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Reseña/Review

Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato, eds. *True Stories of Crime in Modern Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009.

What Historians Can and Cannot Learn from Crime Stories

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Spectacular crimes all: Feuding over a rakish lover, one beautiful prostitute shoots another dead; the Tiger of Santa Julia terrorizes central Mexico for six years; tragedy stalks a mental hospital; a 14-year-old girl murders a congressman to avenge the death of her father; and in the Bajío the 10-year-old son of a prominent landowner is kidnapped and murdered and the father's political rival pays the price. More yet: the Catholic zealot who assassinates Mexico's president-elect in 1928 bears comparison with one of the country's greatest muralists, himself an attempted assassin. Miss Mexico 1928 discovers her husband is a bigamist and pumps him full of lead, and a grizzly infanticide challenges public opinion about motherhood.

None of these crimes are fully explored in *True Stories of Crime in Modern Mexico*. None of them involve long term sleuthing, false leads, mysterious twists and turns, gripping near misses, and ingenious (or sloppy) detective work. The title will mislead those who devour good mystery tales and crave more. No crime noir here. The authors of these essays simply could not find enough documentation to spin out gripping crime capers. Instead, they creatively and intelligently utilize the limited texts surrounding the crimes to analyze and draw penetrating conclusions about the society in which the offenses were committed, publicly scrutinized and punished. Their aims, in most cases, go beyond standard contextualization. Instead, they “examine how crime stories have shaped the way that Mexican society thinks about criminals and about itself.” Co-editors Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato insist that such crimes “are the key to understanding the politicalization of fear...and have profoundly shaped the way historians write about society” (4). These are large claims in my opinion not fully met, but each essay (some more than others) offers approaches, analysis, and conclusions that explore thought provoking, scarcely tread pathways to ponder the role of crime in society. The volume is replete with stimulating insights, some over drawn, others inadequately supported, but many pointing toward new and challenging directions of inquiry.

The editors discuss theories about crime and society, from the inevitable Durkheim who found crime normal, necessary, and a building block in group identity, to more recent contentions by sociologists such as David Garland that crime and punishment shape ways in which people think about justice, law and order, rational and irrational behavior, and in an overall sense, good and evil. But how might historians best approach these roiling, often contradictory and deeply personal notions that may evolve or be molded into general consensus? The answer here: by deconstructing crime narratives that appear in newspapers, posters, graffiti, police reports, trial records, songs, broadsides, paintings, tales, autobiographies “to reveal the logics they impose on public debates” (20). The idea is a good one even if, as in this case, too often enveloped in

academic post-modern verbiage, which obscures more than it clarifies and forces a deconstruction of its own by the reader.

In their essay about the deadly quarrel between two prostitutes over the same faithless lover, Buffington and Piccato deftly guide us through three representations of the engrossing, much discussed crime: first the broadside produced at the time of the murder by the famous engraver José Guadalupe Posada; then, seven years later, analysis by the country's best-known criminologist, Carlos Roumagnac; and finally a renowned novelist's diary entry of his visit to a hospital morgue to view the corpse of the murdered woman. Posada's representation, according to the authors, viewed the murder as melodrama with little attention paid to its political and social implications. The engraver's rendering seems to disappoint the authors, who rectify Posada's shortcoming with a reflection of their own: "It (the broadside) served to explicate social change to its popular audience. The broadside's immediacy likely reflects the greater intensity with which the lower classes experienced that change. It did not, however, suggest remedial action" (37), a conclusion that raised the question, "Through whose lens are these authors working?"

Roumagnac, as did many positivist criminologists of the period, searched for motivation in a criminal's past, and as frequently happens today, found explanation in a disturbed past. In this case, at age thirteen the girl became entangled in a love affair she did not relish and then was recruited for a bordello. The authors relate that Roumagnac seems ambivalent about the murderer's criminality, but conclude that, as a technocrat, he saw her as a danger to orderly society and a drag on the government's program to modernize the country.

The entry in Francisco Gamboa's diary concerning the novelist's visit to the morgue tells much, according to Buffington and Piccato, about upper-class masculine anxieties, the elite's sense of class, and the relationship between sexual activities and criminality. These claims, however, are only lightly explored and hardly substantiated. In their summary remarks for the essay, the authors admit the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities in pursuing textual analysis. Historians, they state, "can only hope to illuminate those inevitable differences" (50). Even if

there is not much new in the assertion that people see, remember, and record the same event in their own personal and private and therefore different ways, it is refreshing to read and ponder, to appreciate and debate, the perspectives of these essayists who so diligently have combed through these remarkable crime stories in search of historical insights.

