

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection Centre for English  
Communication

Centre for English Communication

---

3-2013

### Book Review: The Wrath of God: Lope de Aguirre, Revolutionary of the Americas.

Jennifer Kate ESTAVA DAVIS

Singapore Management University, [jestavadavis@smu.edu.sg](mailto:jestavadavis@smu.edu.sg)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cec\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cec_research)



Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

Estava Davis, Jennifer. 2013. Book Review: The Wrath of God: Lope de Aguirre, Revolutionary of the Americas by Evan Balkan. *Historian*, 75, 1, 128-129.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for English Communication at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection Centre for English Communication by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylds@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylds@smu.edu.sg).

## Book Review

### *The Wrath of God: Lope de Aguirre, Revolutionary of the Americas.* By Evan L. Balkan.

(Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. Pp. vii, 225.)

By Jennifer Estava Davis

Historian, 75 (1): 128–129.

The review has been published in final form at [http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/hisn.12004\\_6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/hisn.12004_6).

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

The author of this study takes the reader back to the jungles of the Amazon and to the quest for El Dorado, the legendary city of gold that was at the center of the Spanish conquest in sixteenth-century Latin America. He focuses on Lope de Aguirre, the legendary madman who inspired Werner Herzog's famous 1972 film, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. Aguirre's notoriety stems from his final 1561 expedition, during which he incited a violent rebellion against its commander, Pedro de Ursúa, killing him and any others suspected of loyalty to him. Aguirre then gained control of the expedition, abandoned the quest for El Dorado, decided to return to Peru to become king, and declared war against the Spanish crown. Aguirre is most famous for the deranged, murderous spree that would ensue and continue throughout the expedition in mainland Venezuela and in Margarita, where his wrath was at its peak. Although they were in Margarita for just over a month, Aguirre and his men ransacked villages, ravaged all provisions, indiscriminately slaughtered its inhabitants, and wreaked total ruin on the island. There he is still known as “the Tyrant” for his misdeeds. Aguirre was eventually caught in the Venezuelan mainland, but before he surrendered and was executed, he stabbed his own daughter to death.

Evan L. Balkan recognizes the historical record that presents Aguirre as a murderous psychopath who would stop at nothing to obtain power. However, his primary claim aims to highlight another side of Aguirre, one that is presented in the title and expanded throughout the book: if we examine the record closely, Aguirre is not so much a bloodthirsty maniac but a “Revolutionary of the Americas,” the first and quintessential warrior of liberation, a precursor and model to American leaders of independence. Aguirre lost out, Balkan contends, simply because he was on the wrong side of history. He notes that his intention is not to justify or exculpate Aguirre but to “situate [him] in his larger historical context and rescue him from flat and static characterization” (4). The main reason he offers for the one-dimensional portrayals of Aguirre is that most of what we know about him has been spun from accounts written by Aguirre's enemies, men who had been part of the expedition, who were complicit in Aguirre's crimes, but who later turned on him and looked to exonerate themselves by making Aguirre the scapegoat. Instead, Balkan's careful investigation of the historical record reveals Aguirre as a “leader of men” whose efforts are comparable to those of heroes of independence like Simón Bolívar and the Founding Fathers.

The book's scope is ambitious, as it aims to provide a comprehensive view of Aguirre's character and importance in history vis-à-vis the context of Spanish expansion and colonization of the Americas. In chronological sequence, Balkan weaves a complex tale, one that relies on extensive research and deep knowledge of the subject. He demonstrates skillful effort in suturing together numerous sources to present a detailed image of the circumstances that led to Aguirre's disenfranchisement and angry frustration against the Spanish crown, comparing the context of the failed expedition with earlier and later ones (chapter 5) and providing a careful analysis of the general setting of the Spanish conquest. It is because he tries to offer such a broad perspective that the narrative seems disjointed at times, especially when Balkan sets out to compare Aguirre's psychological profile with other explorers with psychopathic personalities (chapter 13). Yet these minor digressions do little to detract from the value of the book as an exceptional resource not only for Aguirre enthusiasts and historians but for anyone interested in reading a thorough and fascinating view of this important era of American colonization. And, at its very core, it reignites academic discussion that challenges the certainty of absolutes in historiography and the presumed accuracy and objectivity that is unwittingly conferred to “official” historical records, records that may be skewed simply because they come from the side of the winners.