Writing Mexican History. Eric Van Young. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780804768610

In *Writing Mexican History*, Eric Van Young invites his reader to join him as he revisits the personal, professional and intellectual paths that he has treaded (and opened up) as a scholar of Mexican history. In a career spanning three decades, Van Young has played the dual role of participant and observer in regards to the methodological changes that have swept through the profession. From economic, to social, and then on to cultural history, he notes the crucial impact that these shifts had on not only his own work, but also on that of others. The book, therefore, represents a guidebook to this journey in the making of a historian, with Van Young pointing out what he terms the "artifacts" and "signposts" along the way— the changes in the discipline and his own contributions.

Van Young uses his current project, a biography of the Mexican statesman Lucas Alamán, to explain the origin of this collection of essays. Research into this economic thinker and historian led Van Young to consider how one envisions one's own participation in the profession. Though Alamán wrote a five-volume treatise on the history of Mexico, he did not leave behind any explicit admissions on his role as a historian. This gap between a public product and an individual's "interiority" inspired Van Young to reunite his previous historiographic work, with the desire that "it might be useful for me to offer some observations on the historian's craft, at least as I have practiced it" (7-8). While the majority of chapters (excluding chapter four) have appeared as previously published pieces, Van Young makes it clear that he has revised the essays, updating their content and limiting overlap. In addition, this analytical introduction serves as the explicatory medium through which these essays coalesce into a coherent whole. In contrast to the more obscure legacy of Alamán, Van Young allows his reader to understand the "emotional and experiential processes" involved in both the writing of history, and his engagement in historiographic debates with colleagues on either side of the US-Mexico border.

Van Young divides the book into four sections that explore major shifts in Mexican historiography. Part one surveys the literature on Mexican haciendas and rural Latin America. In the first chapter, he follows the unfolding of the field of hacienda studies, situating his book *Hacienda and Market* among these works. Van Young notes, however, that despite the overall decline of economic history, research on agrarian structures and estates has largely continued "in the hands of anthropologists and ethnohistorians" (24-25). Chapter two follows the tenet that "the history of Latin America has been written on and by the land" (53). In this comparative historiographical survey, he focuses on the feudal and capitalist debate in Mexico, Argentina's export orientation, and the nexus between slave labor and tropical commodities in Brazil.

In part two, chapter three considers Anglophone scholarship on colonial Mexico between 1980 and the early 2000s. Despite the attentiveness of cultural and subaltern histories, the problem among English-language historians of seeing Mexico as a "museum of unmodernity" stretches back from the writing of William Prescott in the mid-nineteenth century (83-85). The subsequent chapter addresses the long historiography of independence. He opens with the work of the earliest Mexican histories—penned by those who experienced the transition from colonists

to citizens, and continues with this trajectory into the twenty-first century. Van Young demonstrates the breadth of his reading, uniting Anglophone and Mexican scholarship in his analyses, as he situates his own contribution, *The Other Rebellion*, which centers on the agency and ideology of peasant insurgents, among them (157-158).

The third part takes a turn towards theoretical and methodological issues. In discussing regional history in chapter five, Van Young challenges the generalized conceptions of bounded space. He understands regionality through the lens of economics, and suggests a dual typology for Mexican history: pressure cookers and funnels. In the former, the city lies at the center of an urban hierarchy with its naturally accompanying internal division of labor. The latter, on the other hand, represents a grouping or cluster of "production units or firms linked to an outside market" (180-181). In chapter six, the most engaging chapter, Van Young places his own archival research center stage. He cites a range of multidisciplinary influences—most prominently the political scientist James Scott—in attempting to make a postmodernist engagement with texts and the boundaries of historical knowledge. The figure of insurgent leader José Marcelino Pedro Rodríguez becomes the seed of discussion on the role of subaltern participation in the independence movement.

The reader's peripatetic journey with Van Young across multiple methodological approaches comes to an end in the final chapter as he reflects on the historiography of the cultural turn as practiced with Mexican history. Van Young offers an insightful analysis of the contributions and promises of cultural history, though he does acknowledge some careful caveats to its application: "its strategy should be to subsume rather than supplant other traditional genres of historical inquiry on the imperialist assumption that all history is cultural history" (263). Differences between economic and cultural methods need not necessarily be irreconcilable, and he advocates middle-ground approaches between the two.

Though for Eric Van Young the search for the "interiority" of his historical subjects constitutes a key theme in his work, after reading this tome, one asks, "how closely has he allowed his reader to approach the same level of interiority with him?" Most certainly, I learned of his professional formation and engagements, and yet much like the aloof Alamán, the more visceral and private life of Eric Van Young remains largely outside of this work. Though from the beginning of the book, Van Young expresses a certain disdain towards "any autobiography that hubris might tempt me to write" (7), this reader longed for more examples of his personal investment and experience with Mexican history. For example, I greatly appreciated his retelling of how he came to study Guadalajara for his dissertation research (27-28, repeated on 99), for anecdotes like this one reassure his graduate student audience that PhD projects are a careful negotiation between research ambitions, and available archival sources and methodological tools. Having accompanied Van Young in his detailed examination of field, the reader develops a sense of closeness with the author. In addition, I personally would have welcomed a few more commentaries on his experiences and insights as a scholar in Mexico during these rollercoaster years for the nation from the late 1970s to the present.

For practitioners and students of Latin American history alike, *Writing Mexican History* is an invaluable tome that should occupy a prominent place on the bookshelf. Van Young's

thorough mastery of the subject, combined with a lucidity of prose, make for an enjoyable read. Having traversed the interlocking paths between economic, social and cultural histories—only to discover himself as a "recovering economic historian"—Eric Van Young demonstrates that writing Mexican history is a dynamic process encompassing multiple terrains. I look forward to where he will take us next with his future contributions.

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