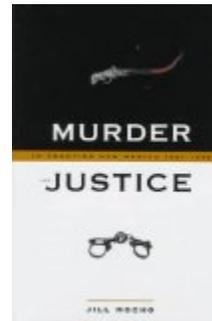


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jill Mocho. *Murder and Justice in Frontier New Mexico 1821-1846*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997. xiv + 245 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-1800-8; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1765-0.

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Homicide and Social History

Despite its brevity, the twenty-five year Mexican-era ranks as perhaps the least understood period in New Mexico's long history. Jill Mocho's *Murder and Justice in Frontier New Mexico 1821-1846* seeks to broaden scholarly knowledge of Mexican-era social and legal dynamics. The author examines eleven homicide cases from the Mexican Archives of New Mexico, arguing that events and testimonies surrounding murder cases reveal aspects of society not otherwise visible. From these cases, she gleans a general understanding of Mexican-era New Mexico.

Mocho divides cases into three sections: *Familia* (family); *Vecinos* (neighbors); and *Extranjeros* (foreigners). Two introductory chapters provide context for the Mexican period and the practice of frontier justice in New Mexico. An analytical chapter concludes each section, and the book's final chapter offers a comprehensive picture of the social patterns evident in the cases presented.

Mocho meets her goal to provide "a fundamental understanding of New Mexico Hispanic society based solely on a handful of murder trials" (p. 184). This goal, however, comprises the totality of the book's thesis. Although she lists general observations gathered from murder cases, the author does not offer a larger argument about the fundamentals of New Mexico Hispanic society.

For the most part, Mocho presents the cases themselves and provides context for the individuals and locations involved. She leaves the analysis for the concluding chapters of each section. Had the analytical chapters

done their job, this format might have worked well. Unfortunately, the analytical chapters offer little sophisticated insight into the fundamentals of New Mexican society during the Mexican period. For example, familiarity with recent scholarship on Latin American women's history in particular would have greatly enhanced the author's analysis of the domestic violence that culminated in murder in the book's first four cases. Mocho blames domestic violence on New Mexico's patriarchal society and on the Spanish concept of honor, but fails to place her discussion in the context of recent scholarship on honor in colonial Spanish America. It is easy and perhaps correct on a general, large-scale level to blame patriarchy for violence against women, but such blame reveals little about how and why such events happened and what they meant in New Mexican society.

Mocho's analysis of violence also lacks recognition of the role of religion in New Mexican's lives. For example, she has trouble understanding why a brother would forgive his sister's murderer, explaining that "perhaps Antonio considered his sister a nagging wife who deserved to be punished" (p. 25). It seems far more likely that Antonio, like many of his fellow New Mexicans, practiced the basic Roman Catholic tenet of forgiveness. These cases suggest a widespread practice among New Mexicans of such forgiveness, a fundamental element of New Mexican society that the author has ignored.

Murder and Justice in Frontier New Mexico succeeds in providing an initial glimpse at the fundamentals of

New Mexican Hispanic society during the short-lived period of Mexican rule. The eleven cases, however, reveal far more about the tenuous nature of justice in a remote region lacking trained lawyers and constrained by layers of bureaucracy in the distant capitol city. Scholars need far more information about the social dynamics of Mexican-period New Mexico before we can assume that the patterns revealed in eleven cases accurately portray the people and events of that era. Furthermore, those

patterns should be analyzed in the context of scholarship on Spanish America and the Mexican Republic to locate differences and similarities between centers and peripheries. Mocho's eleven cases pose more questions than answers about frontier New Mexico.

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