Book Reviews

Pathways of Memory and Power: Ethnography and History among an Andean People. By THOMAS A. ABERCROMBIE. Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Pp. xxviii, 603.

The much overused term “hybridity” has become a mainstay of social science and humanities literature in the past few years, particularly in the study of colonial situations, where the cultures of colonizer and colonized become merged or sedimented. Appropriated from studies of British colonialism, the notion of hybridity simultaneously conveys a concern with the openness and transmutability of culture, at the same time that it inhibits us from tracing that change over the long haul. Colonial Latin American ethnography, history, and literary studies have been particularly susceptible to this epithet, which has served, more often than not, as a substitute for the close analysis of the conditions under which such transculturation occurred, how it transpired, and how its nature changed over time. While a number of influential studies of colonial religiosity and cultural mestizaje in the Andes (particularly the work of Manuel Burga, Alberto Flores Galindo, Sabine MacCormack, and Kenneth Mills) have gone a ways toward understanding how indigenous worldviews and systems of social relations impinged upon Spanish colonial culture, it is only very recently that scholars have begun to produce cultural histories of indigenous populations with a view toward documenting the development over time of an indigenous colonial culture to replace the “idols behind altars” approach that for a long time nourished studies of native resistance. Thomas Abercrombie’s Pathways of Memory and Power is a groundbreaking contribution to such an undertaking.

Focusing on the Aymara-speaking populations around Lake Poopo, Bolivia, anthropologist/historian Abercrombie weaves a nuanced narrative that moves between the pre-columbian era and the present, tracing the processes through which the Spaniards successfully erased portions of the Andean social memory, thus giving rise to a colonial indigenous historical consciousness. I purposefully call Abercrombie an “anthropologist/historian”, because his dual disciplinary leanings are what lend authority to his book and provide the ground for his innovative historical interpretations. Pathways of Memory and Power moves back and forth, from the present of Santa Bárbara de Culta, where he conducted ethnographic research, back to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historical record of the surrounding region, and forward again to the twentieth century, focusing in each part on the erasure and reconfiguration of memory: the field memory written by the anthropologist, the chronicle memory of the Spaniards and the documentary memory of colonial hereditary lords, and the ritual memory of contemporary K’ul’ta ceremonial.

This is a massive book, perhaps several books in one, and for that reason I will concentrate on only one part of it in this review, beyond providing brief summaries of the other parts. The first part of Pathways of Memory and Power presents us with an in-depth recounting of Abercrombie’s efforts to get beyond existing Andean ethnographic narratives, through reflexion on his field experience revolving around the process by which he began to understand modern Aymara ritual celebration of saints’ days as a window onto a historically constituted “interculture”, as opposed to a primordial Andean cosmology. Central to this section is his analysis of memory in K’ul’ta as being traced
through “pathways”—ritual, narrative, topographic, and literary processes through which memory is generated. The second part of the book traces the development of this interculturality by exploring the Spanish efforts to erase Andean memory, thus extending backward the metaphor of memory paths. Abercrombie first interprets chronicle sources for Cuzco and for the Aymara, noting how their authors create metaphorical equivalences between European and Andean cultures, thus bridging the two cultures at the same time that the differences between them are highlighted. Most importantly, this middle section of the book focuses on how native caciques or ethnic lords worked within the Spanish system to fulfill their own ambitions, employing memories of the precolumbian period filtered through European institutions and genres of expression, as well as through Aymara ceremonial forms. The final part of Pathways of Memory and Power moves to the present, providing an ethnographic analysis of K’ulta ritual memory pathways associated with saints’ day celebrations, to explore how this sedimentation of erasures of memory has evolved in a present whose cosmological contours appear to be “autochthonous” or “autonomous”, but are, in fact, historically derived. This layered chronological narrative, which deftly merges ethnography and history, goes a long way in explaining “how it was (and is) that two ‘traditions’ in contact over a period of centuries can have so largely failed to register one another” (129) even as they intermingled and made use of each other’s conventions.

