia including merchants to the northern reaches of the colony, glaringly does not appear in Offut's introduction as a theme in the period she has chosen to study.

The first chapter of the study focuses on merchants and trade, but is largely descriptive of individuals she found in documents in the local archives. Much of the chapter is taken up with descriptions of individual merchants, their relationships with employees (*cajeros*), amongst themselves, and marriage patterns. There is virtually no analysis here, and the discussion of trade is given short shrift. Offutt, for example, notes that Saltillo merchants did business with the residents of Espiritu Santo and San Antonio in Texas, but says little beyond that. And this example is symptomatic of the shallowness of the authors overall discussion of trade. Did trade increase during the period under study? We do not learn from this study, and many sources and innovative analyses are not used here. For example, what do the tithe receipts for the region show? A number of scholars have used tithes to measure economic growth, but not Offutt. Therefore, the book offers only a superficial look at one of the regions most important economic activities. One well-known set of records, account books kept of supplies shipped to five missions in Texas and two missions in northern Coahuila, include wheat from Saltillo and Parras wine as items routinely shipped to the missions. The account books also contain prices that could provide valuable clues to the ebb and flow of trade, as well as wheat production in the region. Offutt did not make use of these records. Overall, the chapter is extremely weak on illustrating the important of regional trade, and has some interesting stories about individuals involved in trade, However, after reading the chapter this reviewer was left with a sense of "so what." What impor-

tant lessons did Offutt wish to convey in her discussion of merchants and trade?

The following chapter examines haciendas and to a lesser extent smaller rural properties in the Saltillo region. Once again, the author's historiographic foundation for her discussion of rural estates is dated, and challenges Chevallier's 1952 pioneering study of Mexican haciendas. Offutt re-enforces her discussion of haciendas with several important articles that appeared in the early 1980s. What is curious is that scholars of rural Mexico and colonial haciendas in Spanish America have moved well beyond a discussion of Chevalier as the starting point for studies of haciendas. Ironically, Chevalier presented a well-presented interpretation of the evolution and importance of Mexican haciendas. Offutt does not do the same for Saltillo, and her most interesting analytical comments in an overly descriptive chapter come from the writings of Jose Cuello, particularly his 1981 dissertation. The type of information Offutt includes on Saltillo area estates includes the approximate number of large properties, size, the fact that some specialized in livestock while others produced wheat, corn, and other crops, and that several estates took on, according to the author, the aspect of villages with churches and resident priests, although Mexican hacendados often built chapels as a part of the casco and hired full-time priests.

Offutt mentions two significant points about ownership of Saltillo haciendas, but does not offer much in the way of data or analysis. Offutt notes the volatility in hacienda ownership, a point the author explored in more detail in the 1991 article mentioned above that did not make it into her bibliography. How volatile was the market in haciendas? The book does not provide clues, and does not explore this important topic in anything but a cursory fashion. Offutt mentions, for example, censos (clerical liens), but does not elaborate. The context for Saltillo is weak, which is incongruous given the large number of studies that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s for Mexico and other Spanish American regions. A comparative discussion of the subdivision of estates for inheritance and multiple ownership of haciendas would have strengthened this part of the chapter. Estate systems in other parts of Spanish America suffered similar fragmentation due to inheritance or sale of hacienda lands, and once large estates became collections of smaller properties that in some instances numbered in the hundreds. A good example is the Cochabamba region of Upper Peru/Bolivia. There is no such broadening of perspectives here, and Offutt largely relies on several studies published in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Offutt attempts to grapple with a difficult problem, which is to establish the relative value or worth of estates with incomplete data, particularly information on the size of properties. It should be pointed out, as Offutt does, that in an arid environment water rights are more valuable than land, and the amount of land in an estate is not all that important. Offutt opts for a facile out, which is to classify the size of estates by value. This is a largely meaningless exercise, and a more creative approach such as creating an index of production factors recorded in estate inventories and other documents could have provided a better idea of the relative importance of different properties. Moreover, the author should have provided more in-depth descriptions of several estates. The end result is a superficial and incomplete picture of estates in the Saltillo region. Offutt also points to the ownership of estates by merchants, but does not provide the historiographic foundation for this important topic within the larger history of colonial haciendas. Again, Offutt is not conversant with the literature.

