Mexico in the Time of Cholera by Donald Fithian Stevens (review)

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***Mexico in the Time of Cholera.* By Donald Fithian Stevens: Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019, p. 328, $34.95**

As Donald Fithian Stevens explains in *Mexico in the Time of Cholera,* he had set out to write a history of cholera in early nineteenth-century Mexico, an unexplored subject, imagining that it would help to comprehend social change and the development of scientific knowledge of the disease. He quickly realized that in seeking to describe "the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary times" (224), he needed to explain what life was like in ordinary times. The result is a new and fresh social history of early republican Mexico which upends many of the staid myths of a society weighted down by the Catholic Church and political chaos.

To explain what life was like in ordinary times, Don Stevens provides us with a tour de force analysis of parish archives, mainly in Mexico City, Puebla, San Luis Potosi, and Oaxaca, in which he explores births, baptisms and the naming of new-borns, the use of titles and honorifics, love relationships, marriages, deaths, burials, and cemeteries. We meet priests who register infants as of "unknown parentage," colluding with relatives to shelter unwed mothers of "decent" families. We sympathize with the struggle of the church and viceregal hierarchy through various epidemics (1779, 1797 1813, 1830s) in their attempt to move burials from church interiors to the cemetery of San Lázaro outside the city to avoid infection by rotting corpses, only to see church burials resume in the aftermath, demonstrating the limited power of the Church over its parishioners' preferences.

Stevens uses memoirs, novels, and short stories of the period to explore male/female relationships before the epidemic. We meet the young, poor Guillermo Prieto (later a Liberal journalist and politician) falling in love at first sight, pining for his beloved and patiently earning her father's consent. We watch the devout although independent-minded Concha Miramón go confessor-shopping to find a priest whose advice she favors, while deciding whom to marry, finally accepting the dashing conservative General Miramón. Consequently, aside from Chapter 2 ("Birthdays, Patron Saints, and Names for Newborns"), which goes into far too much detail for the book's objectives, the narrative is lively and informative.

But then we begin to see what life was like in extraordinary times, a society increasingly overwhelmed by fear of a disease that could kill in a few hours. The author spares no gruesome details of its symptoms, especially in Chapter 9 ("To Fear the Wrath of Heaven"). Parish burial registers reveal the weighty decisions that people were forced to make under extreme circumstances: to marry or not to marry. Many couples who had been having relations out of wedlock were motivated to marry before they met their maker, while others chose to refrain from sexual relations altogether. Marriages in Mexico City, Puebla, and Oaxaca increased

substantially during the years of cholera, especially among widows. In the nation's capital, doña Dolores Crespo and don Diego Crespo were quickly married while the doña was in bed "gravely ill." Under such dire circumstances, priests could marry without preliminaries such as reading of the banns. Sadly, the unfortunate doña died the next day (152-153) but now a married woman. In Puebla and Mexico City, authorities decreed that bodies could not be buried before twenty-four hours, because it was difficult to tell the moribund from the dead. One man, don Enrique, awoke to find himself in a grave with corpses; "he disentangled himself, climbed out of the grave and walked home" but when he knocked at his door, the servants were too shocked to respond to this "ghost" and hurried to find a priest (185-186). Given that the daily burial rate in San Luis Potosí and Oaxaca was thirty times the normal, societies were rocked by fear and priests debated whether to ring the bells on death or not, fearful of increasing people's dread.

Despite these macabre details, the book is a delight to read. It demonstrates that the Catholic Church was not all-powerful in Mexican society and that life was not as chaotic as historians' penchant for enumerating the number of military coups during this period might indicate. However, the book is not without flaws. Although Stevens' class analysis is convincing, a similar discussion of race would have strengthened the study. Additionally, the last two pages of the Conclusion are somewhat off key. Instead of tying up all the threads he has developed so colorfully on the impact of cholera on society, Stevens concludes with the rise of the republic and its separation of the church and state comparing Mexico to France and Spain. While this is one of his underlying themes, it is a strange note on which to close such an excellent account of the impact of the cholera in early republican Mexico.

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