

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stephen G. Hyslop. *Bound for Santa Fe: The Road to New Mexico and the American Conquest, 1806-1848.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002. xiii + 514 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3389-8.

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Hyslop's thesis is that trade over the Santa Fe Trail was "an undertaking inspired by trading ventures but stocked with all the material needed to capture the market by force" (p. 411). In short, the Santa Fe Trail was the beginning of the conquest of northern Mexico. This thesis is not particularly novel nor insightful, but it is well argued and well documented. Hence the purpose of the book is somewhat problematic. The goal is to present a narrative of Santa Fe Trails, based on first hand accounts, and located in their historical contexts.

The book is organized in three parts. The first part uses four chapters to set the background to the trail: to trace its roots in Zebulon Pike's western exploration and adventures, to sketch the diversity of peoples along the routes, to outline the political setting and roles of trade, and to give biographical sketches of the writers upon whose accounts Hyslop builds his narrative. The second part with eleven chapters constitutes the bulk of the book and its narrative heart. They portray a composite trip down the Santa Fe Trail that simultaneously follows eye witness reports and recounts the development of the Santa Fe Trails, their changes, and their changing political, social, and economic contexts. The seven chapters in part 3 discuss the conquest of northern New Mexico. Hyslop's contribution is to tell the story of the conquest from the perspective of trade and traders. Overall, the work gives a history of the conquest of Northern Mexico from the perspective of connecting trails, rather than from the more conventional perspectives of the United States or Mexico.

Hyslop works hard, I would argue too hard, to be formally even handed and noncontroversial. Because he relies heavily on descriptions by contemporary observers,

mostly written in English, white U.S. citizens appear to be a little too good, and Native Americans, Mexicans, and blacks a little too troublesome. He does note, however, that the important role of Mexicans in the trade is often ignored. The pro-American stance is not egregious. Rather, it is a matter of nuance. Still, Hyslop does not discuss explicitly race, imperialism, or inequality. Consequently, there is no discussion of how attention, or its lack, to such topics can shape his narrative. This lack of analysis is frustrating precisely because he presents sufficient detail to be able to draw some fine-grained conclusions.

This seemingly neutral stance allows him to skate over innumerable political landmines, but at the cost of leaving a sophisticated reader who wants interpretation, analysis, or explanation to wonder what the point of the book is—other than a well-told tale. This gives *Bound for Santa Fe* a Janus quality. On the one hand, it is a careful, informative narrative, but one that leaves a knowledgeable reader yearning for analysis and explanation. Consequently, it offers little that is new for serious scholars. On the other hand, however, it is a useful book for general audiences with an interest in the Santa Fe Trail.

In this latter sense, *Bound for Santa Fe* would be useful in a variety of courses that discuss the Mexican-American War. A less expensive paper edition would be a useful supplement for undergraduate courses on the U.S. Southwest and Mexico. A few more detailed maps in addition to the one on page 2 would be helpful. The abundant lengthy and well-contextualized excerpts from first-hand observers provide a great deal of material that could be used to interrogate other, more analytic, accounts. Furthermore, because it draws on so

many English-language accounts, most of them generally available, it could be profitably employed to entice students into some of the primary materials, and help them learn to interpret such sources.

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