

TERRY RUGELEY. *The River People in Flood Time: The Civil Wars in Tabasco, Spoiler of Empires*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

Terry Rugeley's study explores the intersection of geography and political history in the Mexican state of Tabasco in the nineteenth century. Tabasco lies along the Gulf Coast of southeastern Mexico, its borders circumscribing the swampy drainage of the Grijalva and Usumacinta Rivers. The waterlogged riverine geography isolates Tabasco from the arid interior of Mexico, creating what Rugeley describes as a unique society of "river people." Extending the metaphor, Rugeley characterizes the nineteenth century as a "flood time" during which Tabasco suffered through civil wars set in motion by changes emanating from the collapse of the colonial order and the difficult, frequently violent formation of Mexico after independence. Time and again, even as they fought with one another, Tabascans frustrated the designs that outsiders – be they filibusters, or foreign invaders, or the national government in Mexico City – sought to impose on them, making Tabasco a "spoiler of empires" akin to modern-day Viet Nam and Afghanistan. Local unrest combined with the damp climate to ensure the destruction of nineteenth-century documents. Rugeley therefore scoured archives elsewhere in Mexico as well as the United States and even Guatemala to produce a deeply researched book that, "highlights defense against outsiders as a defining historical dynamic." (4)

The book illuminates that dynamic by charting Tabasco's maturation into a "spoiler of empires" in the nineteenth century. Chapter 1 explains that the geography of the Usumacinta-Grijalva basin forged a distinctive pre-Columbian society characterized by geographic isolation, and internal fragmentation abetted by ethno-linguistic diversity and the absence of an overarching indigenous political structure. Chapter 2 shows that Spanish colonialism perpetuated those patterns and built upon them. For example, colonial development sharply divided the capital San Juan Bautista (the future Villahermosa) from the countryside, but also fostered cacao production, and a regional identity nurtured by suspicion of imperial administrators and other outsiders. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 define the combination of factors that sparked civil war in Tabasco in the turbulent decades following Mexico's independence. Power was divided between the

urban elite of San Juan Bautista, the military commandant, and cacao planters in the interior led by the Maldonado clan. Whenever one sought advantage by allying with an outside interest, such as a filibuster or the federal government, the other powers would violently resist. In contrast, Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry's incursion during the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848) elicited a unified defense led by two erstwhile outsiders, Yucatecan Col. Juan B. Traconis and the Colombian-born filibuster Miguel Bruno. Chapter 6 describes the violence in Tabasco through the 1850s provoked by civil war between liberals and conservatives at the national level. Chapter 7 details the invasion of Tabasco by French forces and their conservative Mexican allies during the ill-fated French Intervention (1862-1867), which provoked a unified, determined resistance. Chapter 8 examines the receding of "flood time" after under president Porfirio Díaz (president 1876-1911), when Tabasco conformed to patterns (oligarchy; rural disenfranchisement; the extraction of commodities for export) that characterized the rest of Mexico, and, for that matter, Latin America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The book ends with a meditation on the heritage of Tabasco's "flood time." An oil boom has dragged the state into the twentieth century. But while Tabasco is more firmly part of Mexico, it remains distinct, an outsider.

Rugeley introduces the reader to a parade of colorful characters who helped to make Tabasco distinct. They include "insiders" like Father José María Alpuche y Infante, a devoted defender of Tabasco's local imperatives after independence, and Fernando Nicolás Maldonado, cacao baron and patriarch of a political clan based in Tabasco's mountainous southern borderlands. Maldonado equated localism with defense of his family's interests. His determination to thwart his opponents in Villahermosa led him to recruit the Cuban adventurer Francisco Semanat, the most prominent of the various outsiders who would try to master Tabasco. Rugeley categorizes Semanat and his ilk, including his protégé, the aforementioned Miguel Bruno, as "Napoleonic Free Radicals" inspired by the ideals of liberty and audacious personal struggle against the forces of oppression. Semanat threw himself into the civil war wracking Tabasco in the 1830s. He rose to leadership in the state as a paladin of local resistance to an authoritarian national government, only to wear out his welcome and die by firing squad. An equally rich cast of characters takes center stage in the chapters on Tabasco during the era of the liberal

reform and the French Intervention. The mercurial Spaniard Eduardo González Árevalo, who fought for and then against the French, stands out as a compelling example. So too does the insider Victor Dueñas, a U.S. educated intellectual who served as governor seven times between 1857 and 1875. The reader hoping for an equally detailed treatment of women will be disappointed, though this should not be taken as a criticism, but rather as an acknowledgement of the reality of Rugeley's sources, written by men about men, at a time when women had few opportunities to participate in public affairs. Rugeley having to make do with those records that have survived compounds this reality. What the reader will find is an engaging and substantive contribution to the body of political biography for nineteenth-century Mexico.

This book makes an important contribution to historical understanding of Mexico, and in a broader sense, Latin America and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. It differs from the array of regional studies concerning early national Mexico in two significant respects. First, the book decenters liberalism in Mexico's national narrative. Indeed, while others see rural upheaval as an expression of "popular liberalism," Rugeley sees patronage and coercion at work – that is, elites like Maldonado mobilizing their employees and clients. Second, the book illuminates how place and space – i.e. local realities – conditioned the political process. For Caribbeanist scholars, the book offers an insightful comparative study, inasmuch as geography rendered Tabasco an island of sorts, and connected it to the Caribbean world as much as with Mexico. In sum, Rugeley has produced an authoritative, cinematic, highly readable study appropriate for specialist and non-specialist readers alike.

**Daniel S. Haworth**

*University of Houston-Clear Lake*