## Reviews

*War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War*
Brian DeLay
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
ISBN-10: 0300119321.
496 pages, illustrations, maps, tables.
Paperback, $25.00.

Brian DeLay's *War of a Thousand Deserts* is a history of the Indian raids into Mexico that preceded the U.S.-Mexican War. The focus is on the Apaches and Kiowas, but especially the Comanches. Delay discusses the cultural and economic geography of these indigenous people and examines their pervasive raiding and violence. Comanche attacks were so destructive that they may be described as a war. DeLay argues that during the 1830s and 40s this war created a man-made wasteland across parts of ten Mexican states.

DeLay begins his study with a discussion of Article 11 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), in which the United States promised to curtail Indian raids into Mexico and to rescue Mexican citizens who had been captured by Indians and brought into the United States. Mexico's minister to the United States called Article 11 "the only advantage" of the treaty, which otherwise gave a devastating blow to Mexico (xiii). According to DeLay, the article is a prism through which the reader can appreciate the significance of Indian raids both before and during the United States' war with Mexico.

DeLay compares Mexican and Comanche cultures and discusses their economic and political connections prior to the 1830s when Indians and northern Mexicans had a workable trade relationship. As Mexico's economy and political stability weakened, so did the fragile connections of peaceful relations with the Indians. Comanches and their allies began attacking Mexican ranches and towns from Chihuahua to San Luis Potosi. DeLay refers to these raids as "the War of a Thousand Deserts" because a region of once-thriving Mexican settlements became an empty and desolate wasteland. The Mexican response to these raids was ineffective for several reasons. One was the ongoing conflict between the states, which favored federalism, and Mexico City, which favored nationalism. Another was the disagreement whether to treat the Indians by all-out war or by negotiation and trade. According to DeLay, by the time the Indian violence became a concern to the central government in Mexico City, the northern region was so depopulated that it was unable to withstand the Americans in 1846.

Politicians in the United States argued that the emptiness and desolation of the northern Mexico provinces were evidence that Mexicans were unable to control the increasing violence. The trouble with the Indians became the U.S. government's justification for annexing sections of northern Mexico and waging war. Americans were confident that they would be better able to control the Indians than the Mexican government. Thus, DeLay argues, the War of a Thousand Deserts indirectly led to the U.S.-Mexican War in 1846 and 47 and Mexico's loss of much of its northern territory.

DeLay's extensive research – his sources include personal letters, captivity narratives, and archival documents – is impressive. In a 28-page appendix, he records a table of Indian raids into Mexico, with dates, locations, human and animal casualties, captives, and number of assailants, breaking down these numbers into charts and pie graphs.

*War of a Thousand Deserts* lays bare the violence of the borderlands. Americans, Mexicans, and Indians were perpetrators of bloody interethnic conflict: torture, rape, scalping, and mutilation. Significantly, DeLay does not depict the Indians as victims, helplessly pushed off their land. Instead, he provides the reader with an appreciation of the ways in which Indians actively directed their fate, destabilizing the borderlands and influencing relations between the United States and Mexico in the process. DeLay asserts that that Comanches and Kiowas went to Mexico not only to steal but to kill. In addition to robbing northern Mexicans to better themselves economically, Indians raided for vengeance. And vengeance, according

to DeLay helps explain why the raids were so destructive (135).

The book is designed for an academic audience and can be an exhausting read; the reader can easily become bogged down in detail and forget the thread of DeLay's argument. But given the complexity of the topic and its enormous scope, DeLay has succeeded in providing an excellent transnational study that connects the history of the Comanches and the early Mexican republic with that of U.S. expansion.

In the last ten years, there has been considerable scholarship on the American Southwest. Works by authors like James Brooks, Pekka Hämäläinen, and Juliana Barr have contributed immensely to our understanding of the history of the region. Brian DeLay's *War of a Thousand Deserts* must be added to this list. Well researched and imaginatively written, DeLay's prize-winning study deepens our understanding of Comanches and their Plains Indian allies during the first half of the nineteenth century. It should be required reading for anyone interested in southwestern borderlands history.

***Deborah and Jon Lawrence***

*The Daring Flight of My Pen: Cultural Politics and Gaspar Perez de Villagrá's Historia de La Nueva Mexico, 1610*
Genaro Padilla
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2010.
ISBN: 9780826349705.
153 pages. Hardback, $29.95.

Published in 1610, Gasper Pérez de Villagrá's epic poem *Historia de la Nueva México* relates the tale of Juan de Oñate's exploration and settlement in the northern regions of New Spain from 1595 to the Battle of Acoma in 1599. A member of the expedition, Villagrá incorporated oral accounts, dramas, and legal documents to dramatize the story he wrote in retrospect nearly ten years after he returned to Spain. Ever the loyal soldier, Villagrá viewed the colonial venture as doomed from its onset.

According to Genaro Padilla, Villagrá's 32-canto epic has for too long been read as a history. In *The Daring Flight of My Pen*, Padilla posits that the poem, written in hendecasyllabic form, subordinates history to the play of language – i.e. to metaphor, poetic diction, and formal meter, as well as to frequent allusions to myth and fable stories of earlier Spanish exploration. In so doing, Villagrá is able to critique the colonization process of the empire that he seems to be endorsing.

A professor of English at UC Berkeley, Padilla brings his knowledge of the Greek and Roman classics (especially Homer's *Odyssey*, Livy's *Annals*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*), as well as his familiarity with early Latin American literary epics (i.e. Saavedra Guzmán's *El peregrine indiano*, 1599; Lasso de La Vega's *Mexicana de Gabriel*, 1594; and Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana*, 1569), to his analysis of the work. Padilla claims that by incorporating references to classical works, Villagrá filters historical consciousness through the poetic imagination, creating an expansive reading of the poem's dialectics. To Padilla's mind, this process allows Villagrá to chronicle the events, like the massacre at Acoma, in such a way that he can detail the injustices committed against the Indians by the Spanish conquistadores and still escape the eyes of the court censors.

Villagrá opens his poem with the Aztec origin myth, a story that he equates with the founding of Rome. He details the early Aztecs' settlement of what would become one of the greatest indigenous civilizations in the Americas. By comparison, he reveals that from the beginning, the Oñate expedition was one of confusion and failure, concluding in the Acoma massacre. Villagrá characterizes Oñate as vainglorious, self-indulgent, and confused, wanting to garrote his mutinous soldiers shortly after their arrival at Ohkay Owingeh. One example of Villagrá's disdain of Oñate is evidenced by Villagrá's inclusion in the *Historia* of the complete text of Oñate's "Act of Possession," a document that acts as a dramatic soliloquy in which Oñate claims the territory for the King, the Church,