

**The Mark of Rebels: Indios Fronterizos and Mexican Independence.** *Barry M. Robinson.*

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In this deeply researched study, Robinson delves into the late colonial conflicts that roiled the “Colotlán region,” a term he uses to cover a broadly defined area encompassing the intersection between the modern states of Zacatecas and Jalisco. This region on the northern border of Mesoamerica was occupied in the early conquest era by “sedentary agricultural settlements” of Cazcanes while “others like the Huicholes inhabited smaller family-based rancherías spread through the mountains” (13), while the *altiplano* east and north of it belonged to nomadic Zacateco bands. Untouched by the fall of the Aztecs in 1521, Colotlán remained outside the first configuration of New Spain. Only in the 1530s was a brutal late conquest undertaken to impose an *encomienda* system thoroughly unsuited to a region that never knew imperial rule. The result was the Mixtón war of 1541, suppressed by Spanish and Mesoamerican warriors who destroyed resistance along with the Cazcan people themselves and any possibility of imposing a colonial tribute system on them.

If not for the silver deposits found here, this northern region would have attracted little further attention from the colonizers. But silver was found, the Spanish did come, and the so-called Chichimecas turned from hunting rabbits and deer to hunting cows and silver trains. The Spanish response—decades of bloody war—ended only in 1590 with an offer of regular gifts of food and trade goods in exchange for an end to raiding. The following year, 1591, the Spanish induced their Tlaxcalan allies from central Mexico to cement the peace by settling in agricultural pueblos in the north, among them two on the Colotlán frontier: San Luis Colotlán and San Andrés del Teúl.

The town of Mexquitic, San Luis Potosí, where I did research in the 1980s, was a Tlaxcalan sister settlement of Colotlán and Teúl. The stories Robinson tells about those two pueblos resonate strongly with the history of Mexquitic. One key to this history is the disparity that grew over the long course of colonial rule between the privileges granted in 1591 to the Tlaxcalan settlers, as allies and partners of the Spanish, and the entrenched racial and labor hierarchy that came to define the society of New

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Spain. The descendants of the settlers continued to insist on the privileges granted them as allies of the Spanish settled on the frontier (exemption from tribute and labor requisitions, the right to be armed with swords or arrows, recognition as the status equivalents of hidalgos, and a degree of political autonomy and territorial integrity). But by the late eighteenth century Spanish settler elites were dismissive of such claims and of the notion that Tlaxcalans were anything but *indios*.

Robinson details two stories that illustrate these growing tensions. First, after an introduction and a chapter on the complex regional history of conquest, he details a conflict in San Luis Colotlán in the early 1780s between a corrupt, high-handed Spanish official and a faction of the Tlaxcalan elite styling themselves the “Señores Colotecos,” who enlisted popular support to oppose the official’s “abuses” while “defending the rights and privileges” of the Tlaxcalans (53). Here Robinson draws out the nuances of competing self-images and identities in the communities of the Colotlán frontier, the ambivalent moral status of self-declared defenders of the people who at the same time aimed at self-aggrandizement and enrichment, and the competing agendas of *vecino* elites, all within an overall context that determined the limited, racially based range of possibilities open to those identified as *indios*.

The second story, in Chapter Three, which begins in 1795 in San Andrés del Teúl some 200 kilometers north of Colotlán, illustrates another late colonial conflict with a Tlaxcalan twist: a new landowner attempts to exert full property control of her inherited real estate while ignoring the layers of customary rights, privileges, and accommodations that have accrued over the centuries among the many regional players with some various, interrelated claims to use of the land. The actors include owners, managers, herders, farm laborers working for the haciendas, and the small farmers from Teúl and the other “Indian” settlements interspersed with the estates. The issues that move the descendants of Tlaxcalan settlers include both economic claims to the land (key in a time of increasing land hunger) and status claims to respect and self-government.

The unsatisfactory resolutions to these two cases (for those pushing to have the old Tlaxcalan privileges recognized) feed into the inevitable third case, told extensively in Chapters Four and Five: the broad support among the “Señores Colotecos” and their counterparts in Teúl and elsewhere across this entire region for the Hidalgo revolt. What makes Robinson’s account uniquely valuable is his extensive documentation of the revolt not only among the Tlaxcalans and other “Indians” of the region, but also among a significant faction of the regional *vecino* elite; and, in chapter 5, an analysis of the royal pardon process by which most of the *vecinos* who joined the revolt—but, significantly, not the Tlaxcalans who did the same—were reincorporated into the ruling regional elite just in time to resume leadership positions when Iturbide’s cooptation of the independence movement brought creole leadership to national rule in the newly independent Mexico of 1821. You will have to read the account to get all the nuances; the upshot was that the former Tlaxcalan elites were no longer able to

call on the rights and privileges embedded in their colonial identities, and what was once an important center of indigenous culture was reduced to the status of an agricultural periphery. *The Mark of Rebels* is a well-written, intensively researched account that presents a theoretically important view of local variation in the conflicts of late colonial New Spain and the origins of independent Mexico. It belongs on the must-read shelf of anyone interested in those topics or in the historical development of race/class relations in Mexico generally.

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