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Review/Reseña

Alma Reed, *Peregrina: Love & Death in Mexico*, Intro. Michael K. Schuessler, Forward Elena Poniatowska. Austin: University of Texas, 2007.

Progressive Pilgrim: Alma Reed and Felipe Carrillo Puerto's Revolutionary Yucatan

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The romance of San Francisco journalist Alma Reed and Felipe Carrillo Puerto, revolutionary governor of Yucatán, ended abruptly only a few months after the two became engaged. Federal troops seconding the delahuertista coup assassinated Carrillo Puerto in the early morning of January 3, 1924. Their love has long remained a fascinating footnote in Carrillo Puerto's life. Reed herself has been the subject of one biography (*Passionate Pilgrim*) and much erroneous speculation (that she was Jack Reed's sister). She inspired the song "Peregrina," which Carrillo Puerto had written to serenade her, and two forgettable Spanish-language films

(including the film *Peregrina* in 1987). I suspect I am not the only student of Yucatecan history who knew so little about Alma Reed.

Reed deserves more than a footnote in both North American and Mexican history. As a crusading journalist for the *New York Times* she helped gain Carrillo Puerto acceptance in the U.S.—this at a time when far too many gringos thought the Yucatecan leader was a Bolshevik. Her *New York Times* stories in April 1923 helped convince a reluctant U.S. to recognize President Alvaro Obregón's administration. Her reporting even won William Randolph Hearst over to her pro-recognition point of view (272-275). In fact, she ranks among the key Yankee intellectuals and artists who helped popularize Mexican art and culture in the U.S. Beginning with her *Times* articles, she raised awareness in the north of the glories of the Maya past being unearthed. Years after Carrillo Puerto's death, she introduced José Clemente Orozco to U.S. artistic circles. She went on to make important contributions to Old World classical archaeology, and eventually became the subject of a thick FBI file for ties to then-populist George Wallace's campaign.

After spending decades away from the country she so loved, she returned to Mexico City in the 1950s. By now, the hero cult of Carrillo Puerto was waning, and Mexico and things revolutionary were out of fashion in the U.S. In something of a curtain call, the Mexican government granted her the Order of the Aztec Eagle in 1961. At about this time she finally returned to work on her long-unfinished biography of Carrillo Puerto, a project that she originally planned to complete with him after their marriage. Tragically, just as she was finishing her book, she was diagnosed with advanced intestinal cancer. Fittingly, she died on the Day of the Revolution (November 20) 1966, and was eventually buried not far from her great love's final resting place. Today, you can visit the small, elegant marker to Alma just across a small path from Felipe Carrillo Puerto's tomb in the Socialist Rotunda in Mérida.

Thanks to Michael Schuessler's remarkable persistence in tracking her manuscript down—itsself a worthy subject for a book—we can now read Alma Reed's story of Carrillo Puerto's life and their love. Like other historians of Yucatán, I was vaguely aware of this legendary book. I had

read scattered references to Reed manuscript, the earliest dating back to 1936. But I had assumed it would never be published. Schuessler located not one but two nearly-completed manuscripts, as well as love letters from Felipe Carrillo Puerto in the 1990s. Ironically one draft, left in the hands of writer and producer Budd Schulbert, had been trapped in an apartment condemned after the 1985 earthquake. He also turned up another, slightly less complete version, as well as almost 500 photos given by Alma to her friend Rosa Lie Johansson. Schuessler completed preparation of the manuscript's final few chapters, making minimal editorial changes.

He introduces Alma's story with a biography of Reed. A short, moving forward by Elena Poniatowska reminds us of Reed's central place in U.S.-Mexican relations during the crucial decade of the 1920s. Both, as well as Reed herself, discuss how this daughter of a privileged California family became a true pilgrim of the Mexican Revolution. Reed seems to have been seeking a transcendental experience since her early years. Her father motivated her from a young age to devote herself to "uplift" and social betterment. While still in pigtails, she made speeches for progressive causes: racial equality, independence for Ireland and Indian, abolition of the death penalty, and women's suffrage. She was nicknamed the "Girl Campaigner" (279). For her, journalism was an extension of social work. Thanks to Schuessler's deft editorial hand, we also see Reed in the many photos that enliven the text, reminding us of Reed's flair for fashion and fascination with archaeology.