The most convincing and nuanced part of Abercrombie’s book is his study of the colonial period, for it is here that we can observe at close range the cultural interpretations that effectively erased Aymara memory. The symbol of the pathway continues in this chapter, presenting us a Western ethnohistorical analysis that employs Aymara metaphors as organizing models. But Abercrombie has not romanticized K’ulta by choosing this option: he presents visual-alphabetic documentation demonstrating that colonial Aymara lords visualized their family histories in just this form. Unlike the people of K’ulta, however, Abercrombie’s reconstructed historical pathway is far ranging in its geography: “From our vantage point (though not from a K’ulta perspective), the pathways in space-time that connect K’ulta’s present with its pre-Columbian past intersect not only the Cusco of Huayna Capac but also the Castile of Charles V.” Herein lies the novelty of this book, in which the probanzas and other documentation of colonial caciques are read not only through the lens of a profound appreciation of contemporary Aymara memory but also through the filter of a deep knowledge of Spanish memory forms and strategies for comprehending and dominating the Other. Abercrombie’s colonial analysis takes a series of Aymara caciques from several points during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, carefully documenting how they reinscribed Andean forms of memory into correct Spanish legal discourse in the face of colonial social engineering that fragmented and constituted communities, in the process rearticulating Andean forms of memory and inculcating Spanish forms of habit memory. He moves between Spanish-language documents infused with indigenous contents, Andean forms of inscription (like the khipu) reconstituted within the institutions of the reducción and mit’a, and Aymara narrative and ritual forms that took on a colonial aspect within a system that reconfigured the arenas of public and private space and produced hereodox interpretations of Christian ceremonies. Unlike many existing historical studies, which largely confine their interpretations to a discrete and relatively brief period of time, Abercrombie the anthropologist feels free to range across the centuries, moving from the chiefly rule of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the rise of commoner rebellion against caciques in the eighteenth century, when non-noble Indians murdered their ethnic lords, reinscribing ritual practice within a fragmented territory whose constituent parts were marked by celebrations of saints’ days and relationships with local parish priests.
This book clearly forces us to observe historical transformation over the long haul, in order to comprehend why Andean peoples today appear so different, but also so similar, to the dominant societies in which they live. My criticisms of *Pathways of Memory and Power* stem, however, from its very breadth and depth. Not only is the book too long (some 400 pages of text, plus extensive notes), but Abercrombie has not paid enough attention to connecting his three somewhat disparate parts. While his field narrative and his ethnography can be connected by the reader who has followed Abercrombie’s lengthy memory path, when we move from his reconstructions of colonial pathways of memory to the ethnographic context his argumentation becomes disconnected. Why and how has the colonial memory been erased more recently among the inhabitants of contemporary K’ul’ta, who participate in legal literacy and whose Aymara and Quechua neighbors reintroduced the notion of the *cacicazgo* through the careful perusal of historical sources through the *caciques apoderados* movement in the early twentieth century (as Silvia Rivera, Juan Félix Arias, and other Aymara historians have shown us)? Perhaps this is a product of the differences between the study of the production of legal documentation meant to communicate with the colonial administration and the ethnographic investigation of internal ritual practices in the present. It would have been useful and enlightening if Abercrombie had dwelled on this disparity, suggesting why it should be so.

Notwithstanding such criticisms, this rich, suggestive, and stimulating book will be required reading for all future students of colonial indigenous societies of Latin America. Abercrombie reads documentation in innovative and unexpected ways. He effectively breaks down existing models of two hermetically sealed cultural worlds by submerging us in the nuances of colonial indigenous politics. He moves us away from our focus on the Cuzco heartland to consider how colonial life was configured at the margins of the former Tawantinsuyu. Finally, he forces us to reorient our research through a merging of historical interpretation and ethnographic analysis.

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**The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom.** By GRANT D. JONES. Stanford: Stanford University, 1999. Pp. xxvii, 568.