Through newspaper, police magazines, and broadsheets, Elisa Speckman Guerra trails Jesús Negrete, the infamous “Tiger of Santa Julia,” during his riotous capers in central Mexico, his capture and execution during the first decade of the last century. As might be expected, depending on their political bent, some publications reveled in his escapades, others condemned them. The mainstream press generally saw him as a common criminal, while broadsheets lauded his courage and respect for women and considered him honorable. Speckman asserts that during his criminal career, Negrete was neither a social bandit nor a common criminal; he neither railed against injustices nor robbed or killed for personal gain or enjoyment. Instead, she contends, he felt that earlier in life he had been deprived of legitimate social and economic opportunities and therefore took revenge on a society that excluded him, a conclusion that lacks much evidence and is hardly convincing.

Regardless, the onslaught of revolution, says Speckman, transformed Negrete from a non-descript bandit into a popular hero enhanced by myth-building via movies and other popular entertainments. “Thus Negrete came to signify the Mexican Revolution, which incarnates the innate desire of all men for social justice” (63). Just what the Mexican Revolution “incarnates” is an open question, but that it did or does incorporate the “desire of all men for social justice” is debatable. So much history of Mexico seems to depend upon the Revolution. Events and trends that preceded the fighting are labeled precursors or causes; those that follow become results and effects. Drop out the Revolution and a good many historians would lose their bearings and conclusions. Yet, it occurred and certainly must be considered. None of this refutes Speckman’s contention that the ethos of the Revolution has been used by commercial vendors to create national purveyors of so-called social justice. After all, there is still much delightful controversy over whether Robin Hood lived or

was invented. People, regardless of class, gender, or race celebrate anti-heroes everywhere.

Cristina Rivera-Garza probes the institutional dossier of Marino García, a tinsmith working near the capital, incarcerated as insane in 1919 in Mexico City's General Insane Asylum. Administrators re-evaluated García twelve years later when guards found a cache of iron tools in his room. He was released (it is not known precisely when), then re-incarcerated in 1941 in the same asylum. Rivera-Garza believes the texts in García's file are "not a reflection, a metaphor, or a repository of the real, but one of its incarnations. The text does not stand for, but is (at least one version of the) real. The text *is*. The text does not illuminate its context; the text is pure illumination" (112). This is the purest statement in this book of post-modern reading and understanding of texts. The other authors do not adhere as closely to the line as does Rivera-Garza. A large number of other historians, meanwhile, claim that, in essence, they have long considered and read documentation with cares suggested by post-modernists.

For Rivera-Garza, "The dossier of Marino Garcia provokes awe and confusion. There is no single truth that develops linearly over time, a straight forward journey toward health or toward death" (121). Those writing the reports pile one assessment on top of another; at times they contradict one another. So an authentic version of his life never existed at the asylum. "What does exist is a dossier of paradoxical material that, by its very nature, refuses linear narrative" (121). Still, she insists, the broken, uncertain narrative of García, along with those of others who seem to fail in life or reject mainstream ideas and lifestyles, those whose passage is marked by pain and suffering, can reveal "various ways in which sufferers identify, endure, and unmask the sources of their misfortune" (122). Rivera-Garza believes that suffering endows its victims with dignity, an assertion that is challengeable but is worth attention. In the case of Marino García, who said he spoke with God and took orders only from Him, the author concludes that he knew hope, probably due "to the protection of the masculine and paternalistic divinity he called God" (123). Rivera-Garza could have made that point much more simply. Her subject expressed faith, which itself is a strong form of hope.

In “The Girl who Killed the Senator,” Pablo Piccato studies ways in which public discussion of honor have shaped scientific and judicial views and at times helped a murderer escape punishment. Of course, concepts of honor have been doing this for some time (duels come to mind along with the Texas law which permitted a cuckolded husband to polish off his philandering wife.) This case began in 1922 when two Mexican senators, Francisco Tejada Llorca and Jesús Moreno, bumped into one another in the doorway to the Interior Ministry. A scuffle followed; Tejada Llorca shot Moreno dead but as a senator, the murderer possessed immunity against arrest and prosecution. A few weeks later, Moreno’s daughter, fourteen-year-old María del Pilar, killed her father’s assassin. These events set the capital agog. Comments on the case drifted into politics, and according to Piccato, “provided new meanings of age, gender, privacy, and justice in postrevolutionary times” (133). No doubt the case elicited discussion of many matters—all such events raise ancillary social, cultural, and political issues (for the U.S., one immediately thinks of the still contested cases of the Rosenbergs, Sacco and Vanzetti, Leopold and Loeb, and O. J. Simpson), but whether or not they “provided new meanings” is open to question. “Probed” might be better than “provided,” and requires less proof. Furthermore, the central idea that juries teach audiences “how to codify, in everyday life, diverse ethical and political situations” (143) seems mistaken to me. Juries decide cases, all right, but many doubt they teach us right from wrong. Injustice can echo from jury chambers as loudly as justice.