Reed's story focuses on the love with Felipe. Alma's perspective, and Felipe's letters to her (typed with Socialist red ink, no less) provide as complete a story as we are likely to ever hear of their romance. I had always had my doubts about his intentions—Felipe Carrillo Puerto had been separated from his wife for almost three years, and reportedly had at least one mistress in Mexico City and another in Mérida when he met Alma. Some blamed his intoxication with Alma for his seemingly irrational decision to try to flee rebellious *federales* in December of 1923 rather than heading for the wilds of Quintana to fight a guerrilla war. Alma's account seemingly demonstrates that they were indeed to wed, on January 14th, 1924 in her San Francisco. Reed's book captures the affair—never

physically consummated—in all its intensity. Both were coming off disastrous first marriages, but felt they had finally found their soul-mate in the other. Their mutual attraction was not just physical. She was taken by his charisma, but also his politics. From different worlds, they shared an undogmatic humanist Socialism. Felipe's rejection of the "iron trap" that held the poor down mirrored her own heartfelt conviction that capitalism exploited globally (112). What Felipe achieved politically in Yucatán, she wanted to achieve through journalism and activism.

Alma and Felipe, then, were a perfectly matched pair of secular pilgrims—Carrillo Puerto embodied her own post-Catholic spiritual longings, and she makes no secret of the fact that she idolized him as the apex of humanity. Her view of him bordered on idolization: Felipe was "a synthesis of all the noble causes that had enlisted my own adherence and feeble personal efforts—prison reform, sane marriage and divorce laws, [women's] suffrage, economic justice, art encouragement, birth control, rationalistic education"(119). Of his hardscrabble youth she writes "[l]ike every square inch of canvas in the masterpiece of some immortal painter, every day of the wearisome period could be assigned in its indispensable functioning in the total period of his maturity"(169). This, of course, made it hard for her to see any flaws in him, making her discussion of history problematic at points.

As students of the Mexican Revolution know, Yucatán ranks as perhaps the most radical of the regional "revolutionary laboratories" of the Obregón presidency. In spite of how much has been written about Carrillo Puerto's Yucatan—above all Gilbert Joseph's classic study *Revolution from Without*—her eyewitness accounts provide important details of Carrillo Puerto's regime. More importantly, Reed's interviews with Carrillo Puerto, as well as excerpts from his love letters to her discussing his administration, illuminate his political philosophy. Because Carrillo Puerto was a man not really given to writing about his ideas, parts of *Peregrina* serves as a very little red book of Carrillismo.

Reed also gives us important insights into his childhood glossed over in other biographers, compiled mainly by male collaborators and

family members.¹ Although he did not divulge much to Reed about his early years, other family members did, above all Carrillo Puerto's sister Elvia—a leading Mexican feminist—and his mother, a formidable woman. She made one trip back after Carrillo Puerto's death to gather more information on his life, spending even more time with his mother. The result is a “throwback” chapter (69), and it is a real gem. In particular, we find out much about his early intellectual development. As a youth he devoured Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and even (apparently) read Plato's republic. A second epiphany reportedly came as a young man, when he witnessed the humiliating punishment of a young Maya woman on a henequen plantation in eastern Yucatan. He was traumatized by the sight of her being forced to run a gauntlet of peons naked.

In terms of Carrillo Puerto's ideology, *Peregrina* also tells us much more about his *indigenismo*. Carrillo Puerto went farther than any other comparable Mexican leader in advancing the idea that the Revolution had a special obligation to uplift indigenous people. In conversations and correspondence with Reed, Carrillo Puerto developed his discourse of *indigenismo* with a distinctively Maya edge. When it comes to his relationship with the Maya, Reed's reverence for Carrillo Puerto often borders on literal deification. The Maya, according to her, all but worshiped him. In a ceremony in the town of Suma, for instance, she writes “the bronzed faces turned towards their benefactor with expression in which gratitude and a certain religious veneration were mingled” (151). Felipe spoke to her glowingly of their smiles and gleam in their “tranquil, patient eyes” (151). She said his attitude towards all, not just the Maya, was a kind of “gentle paternalism” (108). So Carrillo Puerto always called indigenous Yucatecans by the diminutive “Inditos” or “pobrecitos” (111).

What sets Carrillo Puerto apart from other indigenistas is that although he was zealously devoted to reviving the Maya past, Carrillo

¹ Edmundo Bolio Ontevereiros, *De la Cuña al Parredon: Anecdótico Historico de la vida, muerte y gloria de Felipe Carrillo Puerto* (Mérida: Basso/Talleres de la Compañía Periodística del Sureste, n.p.); Acrelio Carrillo Puerto, *La familia Carrillo Puerto de Motul, con la Revolución Mexicana* (Mérida: n.p. 1959) and Acrelio Carrillo Puerto, *Lo que no se olvida: El Caso Arjonilla, Anécdotas, Felipe Carrillo Puerto: sus Relaciones con Emiliano Zapata, Algunas de sus Leyes* (Mérida: 1964).