The establishment of Spanish rule over Mesoamerica began, definitively and dramatically, when Tenochtitlan fell to Hernán Cortés in 1521. It ended, with more of a whimper than a bang, when Nojpeten fell to Martín de Ursúa y Arizmendi in 1697. The first story has been told many times and from many points of view. The second story receives its first complete and balanced telling in this masterful and exhaustively researched volume by Grant Jones. How the Itzas, from their island capital in Lake Peten Itza, succeeded for so long in resisting Spanish domination, and the tragic sequence of events that led to a bloody rather than a negotiated end is a fascinating story full of much intrigue and factional strife on both sides.

The Spaniards involved kept copious written records of the whole process. Some of these were the basis for Juan de Villagutierrez Soto-Mayor’s history of the conquest, first published in 1701. Jones goes back to many of Villagutierrez’s original sources, supplementing these with additional archival materials (although not the so-called “Canek Manuscript” analyzed by Jones in previous publications, which he has concluded is probably a forgery). The Itzas, unfortunately, did not record their own versions of the events as they unfolded (or at any rate such documents do not survive), but Jones, an
experienced interpreter of Maya cultural history, reads through the assumptions and biases within the Spanish sources to reconstruct the probable actions and motives, collective and individual, of the Itzas.

The Itza kingdom was a thorn in the side of the Audiencia of Guatemala, the province of Yucatan, and the viceregal authority in Mexico City. An independent and pagan kingdom, hardly peaceable, and a refuge for Mayas fleeing Spanish control, its existence was untenable, yet violent conquests were out of fashion and the jungles and savannahs of the Peten promised no irresistible riches. The Itzas, meanwhile, had the leisure to study their enemies and learn their ways, teasing them with occasional hints that they were prepared to accept Christianity and Spanish rule. Jones reconstructs a broad span of history leading up to the conquest, also including a chapter on Itza social and political organization.

In 1695 the Itza ruler, Kan Ek’, sent his nephew AjChan to Mérida to offer formal submission to the Spanish authorities. Ursúa, a self-aggrandizing Basque nobleman who longed to be an old-time conquistador, was then serving as governor of the province. AjChan and three Itza companions were baptized in the cathedral by the secular clergy, Ursúa acting as AjChan’s godfather. To Spanish eyes, AjChan’s embassy and nominal conversion formally ended Itza independence. The Spaniards did not realize that Kan Ek’ was hardly an absolute ruler but was in fact seeking an alliance with the Spanish to avoid losing control of his kingdom to rivals. Meanwhile, a party of Franciscans slipped into NojPeten to gain their own promise of surrender from Kan Ek’ and try to secure Franciscan control of subsequent missionization. By the time they left, with Kan Ek’ helping them flee in the night to escape his anti-Spanish enemies, they had managed to destroy what little authority Kan Ek’ had still had over his people. By the time Ursúa reached NojPeten, ostensibly on a road-building mission to Guatemala, the dominant Itzas were in no mood to surrender peacefully. Ursúa, no longer willing to wait and negotiate, had brought along enough soldiers and weapons to take the city by force. Ursúa had his Mayan laborers construct a galleon, and his soldiers attacked the island. The ensuing massacre of the Itzas is all but silenced in the Spanish accounts; Ursúa sought to justify his forceful actions by denouncing the Itzas as depraved cannibals and sodomites.

Conquistador Ursúa went on to become president of the Philippines. His conquest, though, was hardly definitive. Mayas fled from the Spanish occupiers, forming new independent territories that warred with one another. The garrison Ursúa left at NojPeten was so poorly supplied that the soldiers resorted to pillaging surrounding settlements for food. The first party of settlers, sent from Guatemala, suffered deprivation, disease, and high mortality. Mission villages were established only slowly and, in 1704, they staged a nearly successful rebellion. The whole area remained poorly populated for centuries.

