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Book Review: Early History of the Southwest Through the Eyes of German-Speaking Jesuit Missionaries

Charles R. Gallagher, S.J.
Boston College

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Albrecht Classen. *Early History of the Southwest Through the Eyes of German-Speaking Jesuit Missionaries* (Lanham: Lexington Books. 2013). Pp. xi, 216. Hardcover.

Albrecht Classen's noteworthy study of German-speaking Jesuits in 17th century Mexico, current New Mexico, Arizona, and California picks up on two important themes. The first is that prior to its suppression in 1773, the Society of Jesus created, sustained, and expanded an impressive system of mission stations, churches, and other infrastructure in the American southwest. Classen rightly argues that this imposing missionary system put in place by Jesuit scientists, architects, botanists, and explorers has largely been neglected by historians.

For Classen, this is because during the forty-one year period between the suppression and the restoration of the Society of Jesus (from 1771 to 1814), too much time elapsed for the system to remain rooted. Four decades of missionary inactivity permitted the seeds of faith to scatter in the desert winds. Consequently, historians and commentators only really tell the post-1814 story of Jesuit work in the Southwest. Yet, as Classen shows, this modern effort ended up being much smaller, and less significant, than the initial Jesuit exertion. The take-away here is that the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1771 was much more significant than perhaps previously realized, at least in the Sonora region of the seventeenth century. This Jesuit mission did not simply go into hibernation. Inattention spelled eradication.

Classen's second theme is that the more vibrant initial Jesuit missionary push, ranging from the years of about the 1690s to the late 1760s, was one which was global in scope, cosmopolitan in nature, and headed by the efforts of German-educated and German speaking missionaries—many of them Swiss. The Jesuit colleges at Sion, Fribourg, and Lucerne, operated freely until 1773, and introduced young Swiss men to the Jesuit regime. Some German-speaking students of these schools who became Jesuit priests were ultimately sent to the Sonora region of what is now the United States. While the image of the Spanish missionary of the Southwest is writ large in many histories, Classen reminds us that German-speaking missionaries such as the Swiss Jesuit Phillip Segesser, offered some of the first travelogues

depicting the flora, fauna, and political interaction with Native Americans in the Sonora region.

The global nature of this effort is key for Classen. The Jesuits written about in this book came from German-speaking areas all over Europe, worked for a religious order founded by a Spaniard, with its organization headquartered in Rome, and its missionary focus directed toward Mexico and its northern borderlands. Many of the German-speaking Jesuits understood the obscurity of the region to which they had been sent. But this did not inhibit them from employing their skills in cartography, astronomy, botany, to compose detailed historical and sociological texts. Classen explicates Ignaz Pfefferkon's *Description of the Sonora* and argues its importance alongside other more well-known Jesuit encyclopedic texts of the era. The readers of this journal will find great importance in the publication and contextualization of many of the letters of Philipp Segesser, including the fascinating story of Segesser's preservation—via his shipment of them to Switzerland—of three of the most important “buffalo hide paintings” ever completed by Native American artists.

Classen's book is important because of its examination of a heretofore neglected field of inquiry. In this sense, the book upends much conventional wisdom. The publication of lengthy excerpts of primary source material alone would be enough to recommend the value of this book. However, in many places the work reads more like a chronicle or register rather than a synthetic overview. Short, and in some cases stunted, biographies of individual Jesuits tend to chop up the trajectory of Classen's globalization thesis rather than enhance its trajectory. The author's sensitivity to Native American issues, injustice, and contextualized theological impulses is commendable.

Charles R. Gallagher, S.J.
Boston College