Puerto knew and appreciated indigenous culture in the present. He hoped that Reed would “find the living Maya and their progress as deserving of your study as their ancient monuments” (109). This challenged the typical revolutionary-era indigenismo that is most comfortable with the Indian in a remote, abstract, romanticized past. Inspired by his example—and much to her credit—Reed did something most journalists and historians in the Yucatán never do: she learned a little Maya.

Indeed, there is much for students of revolutionary indigenismo to analyze. In a revealing passage, Carrillo Puerto compared the Maya to a palimpsest, damaged by colonialism and Porfirian exploitation. Only when these disfiguring elements were erased could one reach what Felipe called “the innermost core of essential Maya character, to which alone the creative impulse of the race would against respond” (125). He believed the science of archaeology, the study of Maya language and epigraphy, the nurturing of surviving Maya arts and crafts would all help his Socialist government reach that elusive, essential core of “Mayaness.” It seems to me that in spite of his paternalism and romanticism, Carrillo Puerto came closer than any other revolutionary *indigenista* in balancing respect for indigenous culture with development.

Another aspect of Carrillo Puerto’s ideology merits emphasis. He repeatedly blamed the Church for keeping Indians ignorant and superstitious, in spite of his friendship with Catholics and at least one priest in his youth. For him, the priest’s message helped the landowners keep Indian peons docile (112). Only “defanatización” by carefully trained teachers could free the Maya from the “fear complex” instilled by the Church (117). Here, he anticipated his great protector Plutarco Elías Calles’ so-called Psychological Revolution of the early 1930s. A decade after Carrillo Puerto’s death, Calles renewed the *kulturkampf* with the Church by calling on teachers to carry out defanatización via Socialist Education.

Reed’s account of Carrillo Puerto’s life also has some important (although not consistently credible) revelations about his time with the Zapatistas. Carrillo Puerto told Reed that he served Zapata first in 1912 as a *proveedor* (quartermaster) before becoming part of an agrarian commission. Carrillo Puerto’s claim to have attended the failed

constitutional convention at Queretaro in 1914 with Antonio Soto y Gama comes as a revelation—at least for me. Was the fiery anarchosyndicalist something of a mentor? Questions still remain: he claimed his decision to return to Yucatan was due to admiration for Salvador Alvarado who was military governor at the time, and the fact that at the time Zapata's program was "in capable hands"(160). In fact Zapata's revolution was falling apart at this time, and as a Carrancista Alvarado was the enemy of the Zapatistas. Sadly, this inconsistency might well have been resolved by a letter from Zapata brought by Felipe Carrillo Puerto to Yucatan, but it was destroyed in a fire in the family's storage room (163).

We are also reminded again of how radical Carrillo Puerto's feminism was, remarkable even on the left wing of the Revolution. Surely, he could not meet contemporary standards for feminism, but that does not diminish his achievements. He spoke to Alma of women being liberated by his revolution, no longer slaves but *compañeras*. He boasted to Alma that his sister Elvia's Socialist Ligas Femenistas would train women to hold elected office (120). Had Carrillo Puerto not been assassinated, Yucatan might have gone on to have many more than the one town councilperson and three diputadas elected.

The subject of this book is not just love, but death. The assassination of Carrillo Puerto by rebellious *federales* was quickly branded a reactionary plot. As president, Plutarco Elias Calles proclaimed Carrillo Puerto a martyr who gave his life to protect the gains of the revolution, especially land. Reed was not present in Yucatan during the coup, but she followed with horror the unfolding drama in the press. She returned to Yucatan not long after his January 3, 1924, execution and interviewed Carrillo Puerto family members and friends to recreate his last days of Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Little of this is new; the biographies of Carrillo Puerto mention much of this material. But Reed cites the revelations of Howard S. Phillips, an English reporter for a U.S. paper, that the Royal Dutch Shell oil company working through Rodolfo Montes funded the uprising because President Alvaro Obregón had favored the U.S. Standard Oil over them. This intriguing connection needs more substantiation, but it would explain why the military leaders of the coup in Yucatan were so eager

to execute Carrillo Puerto. They needed to rapidly protect the arms route their arms from Belize to Veracruz, where key *delahuertista* General Guadalupe Sánchez was based. Yucatán was astride this strategic corridor, and it had to be opened at all costs.

