
Peter Gerhard's earlier study entitled A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain (1972) provided students of colonial Mexican history with a valuable reference work for a study of the central regions. Owing to the relative dearth of basic information on the southeastern part of Mexico, his latest work is perhaps even more useful.

This new study concentrates on New Spain's regions of Tabasco, Laguna de Términos, Chiapa, Soconusco, and the thirteen lesser divisions of Yucatán. In his general introduction, the author discusses briefly the nature of the land, characteristics of the pre-hispanic peoples, and the conquests by the Spaniards. He then examines the subjects of encomiendas, both preconquest and colonial populations and settlements, the confusing political histories, and ecclesiastical divisions. Finally, he considers the basic source materials, both archival and published. The same subjects are then studied in more detail for each of the various political divisions. Superb maps and helpful tables are found throughout.

This is a lean work, well organized, with little elaboration. But there are few such books that offer so much factual information in so few pages, making this study the first one a beginning student of the area should consult to get his bearings. Moreover, Mr. Gerhard alludes to some aspects of the southeast frontier that make it quite different from the rest of New Spain. Aside from the familiar differences of the land, natives, and the twenty-year conquest (at least in Yucatán), the encomienda history, for example, is unusual. Encomiendas remained important for a longer period of time than in most of the areas; the entire cacao-rich province of Soconusco belonged to the Cortés holdings for a few years; and Francisco de Montejo held for some time the province of Maní as a hereditary estate.

Pirates have already been studied with some care, but less attention has been paid to their descendants, the "Baymen," those English logcutters who settled in considerable numbers along the shores of Campeche, as well as on the east coast of the peninsula in the province of Bacalar, touching on the present territory of Belize.

There are many such provocative themes suggested for further study in this excellent book, and Mr. Gerhard's third volume in this series, treating the northern frontier of New Spain, promises to offer more of the same. One hopes that he will provide us with a fourth volume on Central America.

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