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## Frontier Naturalist: Jean Louis Berlandier and the Exploration of Northern Mexico and Texas by Russell M Lawson

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**Lawson, Russell M, *Frontier Naturalist: Jean Louis Berlandier and the Exploration of Northern Mexico and Texas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012. xxi + 262 pages. Cloth, \$45.00.**

A significant number of explorers arrived in the New World in search of a fresh start and a promising future. Especially noteworthy among the thousands who came were those seeking an understanding of place, particularly as it potentially offered knowledge that would be new to science. The New World presented plenty of opportunities for exploration, particularly for those who came early and/or ventured to uncharted areas. Jean Louis Berlandier, a French-born naturalist who trained mainly as a botanist in Geneva during the early nineteenth century, was one of those looking for the promise of discovery. At the age of twenty-one he became the first naturalist to study the flora and fauna of northern Mexico. Over time, Berlandier also delved into other disciplines, including geography and geology, and made advances in climatic studies. Berlandier's copious notes showed the type of detail that allowed for the reconstruction of his journeys and present an understanding of what took place and where. His travels took him to locales that others had not previously visited and brought him in contact with a variety of Indian tribes, some previously little known. His persona permitted him to observe the cultural landscape of the region's Indians. Berlandier's ethnological observations took place at a time that preceded the formation of anthropology as a discipline.

In *Frontier Naturalist*, historian Russell M. Lawson seeks to recreate the life and contributions of Berlandier. Lawson also uses Berlandier's abundant archival records to examine how the explorer viewed the region's environment and placed it all in the context of the conflict between the United States and Mexico. Consequently, Lawson provides two parallel stories in this book, and retells both through the eyes of Berlandier. Lawson deals with the complexities of the conditions that Berlandier faced with ease, yet without missing detailed explanations necessary to grasp the condition of that time. The author interrelates topics to explain relationships between the natural environment, full of challenges, with the various players that sought to dominate and control the area. That Indians, Mexicans, and Americans vied for position and possession is an understatement, for these were unsure times for all. Berlandier not only frequently visited these environments but also cautiously recorded everything he saw. As such, Berlandier also documented the historical proceedings of the time as he navigated among the different sides of the conflict.

Lawson successfully relates the reality of the time and shows Berlandier's own doubts about his development as a scientist. Lawson depends heavily on primary sources located in a number of archival collections, allowing him to piece together a well documented story full of detail and intrigue. The plethora of the collection's contents permit the reconstruction of Berlandier's life from 1826 to 1851, when he drowned while crossing the San Fernando river in northern Mexico. As part of his analysis, Lawson connects Berlandier's youthful experiences in Switzerland with those occurrences he later faced in northern Mexico and Texas. The linkages between the two countries show us the explorer background that Berlandier used to record his findings on the American continent. Furthermore, Lawson also notes that Berlandier relied on the writings of his contemporaries as models for his own research, but most importantly as it related to his personal belief system. For example, Berlandier did not subscribe to the various superstitions that were advanced by the religious establishment in Europe at the time. He, accordingly, applied his suspicious viewpoint as he keenly observed the various practices espoused by the Catholic Church.

Publications such as this one have been recently appearing in the literature. Although Lawson uses secondary sources, it is the unearthing and recovery of primary sources found in archives and often in unpredictable collections that scholars like Lawson rely on to reconstruct the life of such discoverers like Berlandier. Along the way, historical events can be pieced together to complement the histories that have already been published. Certainly, Lawson's work should serve as an inspiration to others to pursue similar projects of the many explorers of the New World who themselves have yet to be discovered. This will only be possible when researchers are able to identify and locate primary sources left behind by explorers such as Berlandier. Sadly, there are many collections that have already been lost, preventing the re-establishment of the lesser known figures that lived in the age of exploration.

Lawson's efforts should be applauded for a number of reasons. Most significantly, he provides a clear window to Berlandier's scientific work and an understanding of a man that lived in an era that afforded none of the comforts and facilities available currently. Lawson's contributions to the literature should grant those interested in the evolution of the scientific method an example of approach and discovery through the use of primary sources. For the cognoscenti of northern Mexico and Texas, this book is a wonderful read that supplies nuances of the region not previously recorded in the literature.

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