

Spain to New Spain were classified as *pobladores*, and some of them likewise became *encomenderos*.

As historians increasingly look beyond studies of high-profile conquistadors, viceroys, and bishops in the early history of colonial Mexico, our understanding of the social and economic conditions in the colony is greatly enhanced by such works as this painstaking and thorough study. For example, the author has traced the origins of *encomenderos* to their native provinces in Spain, he has demonstrated that social standing affected the assignment of *encomiendas*, and he has presented statistical data on how first conquerors, subsequent conquerors, and post-conquest settlers fared. *Encomienda* retention by the heirs of the original grantees, as opposed to grants that escheated to the crown, is another important theme, as well as the status of female holders (*encomenderas*).

The changing status of *encomienda* as reflected in Spanish laws drafted from 1521 to 1549 is far too complicated to address in a review of this nature, but the author is "on top of his game" throughout. The University of Texas Press deserves accolades for publishing and republishing a specialized study of limited market appeal that will assuredly take its place along such standard works as those of Silvio Zavala, Lesley Byrd Simpson, and Charles Gibson. Finally, two-thirds of the volume under review contains *encomendero/encomendera* biographies, making this book an indispensable reference for historians.

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***Bordering on Chaos: Guerrillas, Stockbrokers, Politicians and Mexico's Road to Prosperity* by Andres Oppenheimer. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996; 367 pp. \$24.95 hardback.**

Contemporary events in Mexico seem to resemble telenovelas, those Spanish-language soap operas full of unlikely, incestuous plots of intrigue, sex and violence. In Mexico's case, the truth surpasses the art.

If only the absurd were not real, we could laugh off stories like the one about Raul Salinas, the brother of the now-exiled former president of Mexico Carlos Salinas. While Carlos is weathering cold Irish winters, Raul is festering in jail, charged with corruption to the tune of \$300 million as well as with the murder of his brother-in-law, who was the number-two man in the PRI, the party that has ruled Mexico for nigh on seventy uninterrupted years. Recently, a body was planted on Raul's property. It was thought to be that of a Congressman who was implicated in the murder and who later disappeared. Now, it turns out to be a part of a hoax created by Raul's ex-mistress and a psychic. They planted the body of the psychic's son-in-law's father on the property.

It should be obvious from the above description that “truth” is a mercurial creature in Mexico. Andres Oppenheimer, the *Miami Herald’s* senior correspondent for Latin America and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for his coverage of the Iran-Contra affair, has a gift for telling a version of the truth, for bringing life and context to the events about which we heard in the news—the Zapatista uprising of January 1994, the Mexican peso crash of December 1994, assassinations of politicians and priests.

That gift enables him to start unraveling the confusing tapestry in Mexico in his book *Bordering on Chaos*. Oppenheimer’s access to the principal characters helps immeasurably, as the author is quick to tout in the mid-book photo album—the author with Subcomandante Marcos, the author with President Zedillo, with slain presidential candidate Colosio and so on.

Finding the truth is no easy task in a country where a culture of deceit is a means of survival. As celebrated Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote of his people, “We lie out of pleasure and fantasy, just like all imaginative people, but also to hide and protect ourselves from strangers” (272). Oppenheimer’s contribution to this understanding was an amusing anecdote about the Coke slogan in Mexico. Whereas we remember “Coke: It’s the Real Thing,” the translation in Spanish became “Esta es la verdad” or “This is the truth.”

But it didn’t work. Several focus groups assembled in Mexico City to test the slogan’s acceptance reacted coldly to it.

“We found the truth had a negative connotation in Mexico,” I was told by Jorge Mattlois . . . who conducted focus groups for Coca Cola “People’s reaction was, if it’s the truth, it must be bad.” Coca-Cola’s Mexico division soon changed its slogan to “La chispa de vida”—“The spark of life.” (270)

Where Oppenheimer conveys a certain cockiness that his version is as close to “the truth” as we’ll get, reviewer Sarah Kerr in the *New York Times Book Review* was most curious about the fantastic stories Oppenheimer couldn’t explain—like the mysterious proletarian roots of Mexico’s current president Ernesto Zedillo, which come across as something akin to Luke Skywalker’s quest for his parentage and English Prime Minister John Major’s own reluctance to talk about his humble beginnings.

While some are swept up by the continued mysteries, I was pleased to develop a context for and connections between the events of the past few years. The truth is provisional, and we have to go on the best evidence to date. I’m not so worried about who killed Colosio and some of the other figures in Mexico as I am about understanding the breakdown in elite civility which created the context for such violence.

Though Mexico has always been a dangerous place, Oppenheimer makes plain that the recent cases of elite killings are a product of the

disintegration of the PRI's ability to contain internecine conflicts. Discovering the "truth" is not as important as understanding the climate of opinion amongst the Mexican people that their government is hiding something in each of these cases.

Oppenheimer's re-creation of events past, in the tradition of great journalists, makes you feel as if you were there, that fly on the wall. In particular, I am impressed by how Oppenheimer could know and write so well about a famous banquet in which each of the thirty wealthiest Mexicans pledged 25 million for the PRI's reelection campaign. The proposal for such an obscene amount of money came from Roberto Hernandez, a banker and friend of Carlos Salinas. Here, Oppenheimer recounts Hernandez's pledge:

"Mr. President, I commit myself to making my best effort to collect twenty-five million," Hernandez said.

There was an awkward silence in the room.

"Mexican pesos or dollars?" one of the billionaire guests asked.

"Dollars," responded Hernandez and Borrego, almost in chorus.

Twenty-five million dollars each?! There were hmms and shhs around the table. (86)

You almost feel like one of the aggrieved billionaires being hit up for money.

After reading other books about recent Mexican history, namely Jorge Castaneda's *The Mexican Shock*, I'm left feeling that perhaps Oppenheimer could have said more about the failure of the PRD, Mexico's left-leaning political party, which finished third in the 1994 elections in contrast to those of 1988 when it was widely believed the PRD leader, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, had won the presidency but for last-minute PRI ballot-stuffing.

Despite this gripe, I'm still awed by the other sections that I haven't yet mentioned, for example the section in which naive American investors were sucked into believing in the dependability of the Mexican economy, the section about the unmasking of Subcomandante Marcos and his unplanned emergence as the spokesperson of the Zapatistas when they burst onto the world scene, and the section about the positive influence of Northern Mexico with reform-minded cities like Monterrey, where American norms of plain-dealing have spread.

Oppenheimer's book is an easy teaser, a quick read that leaves as many questions unanswered as answered. With a country as complex, cloaked, and confusing as Mexico, that's the way it should be.

PEACE CORPS, SAN JOSE DE POALÓ, ECUADOR

— JOSH BUSBY