

# Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

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Vol. 17 No. 1 October 31, 2016

***The River People in Flood Time: The Civil Wars in Tabasco, Spoiler of Empires.*** Terry Rugeley. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. Map, photographs, figures, notes, bibliography and index. viii +355 pp

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Terry Rugeley, Presidential Professor of Mexican and Latin American History, University of Oklahoma, is well-known for his books on the Caste Wars in Yucatán -- *Yucatan's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste Wars*, 1996; *Maya Wars*, 2001; *Rebellion Now and Forever*, 2009 -- which have completely revised understanding of those wars. He also wrote *Of Wonders and Wise Men*, 2009, dealing with religion in the lives of ordinary people in nineteenth century southeast Mexico. Now, he turns attention to Tabasco, in southeastern Mexico, a state largely neglected by English-language historians.

Although Rugeley presents a useful, lucid summary of the history of Tabasco, from ancient Olmec times to the twentieth century, the heart of the book deals with the nineteenth century, when Tabascans frustrated powerful empires while wholeheartedly engaged in often violent contests with one another. Important as it is to fill the gap in English-language knowledge of Tabasco, Rugeley also wants to explain why Tabasco was able to spoil the ambitions of post-colonial Mexican central governments, Admiral Perry's Navy, Cuban filibusters and Maximilian's French forces. His explanation, he reminds readers time and again helps explain how other weak societies (Vietnam, Afghanistan, etc.) have frustrated great powers.

The explanation, Rugeley contends, resides in the coincidence of specific geographic-demographic-economic factors plus an internally fractious frontier population. [i] Tabasco's extensive swamps proved an unforgiving barrier to outside forces and created logistic headaches for them, and Tabasco was functionally distant from centers of industry, commerce and power. [ii] Tabasco lacked attractive natural and human resources (few Indians to exploit, no precious metals, etc.) and consequently lacked funds to sustain effective provincial government or underwrite a robust Catholic clergy. [iii] Marked disunity among local power-holders made it almost impossible for any outside force to hold genuine sway over Tabasco (it is easier to conquer a macro-cephalous kingdom than a multi-headed one). (iv) All of this plus a sparse Indian population, meant Spanish settlers had to be tough-minded, individualistic and self-reliant. Tabascans developed a sturdy sense of regionalism, and a frontier mestizo (Spanish, African, indigenous) culture more strictly racist in word than in deed, and a refusal to submit to distant government. Similar geographical, material, and social circumstances seem to have evoked similar characteristics in other frontier populations -- from Los Santos, Panamá, and Petén, Guatemala just across the Usumacinta River from Tabasco, to, perhaps, the Mosquito coast, or even Balochistan. Rugeley explains how geography, large political economies and power structures and Tabasco's willful actors mutually bracket one another. The history of Tabasco is a story of relatively small-scale producers of dyewood, maize, cacao, cattle (swamps and a small native population limited development of latifundia), mahogany and chicle who became racially mixed and who struggled with one another, and with their tropical habitat, and with imperial powers.

One is tempted to say, good, once Rugeley gets us past his important thesis and its lessons for moderns, he can take use into the narrative details. No doubt for some social scientists, narrative histories must have policy or theoretical implications to avoid being regarded as mere additions to a butterfly collection. And Rugeley's book **is** a contribution to comparative historical sociology and does have important lessons for theories and predictions about the past as well as the present. But beyond this, Rugeley has also produced a first-rate *narrative* history.

George Steiner once wrote something to the effect that first-rank historians are also gifted writers. Rugeley is a case in point. Rugeley writes with wit, insight and energy about a large cast of characters who are described in the full flush and context of their time and place. He has a wry fondness for all sorts of outrageous, colorful and truculent Tabascans. These strong, sometimes operatic individuals often clothed themselves in national ideologies (Centralism versus Federalism, Conservatism versus Liberalism and so on), usually to fight strictly local battles. The actors range from cacao patriarchs like the Federalist Maldonados to the charismatic filibuster Francisco de Sentamant y Zayas, and a host of other full-blooded romantic, often deceptive and violent actors who, in the Tabascan ambient, could raise hell leading "armies," often no more than a few of their own workers and a handful of other mixed-race people. While the Indians watched from the side-lines, cacao planters, urban merchants, ranchers, Spaniards, pardos (Afro-Europeans or Afro-Indians), and others contended for control of Tabasco and resisted superordinate impositions. Here, as in his

books on post-Conquest Yucatecan history, Rugeley teaches that (local) realities are a good deal more complex than simpler tales of Great Men (or binary social classes) and their dichotomous ideologies imposing themselves on local populations. Napoleon would have broken a tooth or two on the Tabascans. No doubt there are instances where conditions Rugeley singles out occur but where local groups have been unable to thwart the ambitions of empires, but this does not lessen the relevance of the lessons Rugeley draws from Tabasco's historical experiences.

Rugeley, a meticulous researcher, fully exploits local archives as well as material housed in Yucatán, Mexico City, Guatemala City, and the USA. This calls for a historian's devotion, especially in Tabasco where relatively few nineteenth-century records have been preserved. The records may be few, but Rugeley seems to have read every last one of them. So, in addition to political-economic history, one learns a good deal about Villahermosa, a lovely city on the grand Grijalva River, daily life in Tabasco, its fertile soils, even a description of Spanish spinach (chaya), to cite but a few examples.

The export of bananas (1907-1940) brought a measure of prosperity to an otherwise poor region and, with prosperity, an oligarchy, a growing urban middle-class, a tendency toward land concentration and so on. Oil production, beginning in the 1950s generated more fundamental changes in Tabascan society and culture than banana production (damaged by a fungus in the 1930s), the porfiriato, or the 1910 Revolution. The state-owned oil company, corrupt though it may have been, also generated revenue for infrastructure development, population growth, and a modern consumer culture. Villahermosa is now a modern city of over 2,000,000 people. But Tabascans are still rugged, vigorous and hospitable individualists, still at home along the Grijalva River, as anyone who has read Paul Record<sup>1</sup> or recently visited Tenosique may confirm.

Some readers may find Rugeley's many references to the relevance of Tabascan history to contemporary international affairs and his literary flourishes a bit over-done, but I do not think they interfere with the pace and vividness of the narrative. And in plain fact much of what Rugeley finds in the history of Tabasco is relevant to recent and current events. Mesoamericanist scholars and graduate students, and scholars dealing with somewhat similar geo-political regions will want to read this book. All in all, any educated reader who enjoys a first-rate narrative with important implications for political policy will want to read what is, in my view, what regional history should be.

#### Notes

1 Record, Paul 1969 *Tropical Frontier*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Paul Record is an alias for Philip Drucker, an archaeologist well-known for his studies of ancient Olmec culture at La Venta, Tabasco.