

María Gracia Ríos Taboada, *Disputas de Altamar. Sir Francis Drake en la polémica española inglesa sobre las Indias*, Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2021, 261pp. ISBN 9788491922100. Price 24€.

Anyone working on Spanish American history of the late 16th and early 17th century would recognize that the presence of Francis Drake in the archival record is overwhelming. This is even more so for those working on Central America and the Isthmus of Panama, where Drake's name is always united to the maroons—rebel former slaves—and their resistance to the Spanish Empire. Hundreds of people, even former maroons, alleged on their *relaciones de méritos* (documents asking for rewards from the Crown on account of individual services) their participation in the defense of Panama City against Drake in 1595-1596. Mentioning the name of the pirate was a guarantee of the petitioner's bravery, and it meant leverage to claim rewards from the Crown for defending a strategic imperial space. Therefore, Spanish preoccupation with Drake amounted almost to paranoia. Colonial authorities would see Drake even when he could not possibly be seen, and his mythical figure flooded the imagination—and probably nightmares—of every governor, captain or soldier throughout the Spanish Americas.

In her new book, beautifully edited by Iberoamericana-Vervuert, María Gracia Ríos Taboada adds another dimension to the character of Drake, which historians now must take into consideration to understand both the complexities of the individual and the deep impact of piracy in general understandings of Atlantic empires. *Disputas de Altamar* aims, in a nutshell, to incorporate the figure of Francis Drake—and English piracy in general—into the “discourses of the colonization of America” (13), and it does so by linking literary critique and history with considerable wit.

Since Matthew Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, historians have tended to overcome established common assumptions through similar revisionary processes. One of the myths revisited by Restall was that of “Completion”. While traditional narratives placed the *end* of the “conquest phase” somewhere around 1550 and 1573, Restall's argument claimed that the “conquest” was a process that had a beginning but not a closing and, therefore, the latter should not be taken for granted.<sup>1</sup> Ríos Taboada's book proves that, neither the conquest nor the “polemics of the possession”, following Rolena Adorno's concept, finished in the mid-16th century. Quite the contrary, they

1 Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 4. Guillermo Céspedes del Castillo, *América Hispánica, 1492-1898* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2009), 16.

continued in different ways for the better part of the colonial period and incorporated not only Spanish and Indians but also other European powers and African descendants living in the New World. Therefore, this book can be identified within the historiographical framework as a “new history of conquest” in its search for a more complex understanding of that process.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the book makes a very strong claim to incorporate Drake’s figure into the new entangled narratives of the Atlantic, following Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra’s attempt to move beyond comparative perspectives to think of cross-fertilization between the different European colonial experiences in the Atlantic.

Ríos Taboada’s book explores mainly three different arguments, beyond the general purpose of incorporating Drake’s into major debates on conquest and colonization. Firstly, she analyses how Drake’s image was constructed by English propagandists following Spanish narratives. Therefore, according to Ríos Taboada, Drake’s image emerged in England as a “corrected” version of the Spanish conquistador, paradoxically owing its fame to Spanish propaganda *against* him. Directly linked to the former, the second argument claims that textual relationships between Spanish and English sources were constant and extremely intense: a “particular discursive phenomenon” grounded on the “extraordinary popularity of Spanish language in Elizabethan England” (58).

The book’s third argument is, in my opinion, the most relevant and presents Drake’s presence in Spanish America, and the necessary reaction of viceregal authorities to it, triggered a revision of the grounds on which conquest had been justified. This idea is extensively developed in chapter 3, which analyses how the conversion of indigenous peoples was not exclusively a religious enterprise but much more of a “civic” endeavor—based on the concept of *policía*—which involved acculturation and language conversion.<sup>3</sup> Ríos Taboada links the origins of this mixed civic and religious conversion with external menaces against the Spanish empire. Following her argument, the threat of Drake’s occupation of spaces and possible alliances with indigenous peoples and former African slaves offered Spanish colonizers the opportunity to construct new narratives of their own presence in America and their own identities, combining the evangelization of indigenous populations with the defense of the territory (169).

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2 Matthew Restall, “The New Conquest History”, *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (2012).

3 It was even claimed by conquest theorist Vasco de Quiroga, bishop of Michoacán in New Spain, who defined the process of conversion as a work of “*policía mixta*”, both religious and civic, see Vasco de Quiroga, *La Utopía en América*. (Madrid: Dastin, 2002).

*Disputas de Altamar's* fourth chapter speaks to the complexity and long breath of the entire book. By analyzing Lope de Vega's famous epic poem *La Dragontea* (written in 1597 to commemorate the Spanish victory against Drake in Panama in 1595), Ríos Taboada explores the sources used by the poet and his discursive selection to express his claim, which link this war to religious conflicts. Firstly, it is shocking for the reader to learn the amount of research that Lope carried out to write his poem, consulting correspondence between the governor of Panama and the Court and even interviewing some of the main actors. In addition, the discursive complexity of the poem, as unfolded by Ríos Taboada, follows different arguments on the legitimacy of the Spanish conquest. In order to "prove false the Anglican religion" (224), Lope even refers to the famous dispute of Valladolid between Las Casas and Sepúlveda a half century before, placing it in the mouths of either maroons and corsairs to support the Catholic faith.

In sum, this book is a good example of interdisciplinarity and entangled history. By following a methodology grounded on literary studies, it participates in existing historical debates, adding to the current revision of the history of Atlantic empires. Obviously, it will interest literary scholars, but it also should be a must read for anyone interested in imperial disputes and Atlantic history in general.

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