Jones presents this history at such length and in such painstaking detail that the narrative thread occasionally catches: it can become difficult to keep track of all the different actors and their shifting allegiances; archival data are sometimes presented in long quotations or in barely mediated form. But it is a complex story and demands to be told in detail in order to convey the nature of the sources and the highly varied personalities and intentions of its Spanish and Maya protagonists. The book provides rich data on the politics and mentalities of colonial Spaniards—settlers, officials, secular and regular clergy—on the frontier of the empire. For scholars of the Mayas, its information on the organization and functioning of an independent Maya state will be of great interest in respect to postclassic as well as colonial studies. But perhaps the book’s greatest value lies in its precise explication of the machinations of colonialism itself: the conquerors’ determined failure to comprehend the indigenous civilization even after a century and a half of coexistence, the gratuitous violence and self-serving justifications,
the haphazard and improvised manner in which the colonial enterprise actually proceeded, and, yet, its inexorability, despite the Itzas’ long resistance. Knowing their enemies, they did not need their prophetic books to tell them their kingdom was doomed.

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The Story of Guadalupe: Luis Laso de la Vega’s Huei tlamañu cola cotlica of 1649. Edited and translated by LISA SOUSA, STAFFORD POOLE, and JAMES LOCKHART. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Pp. 151. In this fine volume, Lisa Sousa, Stafford Poole and James Lockhart have given us much more than an eminently readable scholarly English translation of the entire Huei tlamahuicolotica, which is an important account of the apparitions and miracles of the Virgin of Guadalupe published in 1649 by the vicar of Guadalupe, Luis Laso de la Vega. The translators have also carefully transcribed the original Nahuatl text of Laso de la Vega, and they have included a selection of translated excerpts from the first known relation of the Virgin of Guadalupe legend, the Imagin de la Virgen (1648) of Miguel Sánchez, like Laso de la Vega a Mexican-born Spanish ecclesiastic. Perhaps the most important part of this book, however, is the introduction, which contains a critical study of the relationship between the two versions of the Guadalupe story that raises important questions about the authorship of the Nahuatl text.

The Hueitlamañu cola cotlica is composed of several distinct parts: a preface (prayer to the Virgin), the story of the apparitions (Nican mopoñua), a detailed description of the Virgin’s image, the account of the miracles (Nican motecpana), further information about Juan Diego’s life, an exhortation to Guadalupan devotion, and a concluding prayer based on the Salve Regina. Sousa, Poole and Lockhart show that of these seven sections, the three central ones (apparitions, image and miracles) overlap significantly with Sánchez’s Imagin de la Virgen. They demonstrate not only that the first six miracles narrated by both Sánchez and Laso de la Vega are the same in substance and order, but that the two priests seem to have turned to the same source for the remaining miracles: the seventeenth-century engraving of Samuel Stradanus. The main difference is that Laso de la Vega includes more miracles. All of this leads the editors to suggest that the Huei tlamañu cola cotlica is a rendering of Sánchez’s story in a manner resembling Nahuatl ecclesiastical plays, one which omits the biblical analogies present in the Imagín de la Virgen while developing dialogues in a way consistent with plays and other kinds of Nahuatl compositions.

This direct dependence of Laso de la Vega on the text of Sánchez can actually be used, as the editors demonstrate, to clarify obscure passages in the Huei tlamañu cola cotlica and to explain slips in Laso de la Vega’s Nahuatl, some of which can be traced to Spanish-influenced expressions. The linguistic and philological scholarship evident in the introduction of Sousa, Poole and Lockhart is most impressive, as is the good judgment that leads the three scholars to make choices about punctuation, orthography and indentation in their transcription of the Nahuatl text. Taken together, all these factors make it clear how this team arrived at the tentative conclusion that Laso de la Vega, rather than his indigenous aides, was primarily responsible for the writing of the Huei tlamañu cola cotlica. This study is required reading for those interested in the generation of foundational and national myths.

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Crime and Punishment in Late Colonial Mexico City, 1692–1810. By GABRIEL HASLIP-VIERA. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 193.