Reed also repeats the charge that the Yucatecan henequen oligarchy and Church backed the coup to protect its land and privileges, but provides no evidence for a Church connection. In terms of the great oligarchical families, she cites Rodolfo Montes as a key nexus. I have never run across that person in my research, but the Montes family was linked by marriage to the greatest Porfirian *hacendado* clan, the Molina. Here too, more research is sorely needed.

The death of Felipe Carrillo Puerto left many unanswered questions. What would he have achieved and what would he have done had he lived? Their marriage seems a certainty, but she argues that had he lived he would not have set his sights on the Mexican presidency. Talk of him being presidential timber was not so far-fetched; the famously cold Calles genuinely idolized Carrillo Puerto, pardoned his family's scandals while he was governor, and might well have supported him—had the Army and labor czar Luis Morones gone along. But Reed believes Felipe was intent on retiring from politics entirely, devoting himself to helping the world's poor gain dignity and modernize. When U.S. journalist Selden Rodman interviewed Alma in the late 1950s, she said that she and Felipe were to have honeymooned in Switzerland, then Felipe Carrillo Puerto planned to spend several years there educating himself for what Alma called "the international regeneration of the backward races of the world."² Perhaps at this moment, Felipe indeed did plan on this. But had he lived, he would have faced the determined onslaught of his enemies in regional politics. Felipe Carrillo Puerto apparently planned to install brother Benjamín (who died with him) as governor in the 1925 election. He would have needed Felipe's help to win and to stay in office. Already, Carrillo Puerto's brothers and son-in-law Javier Erosa had been enmeshed in several scandals, not just corruption but murders too. Could Carrillo Puerto have failed to come

² Selden Rodman, *Mexican Journal: The Conquerors Conquered* (New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1958): 91-92.

to their defense? For these reasons, the idea that Felipe would have simply walked away from politics had he lived remains problematic.

It is not really fair to read and assess this book as a typical academic biography. Alma Reed's relationship with Carrillo Puerto gave her unparalleled access to his inner thoughts, but such access—not to mention her status as Carrillo Puerto's intended future spouse—obviously shape her view of him and his politics. In Alma's own preface to *Peregrina*, she writes of her "moral obligation to history" that comes with "shar[ing] the hopes and aims of a great public leader" (59). And she was quite right that much press coverage of Mexico's Social Revolution and Carrillo Puerto's regime in particular was hostile and at times biased due to lack of understanding or bribery (70). But while venomous and at times libelous, critical press also uncovered some serious problems in revolutionary Yucatán: corruption as well electoral violence in which Socialists and their foes were both perpetrators. She is so invested in the noble aspirations and real accomplishments of Carrillo Puerto that she can never really confront the dark side his regime.

At a few points, Reed's enthusiasm for Carrillo Puerto, combined with what Juan Castillo Cocom calls the *cultivo yucateco*—winding up folks with fantastic stories—leads her into something close to magical realism. Franklin Delano Roosevelt might well have been an admirer of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, but he could not have ordered U.S. Navy ships to search the ocean for him when he tried to flee the coup in December 1923 because FDR resigned as under-secretary of the Navy in 1920 (70). Did the young Felipe save birds from dying in the summer heat by building over a thousand wicker cages on his family's patio, giving them food and water? (182) Carrillo Puerto was jailed at least three times, but his claim to her that he served a total of seven years on five political charges will surprise many scholars familiar with his career (225). Some of the tales Alma records seem clearly intended to pull her leg: the claim that Felipe was kidnapped in Quintana Roo by Caste War hold-out General May to be his translator, then returned months later with a full beard and long hair down to his shoulders (231-232). Or the story told to Reed, an ardent supporter of Irish independence, that 19th century Caste War caudillo Jacinto Pat was

“allegedly of Irish descent” (263). Some lapses are a little more serious, such as the claim that Felipe Carrillo Puerto was the chief intellectual director of an uprising against the Porfiriato in Valladolid on June 4, 1910—an event known as the “first spark” of the Revolution (222). His involvement was peripheral at best.

That said, these concerns do not fundamentally mar the value of this volume as a crucial primary source (although they do speak to the need for a bit more editorial commentary). This volume restores Reed to her place in the history of both Mexico and the U.S. I was reviewing this book at the same time that I was reading Carlos Fuentes’ marvelous but archly cynical *Eagle’s Throne*, a fictional recounting the decline of the real P.R.I. Reading Reed reminded me of the optimism of the 1920s about the Mexican Revolution. She was a true pilgrim, transformed by her encounter with a crucial revolutionary and by the Revolution itself. And like pilgrim, she helped transform her own society as well.