Piccato skillfully employs the defendant’s memoirs, published during judicial procedures against her, the teen-ager’s dramatic courtroom performance, and the final eloquent defense summation to the jury by her famous, artful attorney (she was acquitted) to highlight changing morals and ethics in post-revolutionary Mexico. But all of these narratives were deliberately orchestrated and highly biased in favor of the defendant, and would therefore seem tainted as arbiters of change. Still, the author’s conclusions remain provocative and noteworthy, if at times stretched too thinly (for my taste). Superficially, the case concerned a woman’s right to defend her honor and justice, he notes, but as revealed by the narratives,

feminine roles remained guided by masculine morals. Not much change there.

Christopher Boyer's contribution concerning the kidnapping and murder in 1923 of the ten-year-old son of a prominent Michoacán landowner is the most "traditional" of the essays in this volume, which by no means detracts from its merits. It is the only "Who done it?" of the group, and settles upon a careful consideration of political enmities in the state where rancheros and conservative politicians had recently driven the left wing, anticlerical firebrand governor from office. The reactionaries fingered a radical activist, Ramón Ascensio and his cohorts as the criminals. Boyer warns not to condemn Ascensio too quickly; he finds evidence against him highly circumstantial. The case, however, escalated from Catholic complaints about anticlericalism to mass demonstrations demanding religious freedom, and then to a militant defense of family, community, and nation.

Michoacán, notably in the environs of Zamora, had long been a bastion of Catholic nationalism. Most people there saw private property, patriarchal family honor, and the prevailing class structure as God's will. They abhorred the Revolution's aims for land and social reform, especially the call to class struggle and insistence on a secular state. They bristled when the revolutionary leadership named one of its more radical generals, Francisco Múgica, governor of the state. The governor had little political support in Michoacán, only a handful of peasants, a few leftist politicians and journalists, along with a smattering of teachers and shopkeepers, among them a grocer, Ramón Ascensio, loosely linked together in the Agrarian Party. When in January, 1923, the federal government expelled the Pope's delegate to Mexico, Catholics in Zamora organized massive, belligerent protest movements. Two weeks later the lad's mutilated body was found in a nearby river and authorities charged Ascensio with his abduction and murder. A judge soon sentenced him and two henchmen to death. They were still in jail in early 1924, when armed forces rebelling against the federal government over the presidential succession hauled the prisoners from their cells and shot them. They then hanged the corpses from trees lining a roadway to the town. The scene displayed exemplary

punishment *par excellence*, delivered with approval of local authorities. Three years later, the region became engulfed in unfettered Cristero upheaval, among the most vengeful and violent in all Mexico. The crime unraveled by Boyer foreshadowed the deluge to come.

In comparing the parallels and intersections in the lives and thought of José de León Toral, who in 1928 assassinated president-elect Alvaro Obregón, and the internationally acclaimed muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, who shortly thereafter attempted to murder the exiled Soviet, Leon Trotsky, Renato González Mello relies on a variety of standard texts but most interestingly on the drawings and paintings of the criminals. Both studied under the same teacher at the National School for the Arts, both were sports enthusiasts, and both obviously believed in political violence as a means to right wrongs—Toral to end persecutions of the Catholic Church and Siqueiros to avenge what he saw as betrayal of the Trotskyites in Catalonia. And in custody, they each (not surprisingly) painted and drew images of imprisonment and pain.

The author puts written evidence for her analysis to good use. He utilized transcripts from Toral's trial as well as his mother's memoirs. For Siqueiros he probed interviews conducted and later published by a journalist during the painter's imprisonment during the 1960s. There were, naturally, many differences between the motives and actions of the Catholic zealot and the militant Communist, but González Mello is interested in teasing out the "commonalities in both men's construction of their own biographical narratives and their individual 'truths.'" (182). The result is an admirable academic exercise laced with erudite insights, but to what degree the lives of the protagonists intersect as well as the essay's contribution to historical knowledge are problematic and, at any rate, ambiguous.

In his artwork, Toral, according to the author, identified with Jesus, the suffering Christ. "Siqueiros also painted an idealized, even religious figure: the tortured prisoner who represented the working classes, or the *Ecce Homo* he painted in jail." (209). But Toral saw himself driven by divine intervention, Siqueiros by the forces of history. And González Mello concludes that while consistency marked Toral's art and pronouncements, no such consistency characterized Siqueiros' work. So in the essay at large,

the comparisons lose cohesion and weaken any argument. Perhaps any study of personalities, their actions and motivations, is bound to do the same. After all, researchers can tease similarities and oppositions between, as well as contradictions within, any human relationships.