The elite of late colonial Mexico City complained persistently about rampant urban crime that challenged the social integrity of the metropolis and threatened the property and personal safety of its inhabitants. Even as it perplexed colonial authorities, so, too, has the yeasty social milieu of New Spain’s capital intrigued numerous modern scholars who have studied this urban setting to shed light on questions of social disorder, methods of social control, and configurations of poverty and wealth. In Crime and Punishment in Late Colonial Mexico City, a work evocative of the Europeanist “crime and society” historiographic tradition, Gabriel Haslip-Viera tackles these important issues. Relying heavily on court documents and examining only “street crime,” the author endeavors to uncover “the nature of urban criminality by focusing on the social and economic factors that contributed to the emergence of a criminal class” (2). With his methodological agenda thus set, Haslip-Viera proposes to “explore, in detail, the manner in which urban colonial society reacted to the reality of crime” and to look at the rise of “mechanisms and institutions designed to maintain public order” (2).

After laying out the purpose of his work, the author introduces us in the first chapter to the social make-up of eighteenth-century Mexico City. His brief, insightful overview underscores the great disparities in wealth and social condition of the capital’s inhabitants and depicts vividly the hardship and misery that the urban poor endured daily. The following chapter describes elite attitudes toward crime and official measures to enforce law and order. Chapter 3 analyzes the types of crimes committed and offers a social profile of those arrested. Not surprisingly, since he looks only at street crime, Haslip-Viera finds that those processed by the judiciary tended to be young males from the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Here he makes the explicit connection between poverty and crime, asserting that criminal behavior stemmed from “unemployment, under-employment, poverty, exploitation, substandard living conditions, poor diet, and an inability to control one’s life” (62).

The subsequent two chapters describe the workings of the criminal justice system, taking the reader through the procedures of arrest, incarceration, trial, and pronouncement of sentence. The author’s anecdotal treatment of prison squalor and harsh convict labor portrays effectively the fundamental social inequalities that the colonial legal system upheld. Finally, a short conclusion ponders the meaning of criminality in Mexico City by briefly comparing it with London, Paris, and Madrid. Although Haslip-Viera finds a number of similarities, he also notes that Hispanic authorities seemed less preoccupied with property crimes than did their counterparts in London or Paris, and that punishment for said crimes was less harsh, especially when compared with London. In summing up, the author maintains that while crime in late colonial Mexico City probably did increase, it was highly individualistic behavior, of little threat to the established order, and, therefore, tolerable to the elite.

Crime and Punishment in Late Colonial Mexico contains rich, informative descriptions of urban society, criminal profiles, and prison hardship, but it suffers from several weaknesses that limit its utility. Foremost among them, the author demonstrates a very weak grasp of the philosophical and mechanical rudiments of the Spanish colonial legal system. Chapters 2 and 4 abound with ill-founded characterizations of contemporary legal thought, misapprehensions of the legislative and judicial processes, and imprecision in juridical vocabulary. For example, Haslip-Viera fails to appreciate how jurists and magistrates of the antiguo régimen conceived of law, for he reduces derecho to mere legislation, and the judicial process to a mechanical application thereof. In fact, derecho consisted not just of written law, but also of custom, equity, and doctrina, and it was
meant to be applied in a discretionary, flexible way. This unawareness of the constituent elements of derecho leads the author to chastise the colonial judiciary for meting out punishment “in a discretionary manner” and for giving “widely dissimilar sentences” to convicts of similar social and economic backgrounds (98). Editorial limitations do not allow further elaboration or examples of misguided legal scholarship, but another major shortcoming bears mention. The sociological theories upon which Haslip-Viera substantially bases his arguments about the relationship between crime and society are works published mostly in the 1950s and 1960s, even the 1930s. This book has been a long time in coming, as the author notes in his introduction, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that. Unfortunately, however, the author appears to have kept up with pertinent scholarship only in haphazard fashion. Thus, the issues, approaches, and assumptions that underlie this work seem curiously outdated.

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Telémaco en la Isla de Calipso: epopeya amorosa. By JOSE BERMUDEZ DE LA TORRE Y SOLIER. Lima: Editorial e Imprenta DESA, 1998. Pp. 144.

