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doi:10.1017/mdh.2020.25

Donald Fithian Stevens, *Mexico in the Time of Cholera* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), pp. ix + 315, $34.85, paperback, ISBN: 9780826360557.

Readers may be forgiven for judging from its title that *Mexico in the Time of the Cholera* is a medical history. A desire to gauge 'the gradual development of scientific understanding about the connections between disease, poor sanitation, germs, and poverty' (p. 222) during the 1833 cholera epidemic that devastated Mexico may have triggered Donald Stevens' inquiry, but the epidemic remains somewhat marginal to the tales he tells here. Instead, Stevens is centrally concerned in this work with apprehending popular practices of Catholicism in Mexico in the first decades after independence. Essentially, he wants to know 'how Catholic were the Mexican people?' in the period immediately after breaking from Spain and its colonial institutions (p. 224).

Beginning with the 1824 history of the alleged murder of an American shopkeeper reputed to have displayed insufficient piety as a procession of the Holy Host passed by his store, Stevens proceeds through an episodic examination of popular piety. He seeks to assess whether early nineteenth-century Mexicans might best be understood as 'Catholic fanatics' (as Protestant visitors viewed them), or as impious, indecent, and obscene, as domestic Catholic Church officials suggested (p. 17). To examine this question, Stevens leads readers through an engaging treatment of such popular practices as the adoption of patron saints and naming customs (Chapter Two), the recording of parentage in church registers (Chapter Three), courtship and marital preferences for men and women (Chapters Four to Seven), burial traditions and innovations (Chapter Eight), and knowledge about the cause and spread of cholera, as well as popular reactions to the disease (Chapter Nine). In many chapters, he draws comparative conclusions about patterns in the ecclesiastical records documenting birth, marriage, and death in the central parishes of four cities – Mexico, Oaxaca, Puebla, and San Luis Potosí – that populate his study.

Stevens brings both thoughtfulness and playfulness to his interpretations. Studying the question of why elite families sometimes gave their children a dozen or more personal names, he deduces that such practices did not necessarily represent 'religious fervour', but instead, might reflect 'a family's extended social network and material connections' (p. 40). Given that so many parties were involved in a child's christening (the midwife, the *padrino*, the *comadre*, the grandparents among them) aside from her parents, the acquisition of names became a symbolic reward in exchange for the material or social benefits expected of the name provider. When puzzling why one family had christened its tiny son with no fewer than five individual saints named Francis, Stevens comments that 'rather than indicating a baroque exuberance for saints named Francisco, this list may only indicate uncertainty or confusion about which Saint Francis the child should identity with and celebrate' (p. 41).

In each chapter, Stevens draws concrete and persuasive conclusions about popular expressions of Catholicism. He infers that clerics in the cities of San Luis Potosí and Puebla more scrupulously pressured midwives and godparents to reveal the parents' names of illegitimate children they baptised. These officials were also able to 'persuade a higher proportion of sexually active parishioners to marry, and to marry at a younger age, than their contemporaries in other parishes' (p. 204). In contrast, in both Mexico City and Oaxaca, higher numbers of couples either delayed marriage or never married at all. Stevens also provides a detailed portrait of marital choices and the reasons behind them. Despite the augmentation in this era of the idea of egalitarian and more emotionally fulfilling marriages

https://doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2020.25 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(p. 148), both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that parental influences on spouse selection remained intense after independence, and for parents, financial security seems to have trumped all other considerations (p. 149).

Stevens' engaging chapters on courting and marital choice, drawn heavily from published memoirs by both men and women, present lively portraits of the emotional dramas and status-conscious calculations of fringe members of the upper class teetering on the brink of financial chaos. These sections read like chapters from a Jane Austen novel, replete with details at times hilarious, at times devastating. Decades before he became a liberal statesman, Guillermo Prieto was a struggling writer and clerk forced to adopt various tactics to render his appearance more respectable when he went courting his prospective wife, the daughter of a relatively wealthy bakery owner. Among other stratagems, Prieto purchased a 'sham shirt' consisting of a linen shirtfront and collar that he kept clean by storing it inside his hat when travelling through Mexico City's streets, attaching it to his coat on his paramour's doorstep. While the family of Prieto's fiancée accepted the ruse, when discovered, with good humour, other subjects' navigations of the public display of honour and status hint at graver possible outcomes. María de la Concepcíon Lombardo had to flee twice to the convent during her months' long, and eventually ill-fated, courtship with Englishman Edward Perry in order to protect her reputation, and with it her future financial well-being.

With this work, Stevens joins Matthew O'Hara (*A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749–1857*),[1] a work curiously absent from Stevens' discussion, in contributing fine-grained attention to the social history of Mexico's early republic that previous scholars have provided for the colonial period, the Porfiriato and the Revolutionary era but have neglected for this period. While O'Hara argued for the continuity of colonial religious identities and spiritual practices after independence, Stevens is more hesitant to force his evidence into one overarching conclusion. 'In the end,' he concludes, 'there is no simple answer to the question of how seriously the Mexican people took their religion' (p. 216). Stevens is too careful an observer of the past to be comfortable with a blanket conclusion. However, both the data he has mined and his own reflections on his subjects suggest to this reader that Mexicans both remained devoted Catholics at the dawn of the secularising nineteenth-century, and that a powerful pragmatism often shaped their piety. Such a conclusion is illustrated in various passages throughout this delightful book, including in Stevens' observation of the dramatic increase in cases of unmarried couples whom fear of death in the 1833 cholera epidemic prompted into the hasty formalisation their unions.

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[1] Matthew O'Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749–1857* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

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