This is followed by a more detailed discussion of several case studies of haciendas and smaller properties, based primarily on inventories. This chapter adds more of a sense of rural life, but again the information presented is spotty. Offutt discusses labor, and found some data on worker debts and rations provided. However, the author does not go beyond this rather superficial presentation to ask questions about the nature of relations between worker and landowner. Were Saltillo region hacienda workers service tenants? Given the extensive size of haciendas, service tenantry strikes me as having been a reasonable adaptation to a situation of abundant land and scarce labor. Offutt focuses on easily discovered facts, such as disputes over ownership and unpaid debts. But there is too little on production. The author offers a handful of production figures from one estate, but the figures on the amount of corn and particularly wheat do not appear to be particularly impressive for a region characterized as being a major wheat producer. In the end the case studies provide some useful information, but do not provide the definitive explanation for the development of Saltillo's rural economy at the end of the 18th century. Other scholars have made good use of data on tithes to establish the parameters of economic expansion or growth. Offutt does not make use of this important source of information.

The final chapter purports to describe political life in Saltillo, but offers little insight and is a rather conventional discussion of the different positions in the local government and who held those positions. There is no

sense of how politics actually worked in Saltillo. One exception to my generalization of the chapter is Offutt's discussion of food supply and drought, and efforts by local officials to insure a local food supply during periods of dearth. This section, if it had been more fully developed, could have been very interesting. It would have been useful for the author to draw more comparisons between the management of grain supplies during drought, the government campaign to establish positos in the late eighteenth-century, and the institution of the alhondiga. Offutt notes that drought resulted in an increase in raiding by hostile Indians (p. 158), actually Apaches. This was in the 1780s and 1790s. However, although not to discount drought as a factor affecting the range of the buffalo herds the Apaches depended on, particularly the Lipan Apaches, there were other important factors that caused the upturn in attacks. In the mid-1780s, after trying peace for three decades with the Apaches, the Spanish switched policy and allied instead with the Comanches and resumed their war against the Apaches. The military reform on the frontier after 1770 gave the new administrators on the frontier the ability to initiate a coordinated attack on the Apaches, and force many onto settlements resembling reservations.

Offutt ends the book with an anemic conclusion that purports to describe the end of an era-1810. Offutt adds little to make sense of what she would like readers to learn from this study, and as I noted in an earlier section of this review, there is no definition of what the era was, or how the events initiated with a failed golpe de estado in 1810 transformed the region. This reader was left wondering if there were some reason to end the study in 1810?

Offutt has had five appendices related to the study posted at the University of Arizona web site at the following url (<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/extras/offutt/bib.htm>), which is not completely cited in the book. This means that the reader will have to do a little sleuthing to find the appendices referenced in the book. The topics of the appendices are: Saltillo Merchants, 1777-1810; Multiple-Ownership Haciendas; Ownership of Water on Multiple-Ownership

Haciendas; Cabildo Officers, 1764-1810; and Royal Officers in Saltillo, 1764-1819. They are simply lists with minimal explanation, and there is a degree of sloppiness in their presentation. Two of the appendices include the documentary sources, whereas three do not. While the data may be useful for further understanding the study, it appears to this reader that the author put little thought into the presentation of the information beyond having the appendices scanned and added. Granted that many university presses are cutting back on production costs by reducing the number of tables and appendices included in print books, but the utility of merely posting largely undigested data on a web site seems to be limited. Given the disjointed nature of having the appendices available in a format separate from the book, I believe that an introduction to and an explanation of the appendices that would have linked the information to specific points in the book would have been in order to make the exercise of posting the data on-line worth the effort. Moreover, given the ephemeral nature of the Internet, it would be useful to know if the University of Arizona Press has guaranteed that the appendices will be available for an extended period of time.

On balance, this is a weak book theoretically and conceptually. Offutt offers the reader no real explanation as to why this book should be read, nor why she has chosen to study the time period covered-the era thing. At a time when some historians of Latin America err on the side of too much theory and too little substance, it is important to remember that historical studies need to have a sound historiographic foundation and relevance to the larger field.

Notes

- [1]. In *The Americas* 44:4 (April 1988), 461-481.
- [2]. In *Journal of the Southwest* 33:3 (Autumn, 1991), 262-281.
- [3]. In Robert H. Jackson, ed., *New Views of Borderlands History* (Albuquerque, 1998), 157-188.
- [4]. In *Journal of the Southwest* 33:3 (Autumn, 1991), 322-344.

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