Given the re-emergence of eighteenth-century Peruvian letters within the greater body of Latin American studies, the reprinting in modern Spanish of this 1728 work is a welcomed and long-awaited addition. Although often overshadowed by his Creole contemporary, Pedro Peralta Barnuevo, with whom he collaborated in literary academies, poetic contests, and tributes dedicated to successive vicerealties, Bermúdez (1661–1746) enjoyed a distinguished career of his own as a dean and twice rector of San Marcos University, lawyer and consultant to the Inquisition, and alguacil mayor of the Real Audiencia.

This edition of Telémaco, based on Bermúdez’s manuscript, itself fashioned after François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénélon’s Télémaque (1699), includes Fénélon’s original engravings. Composed of four cantos, each prefaced by an explanatory argument, the poem recounts the trials and tribulations endured by the protagonist and his mentor after a shipwreck on the island of Ogygia while in search of his father, Ulysses, who had been held captive by Calypso. Through the course of 540 octaves, which reflect the author’s knowledge of classical mythology, geography, astronomy, and French and Italian literary influences, as well as his adherence to Quevedo’s conceptismo and Góngora’s culturanismo, the reader is invited to share in the unrequited love affair that Calypso initiates with Telemanachus, the latter’s affection for the nymph Eucaris, the hero’s return to Ithaca to govern at the urging of Minerva, and the dramatic suicide of Eucaris when she learns that Telemanachus has abandoned her for marriage to Antiope, whom he has rescued from the power of Aristeo. The novelty of this epic poem lies in the author’s conceptual framework, which he justified by invoking Aristotle’s Poetics and Horace’s Ars Poetica as the basis for creating a revised treatise on the art of dramatic poetry. His fanciful reworking of the original story (“invención propia”) included the incantations of the sorceress Filida, the hell of jealousy, and the protracted love affairs of Telemanachus’ soldiers with Calypso’s nymphs. Of no lesser importance was Bermúdez’s reformulation of the triangulated sentiments that characterized the classical epic in a shift from Penelope–Ulysses–Calypso to Telemanachus–Calypso–Eucaris, and ultimately to Telemanachus–Eucaris–Antiope. The poem’s narrative thread follows its lyrical scenes, which are rich in mythological references and which appear synthesized in the final verse of octaves in four or five words that condense the entire poetic content of the strophe.
The cursory introduction by César Debarbieri is unsatisfying in that it fails to offer the uninitiated reader an analysis of the poem, and lacks bibliographical references and endnotes that might otherwise qualify this as a scholarly edition. Although the pagination is not consecutive and the edition contains other printing errors, the republication of this poem will in time lead to a rediscovery of Bermúdez’s role in shaping the literary atmosphere of Lima during the first half of the eighteenth century, and will rescue from obscurity his more than 20 published works in poetry and prose, as well as unedited manuscripts.

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La pérdida de La Habana y las reformas borbónicas en Cuba, 1760–1773. By CELIA MARIA PARCERO TORRE. Ávila, Spain: Miján, 1998. Pp. xxix, 173.

La pérdida de La Habana y las reformas borbónicas is an ambitious book that addresses the subject of the siege and capture of Havana (1761–1762), its background, and its consequences. The book uses the traditional approaches of military and institutional history and rests on a broad body of primary and secondary documentation, including voluminous files house at the Archivo General de Indias.

Parcero Torre begins by looking into the state of military preparedness in Havana, including very detailed—actually overwhelmingly so—information on the extent of the city’s fortifications and numbers of troops, vessels, and cannons. The author concludes that although the city counted on an adequate number of troops and a good defensive infrastructure, it lacked an effective defensive plan. The inclusion of maps and illustrations would have helped the author visually convey the state of Havana’s defenses.

Following a description of the British attack, Parcero Torre provides the reader with some interesting insights pertaining to the actual occupation of Havana. These constitute the book’s most interesting parts. In them the author explores the controversy over the forced quartering of British soldiers, the extent of collaboration between the invaders and the local residents, and the tense relations between the occupied city and its hinterland.

