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Review/Reseña

Rachel A. Moore. *Forty Miles from the Sea: Xalapa, the Public Sphere, and the Atlantic World in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011.

Nineteenth-Century Xalapa

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If you came to Mexico at almost any time after the death of good King Charles III yet before Don Porfirio Díaz's untimely departure in 1911, chances are you passed through a lovely mountain city known as Xalapa, spelled with an "x," but pronounced with an "h," like the eponymous chile that livens the region's cuisine. Today the capital of Veracruz state, Xalapa and its early national history feature in Rachel Moore's new *Forty Miles from the Sea*. This book focuses on the city's place as *entrepot* and

communications hub, and also reaches outward to shed light on Orizaba, which dominated an alternative coastal-capital route passing to the south.

Following studies for the Appalachian region, Moore argues that we extend the concept of an Atlantic world into the interior—in this case, about forty miles. Travelers seldom dallied in the port of Veracruz, owing to that nineteenth-century city's legendary propensity for yellow fever and typhus. This collective decision made Xalapa the real filter for those passing to and from the Mexican republic. Here the tropical palm-lined coastal plain gives way to cooler temperatures and beautiful hardwood forests (even today, the abrupt change is striking); the plague of mosquitoes abate, and a man can relax on his patio while sipping rich local coffee and taking in the mountains that loom in the background. Xalapa inns became frontline newsrooms, and its stores became provisioning centers for those individuals intent on long journeys and extended residences. In a less flattering light, they were also gossip factories where rumors flowed like spring wine. But life here was anything but simple. City residents, known then and now as *xalapeños*, inhabited a cultural world considerably different from that of the *jarochos*, or Veracruzian agriculturalists, who were the base of support for so many of native son Antonio López de Santa Anna's political and military campaigns. They saw themselves as an urban intelligentsia separate from either the country bumpkins or the neo-colonial monopolists of Mexico City. Such inclinations naturally made them die-hard federalists, partisans of that early national persuasion that taught that provinces should best govern themselves. Santa Anna himself detested Xalapa's conspiratorial political lodges and urban comfort; to his mind, both factors qualified *xalapeños* as cash cows, and his repeated soakings and gradual shift toward centralism made him the city's averred enemy, a man from whom prominent elites hid not only their daughters but also their treasuries.

Too few Mexican communities have serious histories all their own. The theme enjoys perennial vogue among amateur historians in Mexico, perhaps because community still provides the focal point for those living within it, the state or nation being too large or far away to hear us, or we it. San José de Gracia, in Michoacán, comes to mind; we also think of some of

those rich anthropologies of often-studied places like Chan Kom (Yucatán) and Tepoztlán (Morelos), where a participant-observer lurked notepad in hand behind every ceremony and daily folkway. But serious histories, studies that have scholarly depth and cover a long stretch of time... those are a different matter. Admittedly, *Forty Miles from the Coast* is not exactly the *longue durée* preached by practitioners of the *annal* school of history. It mostly covers the late Bourbon period (here 1795) to the end of the French intervention in 1867.

The book draws principally from archival collections and travelers' accounts. The former include Mexico's National Archives, Spain's Archivo de Indias, and municipal archives from the troika of Xalapa, Veracruz, and Orizaba. Passport collections provide useful tips on who came here and whither they roamed. Indeed, many travelers passed through this mountain city on their way to somewhere else; their number includes such luminaries as Alexander von Humboldt, Joel Poinsett, and Carl Sartorius, but also a host of lesser-knowns who also toured. One factor that registered all too clearly in traveler consciousness was the omnipresent threat of bandits, and that threat does not abate over the course of the book. Moore also makes good use of the tireless observer Karl Heller, an Austrian botanist who spent considerable time in the region. Having traveled some time myself with Mr. Heller's writings, I could only share Moore's enthusiasm for his reports on Veracruz life in the days of Santa Anna. His comments on everything from plants to awful roads find their natural home in *Forty Miles*. She errs, however, in stating that he reported back to his patrons, Austria's Royal Botanical Society, on his "romantic conquests" (19): the problem from his point of view was that he didn't have any, and that was major part of the reason that he felt so alone during his two years in Mexico (1845-1847). Beyond that minor detail, however, the persevering botanist's observations turn up everywhere throughout the text, and to good effect.

