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Jeffrey M. Pilcher, ed.. *The Human Tradition in Mexico.* Wilmington: SR Books, 2003. xxvi + 242 pp. $27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8420-2976-6.

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The Human Tradition in Mexico is both a good read and a compilation of serious scholarship. The book's fifteen brief biographies of men and women who lived in Mexico from the mid-eighteenth century to the present will be welcome additions to the syllabi of those of us who constantly hunt for readable yet serious works of history in our classes on Mexico or Latin America. Some books intended (primarily) for use in the classroom have an uncanny ability to kill off the most interesting aspects of history, shunning deep engagement with sources and disciplinary concepts in favor of an unappetizing combination of generalities, dates, and names that cascade one on top of another. Editor Jeffrey Pilcher avoids this pitfall and gives us instead a series of 15 vignettes of roughly 15 pages each, written for the most part by notable younger historians.

Pilcher's introduction uses the Mexico City subway system as a heuristic device to link the individual narratives together. Like the metro, the biographical subjects represented are flung yet interconnected points within a larger (historical) map. The book proposes to show us life in Mexico the same metaphorical way that subway riders experience re-emergence to the city after a ride on the metro: from the bottom up. The introduction manages to shuttle us from stop to stop in Mexican history, while providing an overview of the individual contributions to the book, and to do so in a pleasingly snappy way. The Mexico City subway continues to wend its way through the text, as Pilcher uses brief exegesis about the names of individual stations to introduce each chapter. Like the book's introduction, these chapter introductions work well to introduce the historical subjects and give a bit of context to their lives in a way that most readers (whether students or professional scholars) will simultaneously enjoy and learn from.

The book presents its biographical subjects chronologically. Although the book does contain one colonial-era biography (Linda A. Curcio-Nagy's contribution on a courtesan with a surprisingly protracted record of bedding the rich and powerful of Bourbon-era Mexico City), it aims primarily at the national period insofar as all the rest cover the independence period to the

present: five treat the independence period to the Porfiriato; and nine cover the revolutionary era forward. All of the contributions draw the reader into their subjects' lives and times, and a couple of them introduce readers to episodes of Mexican social history that have normally remained in the ambit of specialist scholarship. For example, David Coffey and Eugenia Roldán Vera team up to replay the life of American-born Agnes Salm-Salm, whose husband developed a deep allegiance to Maximilian in the waning days of the empire; likewise, Anne Rubenstien gives us entrée into the world of post-revolutionary intelligentsia through a discussion of the lesser-studied artist Nahui Olin (née Carmen Mondragón). Other creative processes make appearances as well. Contributions by Pilcher and José Orozco take a look at a professional cookbook writer and tequila master, respectively. Music makes an appearance through Andrew G. Wood's discussion of Agustín Lara's romance with actress María Félix and Eric Zolov's piece on the La Onda band Los Dug Dug's in the 1960s.

Other chapters put a human face on major historical events and well-known personages. Karen Racine's biography of Fray Servando Teresa de Meir, for example, shows the difficulties that politically active clergymen faced in the era of independence, while at the same time exposing the tendency of patriot intellectuals to argue heatedly for political autonomy without actually fighting for it. Susie S. Porter's sketch of Juana Belén de Acosta likewise gives a great sense of the radical intellectual ferment surrounding the revolution, though from the uncommon angle of a radical, feminist, and sometime Zapatista. Pedro Santoni's superb chapter on Lucás Balderas simultaneously provides a portrait of post-independence politics and a genuinely moving portrait of one military man's desperate attempt to stave off defeat during the war against the United States.

All of the chapters are highly readable, even those that deal with topics students sometimes balk at discussing. The contributions by Curcio-Nagy and Santoni are particularly adept at marrying discussions of complex nineteenth-century politics with personal narratives that most students will find accessible. Some contributors tackle even more difficult subjects through the lens of biography. Enrique C. Ochoa's discussion of a Cardenista economist who often found himself on the outs with state and federal leaders during the go-go 1940s and '50s, for example, gives readers a sense of how economics fit into state-formation as well as the difficulties that socially progressive intellectuals faced after don Lázaro left office, all while presenting a brief overview of Mexico's political economy of development at mid-century. The subject of Glen David Kuecker's biographical sketch epitomized the modernizing and sanitizing spirit of the Porfiriato, at least until his plan for a public sanitation project in Tampico foundered on the shores of inadequate financing and its designer's tendency to overreach. Finally, William E. French's compelling and tragic examination of love letters exchanged between two upper-middle class sweethearts locked in a doomed relationship does a terrific job of introducing questions of gender, honor, and class in the early twentieth century.

Perhaps the only shortcoming of the volume is the shortage of truly popular-class voices. We glean relatively little about the majority of Mexicans past and present who work in the fields and factories, nor do we learn of the trials of the average person forced to leave her or his hometown behind to seek a brighter future in the cities or across the border. The two contributions that come closest to getting at this quotidian viewpoint are Patrick J. McNamara's carefully constructed contribution on Felipe García and other lesser-known community leaders of Benito Juárez's hometown of Guelatao, Oaxaca (which, as McNamara himself recognizes, diverges from the book's emphasis on individual biographies) and Sarah A. Buck's chapter on Rosa Torre González, who served as a ***soldadera*** in the 1910 revolution but

nevertheless hailed from a middle-class family and became one of the first women in Mexico to hold elective office when elected to the *ayuntamiento* of Mérida, Yucatán in the 1920s. Both McNamara and Buck pause to consider the condition of popular classes generally, as do a number of other contributors, but the fact remains that nearly all subjects of individual biographies are drawn from the middle and upper classes and are shown working and living primarily in urban areas in conditions of relative privilege.

The selection of subjects will not disappoint most readers, however. I imagine that the book will most often be assigned alongside with other readings in an undergraduate class. Used in such a way, these chapters will illustrate and flesh out lectures and other readings, giving students a glimpse into how (to paraphrase Charles Tilly's felicitous formulation) real people lived the major transformations in Mexican history. Some students might find the vocabulary in some of the essays a bit daunting and the historical background will certainly need to be firm in students' minds before they delve into these short biographies. Yet whether assigned individually or as a group sprinkled throughout a semester, these historical snapshots are extremely effective avenues through which to approach Mexican social, cultural, and institutional history.