Much of the author’s attention is devoted to the consequences of the capture of Havana. The prevailing historiographical interpretation since Francisco de Arango y Parreño and Jacobo de la Pezuela has recognized the city’s occupation as a major watershed in the island’s history, one that helped spark far-reaching reforms and initiated the island’s sugar boom. Parcero Torre minimizes the impact of Havana’s capture, arguing that the reforms had already begun to be implemented and that the sugar expansion resulted from other factors such as the opening of the United States market and the collapse of St. Domingue’s sugar emporium. The author maintains that the number of slaves imported during the occupation was smaller than widely believed and that the British imported relatively few goods. In fact, she characterizes the occupation as a predatory enterprise resulting in the appropriation of 3.4 million pesos by the British captors.

This book stands as a useful addition to the growing historiography on colonial Cuba; while most of the historiography continues to focus on the nineteenth century, this study surveys the less studied seventeenth century.

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Wealth and Power in Provincial Mexico: Michoacán from the Late Colony to the Revolution. By MARGARET CHOWNING. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Pp. xiv, 477.

Wealth and Power in Provincial Mexico is the kind of book that is increasingly unusual in the contemporary world of US academic publishing. Chowning makes no attempt to reference or dialogue with theoretical literature of any kind, and she makes no international comparisons. The questions that drive the book flow strictly from Mexican historiography, and the author contributes to these debates through a regional study. What she provides is a meticulously researched book that derives its power from the careful presentation of reams of detail about the economic tactics and fortunes of the wealthy people at the book’s core.

The book is centered on the region’s elite, and it mostly focuses on their economic struggles, successes and failures. Short sections that follow the fortunes of one family, the Huarte-Alzúa-Gómez clan, through five generations in fact, precede each chapter. Yet, Chowning’s contributions do not end with economic history. Each chapter also explains the politics of the state during that particular period, and she carefully links those politics to the economic experiences of the leading families. This combination allows her to make causative suggestions about the economic forces behind the War of Independence, the initial construction of federalism in Mexico, its demise and the turn to centralism, and the origins of the Reform. Yet, throughout, the political narrative is subordinated to the economic one, and Chowning does not often probe the political motivations of Michoacán’s impoverished majorities or even wealthy people in areas of the state far from the state capital. Chowning does not really give much of a sense of the actors and motivations behind most of the rebellions and political movements that shaped nineteenth-century politics in the state.

Chowning’s most unusual finding is closely tied to her methodology and focus. Her careful probing of the business affairs of Michoacán’s elite using notarial and other economic sources allowed her to see economic trends that do not show up in longer-term studies. In particular, she notes an economic recovery from the mid 1830s to the early 1850s. The region’s elite was able to recover economically as a group from the dramatic economic crisis that began with the War of Independence, even though not all individual families returned to prosperity. This recovery was short-circuited when liberal politicians began efforts to drastically reform society, leading to another round of civil wars that battered the regional economy.

Another strength of the book is Chowning’s section on centralism. Although the turn to centralism was motivated by a desire to end the disorders of the previous decade, in Michoacán it had the effect of provoking armed opposition from federalist leaders, especially in the southern part of the state. Centralist leaders showed a greater propensity to regulate society than their federalist predecessors did, but in key matters they agreed with their federalist predecessors. Both, for instance, sought to distribute communal lands in individual plots. In fact, in Michoacán the turn to centralism stemmed less from ascension of a new group to power than from the changing opinion of powerful people who had earlier espoused federalism.

Wealth and Power in Provincial Mexico is a difficult book to summarize. The author’s purposes and methodology have led her to create a book that is full of interesting insights about regional history, the changing ways in which families accumulated and tried to preserve fortunes, and the connections between economic change and political conflict. Many of these insights could help illuminate these issues for other Mexican regions. Yet in the end they are thoroughly embedded in regional history, a fact that does not diminish their value but does make it difficult to extract and display them in a brief book.
review. On page 3, Chowning explains how she had hoped that the careful study of a regional elite using local archives would allow her “not only to unearth new data but also to untangle the shifting and unpredictable connections between politics, economics, and ideologies as they came into play in the lives of well-to-do provincial Mexicans”. The work clearly fulfills these goals. The book is a crucial contribution to regional history and an important work for Mexicanists interested in politics and economics in the nineteenth century.

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