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Book Reviews

Beware the Great Horned Serpent! Chiapas under the Threat of Napoleon. By Robert M. Laughlin. (Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York, 2003. xiii + 302 pp. Illustrations, map, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$28.50 paper.)

Robert M. Laughlin offers a fascinating glimpse into how political intrigue and conflict between Bourbon Spain and Napoleon's France infiltrated and was interpreted for an indigenous audience in colonial Chiapas. The subject of the study is a Tzotzil translation of an 1813 proclamation issued in Cádiz imploring colonial fidelity at the height of the political crisis in Spain. Although Laughlin warns the reader not to expect "an historical argument" but rather "a theater of the absurd, a fabulous history with myriads of details as if set in the Milky Way" (p. 11), he does contextualize the era in which the document was produced and provides an insightful analysis of both the Spanish and Tzotzil versions of the manifesto.

The book begins by tracing Spain's political climate in the years preceding the proclamation, from shortly before the abdication of Charles IV to the rule of the vilified Joseph Bonaparte. Subsequent chapters move closer to Chiapas through an examination of concurrent events in Peru, New Spain, and Guatemala. The narrative contains marvelous detail underscoring how seriously some authorities took the threat of Napoleon's possible intrigue in the Americas and the resistance mounted against his brother's reign in Spain. The discussion of the American scene lacks balance (at barely three pages, the chapter on Peru might have been best left out), but Laughlin's rendering of colonial Chiapas is clearly the focus of his efforts and is generally well done.

The focus shifts after six chapters to Laughlin's translations of the original Spanish proclamation and the Tzotzil reinterpretation. The chapter that follows is the centerpiece of the book. Here, the author analyzes and compares the two documents, drawing on his ethnographic and linguistic expertise of Chiapas' indigenous groups. Although authorship of the Tzotzil version remains uncertain, Laughlin posits that the translation was the work of a Franciscan, perhaps residing in Hutiupán, given the presence of certain discernible linguistic characteristics. The discussion of the translator's efforts to remain faithful to both the liberal ideas of the Spanish proclamation and his own religious conviction (and presumably that of his intended indigenous audience) is particularly intriguing. Specialists of other Mesoamerican languages may also notice a familiar reliance on couplets, metaphors, and kinship terms, all of which serve to lend the translation a decidedly distinct message and tone from the original.

As Laughlin notes, there is no evidence to suggest that the presumed Franciscan toiling away "in a damp cell in the Province of Chiapa" (p. 177) was ever rewarded with a public reading of his work. No doubt, for this

reason, the study reveals much more about how some Spaniards and colonial officials sought to appeal to indigenous people rather than the latter's reception and interpretation of that message. Given the author's emphasis on ecclesiastical correspondence and decrees, mostly housed today in Chiapas, this perspective is not altogether surprising. Still, one wonders if the Tzotzil Maya would have reacted as indifferently to the emerging appeals to constitutionalism and other elements of early-nineteenth-century liberal rhetoric as Laughlin seems to imply toward the end of his account (p. 191). While problems of political marginalization and oppression are certainly nothing new to the region, as the author laments, some recent studies suggest that nascent liberal ideology and anti-French xenophobia could have influenced peasant attitudes and understanding of the wars of independence and early republican politics.

Laughlin's book will be of particular interest to specialists of the late colonial era and students of Mesoamerican indigenous languages. For the latter, the appendices—which offer a full transcription of the Spanish and Tzotzil documents along with English translations and linguistic notes—will add further value to this important contribution.

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Juan de Ovando: Governing the Spanish Empire in the Reign of Philip II. By Stafford Poole. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. x + 293 pp. Appendix, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.95 cloth.)

Using Juan de Ovando to open a microhistorical window on sixteenth-century imperial administration in Spain, Stafford Poole does a fine job of revealing the intertwining complexities of Spanish society and its imperial bureaucracy. The reader is cast into a world of shifting coalitions, implicit distrust, the prejudices of *limpieza de sangre*, and the quest for a just rule where Native Americans were concerned. Indeed, it is telling that Ovando's epitaph mentioned his status as a fellow of the *colegio mayor* of San Bartolomé of Salamanca as well as his eventual power as president of the Council of the Indies and the Council of Finance. By earning a scholarship to San Bartolomé, Ovando ensured his status as a member of the "old boys' network" of *letrados* who "advanced one another's careers" (pp. 25-27). The imperial bureaucracy became such a battleground for men like Fernando de Valdés, archbishop of Seville, president of the Supreme Council of the Inquisition and Ovando's first major patron, that it is unsurprising that Philip II usually parceled out information among his bureaucrats, following the advice of his father not to become overly dependent on any one ambitious individual