Moore plies two conceptual lines, those being the Atlantic world and the public sphere. The former posits a range of ties exceeding previous such as the Caribbean, New England, New Spain, or colonial Central America. The latter focuses on a world where individuals, usually of the bourgeois sort, forsake comfortable private pursuits in favor of contentious

social causes. Both of these terms currently enjoy great popularity because they have opened new ways of looking at familiar histories, but as a result of that popularity, both incur the risk that threatens all interpretive concepts: that is, of becoming so vast and inclusive as to be functionally empty (remember the way “resistance” perished by overwork a few years back). To be honest, there is a little bit of that here. Almost anything becomes Atlantic world if you put the adjective “Atlantic” before enough nouns. But since *Forty Miles* doesn’t wander too far beyond the Xalapa-Orizaba region, that world tends to remain an abstraction of unseen people and places far beyond the sea. Moore’s treatment of the public sphere, popularized by Jurgens Habermas, fares considerably better. Xalapeños emerge as real people engaged in debate over the future of their city and their nation. Among their various plans for fostering an informed citizenry came in the form of reading rooms, places where ordinary individuals could go (normally somewhere in a government office) to read the official bulletin and the affairs of the day. Curiously short hours (forty-five minutes per day, originally), plus the unwelcome scrutiny of government employees, led most concerned xalapeños to do their reading in a café or tavern; still, the initiative does reveal a growing concern for an active, literate electorate.

Among the projects dearest to xalapeños was the creation of a postal service. Moore argues that the issue of reliable postal service became all the more important as the Liberal reforms of the mid-1850s eliminated the pulpit as a source of information. In fact, *Forty Miles* may be the only book I know to build on the collections of Mexico’s postal service, and in that regard, kudos to the author for doing highly original research that reminds us of how early national Mexicans made serious and often successful efforts toward creating a better society. However, the push for a postal service, together with the Orizaba railroad story, raises another issue. Moore’s work would profit from having a critical moment or narrative peak to which all the material builds. I don’t quite see that here.

Still, there is much to savor. Comic relief comes when Moore reconstructs the brief but highly amorous political exile of Puebla poet Manuel Flores, who lived and loved among the Xalapeños in 1865-1867. He spent his time juggling sweethearts—Manuela or Mariana? Mariana or

Manuela?—while these same women were often escorted in public, as Moore wryly observes, “by their largely oblivious husbands” (138). Among the appreciated contributions of this book is Moore’s telling of how Mexico’s first railroad came to be. We all know the photographs of those nineteenth-century trains, with their billowing smokestacks and overworked cow-catchers, and we associate them with don Porfirio and his sweetheart concessions to U.S. construction tycoons. But the first line actually came through the efforts of Manuel Escandón, who saw to it that his Veracruz to Mexico City line passed not through Xalapa, but through rival Orizaba as part of an effort to link that latter city’s tobacco and cotton products to the capital market. But contrary to promoters’ optimistic predictions, the new railroad line failed to generate a network of better supporting roads, and travel through the northern Xalapa route remained much as it had always been. Finally, the whole book is kept alive by a graceful, engaging writing style that lends a sense of immediacy to xalapeño life.

In one of his most famous poems, Alfred Lord Tennyson mused that if he could understand the flower in the crannied wall, he could understand what all life is. Something like that applies to the best of community studies. Xalapa was simultaneously a colossus among its surrounding farms and hamlets, and yet a tiny and claustrophobic fishbowl in terms of the great powers that beyond the sea and over the mountains. The more we understand that strange dual role, the more we will understand the world that early Mexican nationals forged for themselves in the workshops of cities like Xalapa and Orizaba, points of transit through which passed people, products, rumors, and railroads en route to the forging of a new nation.