The beauty queen as murderess is a marvelous tale well told by Victor Macías-González. The queen, María Teresa de Landa, the well-educated daughter of a privileged family, a feisty if not an aggressive feminist, learned in August, 1929 that her recently married husband, a handsome, young army general, was a bigamist. So she shot him dead. A jury acquitted her on grounds that she was defending her honor, the most common defense in these matters. Honor, yes. Also reputation, maybe. Or possibly because she was pissed off and discombobulated because the man she loved had betrayed her.

According to the author, beauty pageants—the contestants, sponsors, organizers, and audiences—embody certain values of society and encourage public assessment of those values. In this case, he concludes that the various narratives produced by the crime reflect both changes in post-revolutionary Mexican society and the persistence of traditional practices and ideals. While de Landa in her lifestyle portrayed attributes of the so-called “modern woman” challenging the restraints of machismo, she also represented traditional race and class stances that remained dear to Mexican elites. In her judicial defense, de Landa played the role of a powerless, remorseful woman, but Macías-González sees that as a crafted ploy to gain her freedom. In fact, the beauty queen’s “refusal to adhere to patriarchal notions of female propriety—wifely devotion and unquestioning submission—parallels the numerous challenges religious, agrarian, and labor groups posted to the revolutionary regime in the 1920s” (240). Not much substance or rigor in that conclusion.

Beauty pageants are so fixed and phony, so commercial and vapid, it is difficult to determine whose values they represent. Not mine, for sure. Generalizations on this score certainly would be hazardous. That they stimulate public debate about gender, propriety, exploitation, even politics and patriotism is beyond doubt. (Post-modernists are going to have a field day with the recent hullabaloo over Miss California.) Nonetheless, even if

the analysis and conclusions of Macías-González seem to me somewhat preconditioned, the questions he asks of his texts are excellent and evocative.

Probing the records of an infanticide case, Katherine Bliss examines Mexico's often contradictory policies in the 1920's and '30s toward motherhood, paternity, family, and science. The crime involved a twenty-three-year-old domestic servant in 1937 on the outskirts of the capital. A judge found her guilty of killing her newborn baby, but calling attention to her poverty, illiteracy, and clean criminal record, he sentenced her to only three years in prison. The judge ruled, "...The accused has no other means of supporting herself but her work, which would be very difficult to keep if she were raising a child" (249).

With only a brief written summation of the case available for textual dissection, Bliss concentrates on three wider areas being promoted by reformers at the time: "The place of fathers within a larger discussion of pregnancy, disease, and infant death; the emphasis on science in prenatal care program, and the early efforts to promote publicly supported birth control clinics" (250). For upper and middle class families, reformers urged husbands to care for their wives during pregnancies and to follow the doctor's instructions, but expressed concerns that lower class husbands, prone to drunkenness and rejecting their wives, made unacceptable father figures. The Eugenics Society admonished adolescent girls, "At any moment you are in danger of being assaulted: on the street, at the movies, in the countryside, at the factory. Make sure your boyfriend is truthful to you, he may be sick [have venereal disease]" (252).

As a pillar of its modernization program, Mexico's leadership aimed to increase the country's "quality" population through improved hygiene and sanitation and sterilization of the "unfit." Health publications warned against superstitions regarding pregnancies. Hospitals, at least in Mexico City, offered maternity services. Discussion of birth control gained a tenuous toehold but left little impression on Catholic belief. In all likelihood the great majority of Mexicans, including the woman convicted of infanticide in 1938, knew nothing of these fledgling matters. With little criminal narrative available to deconstruct, Bliss wisely turned to

contextual matters raised for her research interests. That's about as far as any historian could go with the material at hand.

A couple of afterthoughts concerning the volume at large

First, all the essays examine their subjects in light of a tumultuous Mexico both before and especially after the Revolution. The crimes are largely seen as a product of, or at least in the midst of, national turbulence. Mexico, however, was not the only country undergoing dramatic remodeling. In the wake of World War I many countries were testing the old order. They debated, at times with armed force, conflicting ideals about a new shape for the entire world. Cars and radios were spreading ideas and transforming societies. Feminism and reformism were budding. Artistic innovation was astonishing and confounding. And one wonders how all these early brushes with what is now labeled "globalization" might have influenced Mexican actions and attitudes imbedded in these crime stories. Certain happenings and trends are not confined to the place they occur but spread their influences to distant locations. Historians need to weigh the consequences.

Second, a proposed experiment. It would be extremely instructive to have a group of scholars, such as the historians in this volume, to deconstruct the same crime narrative (or any such narrative) from their own trained and personal point of view. Each would ask his or her questions of the same narrative. Each would contextualize it in his or her own manner. It would be fascinating and noteworthy to watch the "Rashomon effect" take place. Different historians looking at the same document, the same evidence, in their own preferred but different ways. Such a project has been talked about; now let's do it.