Review: Mark W. Lentz, *Murder in Mérida, 1792: Violence, Factions and the Law* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018)

This monograph – the first by Mark W. Lentz, currently an Assistant Professor of History at Utah Valley University – is a highly readable study of the ways in which the Bourbon Reforms of the late eighteenth century affected Yucatán, then the southernmost province of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Structured around an account of the 1792 assassination of Yucatán's top royal official, don Lucas de Gálvez, and the subsequent investigation into his murder, Lentz's book is also 'a real-life murder mystery,' complete with 'plot elements that would work well in a telenovela: a love triangle involving a married woman, accusations of abuse of power, affairs and out-of-wedlock children, conspiracies hatched on drunken afternoon gatherings, poisonings, and killers roaming the night-time streets in disguises' (p.15).

Unlike several earlier works, *Murder in Mérida* 'does not just discuss the European-descent killers; it includes the supporting cast of casta scapegoats, Maya witnesses, and mestizo accomplices' (p.15). In so doing, Lentz is able to explore the wider context and ramifications of this 'critical yet overlooked event in the history of resistance to royal rule,' detailing not just the assassination itself, but also the stalling, dissimulation, resentful rumours and other forms of Scottian 'everyday resistance' that local people employed to obstruct the Crown's investigation (p.11). By drawing on previously neglected documents produced during the investigation, Lentz's study additionally provides 'an image of Yucatecan society in microcosm' (p.8) just prior to the outbreak of the Mexican Independence movement in 1811, exploring the often dramatic socio-economic, political and cultural effects of the Bourbon Reforms on the region.

Over the course of eight chapters, tied together by the narrative of the ongoing murder investigation, Lentz explores subjects ranging from elite politics in Yucatán's capital, Mérida; factionalism in Maya villages; the role of the Catholic Church in both rural and urban settings; and the local dynamics of slavery and the interlinked – but distinct – *criado* system. Lentz shows that reforms enacted by Charles III, which put an end to the long-lived local *repartimiento* system, caused unprecedented social and economic insecurity for local creole elites, while 'an empire-wide preference for *peninsulares* in many administrative and military posts… often set middling creoles back further' (p.12).

On the surface, such reforms eased the burdens suffered by Yucatán's indigenous Maya majority, but also led to creole merchants, soldiers and administrators flooding into rural areas 'that had once been occupied solely by a Maya majority and a few priests and friars' (p.8). Thus Maya villages, already home to rival indigenous factions (p.127), became new battlegrounds in the burgeoning conflict between religious orders and the centralising and secularising imperial administration (a conflict locally exacerbated by Galvez's murder, in which many investigators suspected the overbearing Bishop of Mérida had a hand).

Such political conflicts drew in men (and, as Lentz shows, women) of all kinds, and gave rise to multi-ethnic alliances that reflected Yucatán's own complex racial composition. Mérida's urban *barrios* were by now home to 'blacks, mulattos, mestizos, Spaniards, and Indians living side by side' (p.53), while in rural areas 'white' and 'mestizo' had become extremely mutable categories (pp.55-6), thanks to mixed marriages, elaborately faked family trees, and the overwhelming dominance of Yucatec Maya, rather than Spanish, as the region's *lingua franca* (pp.113-4). Such alliances – which Lentz argues foreshadowed those that soon led to the overthrow of the Imperial order in New Spain

(p.215-7) – were predicated less on supposedly rigid categories of caste and gender, and more on 'household affiliation, professional status, military rank, guild membership, barrio, pueblo, region or nation of origin, nobility (both Spanish and indigenous), knighthood in one of three royal orders, religious confraternity affiliation, royal and municipal administrative appointments and titles' (p.13).

Lentz's book thus showcases the fascinating breadth and flexibility of identities in the Yucatán in this period. The differences between commoner and noble status, or between rural farmers and urban artisans, severely divided Maya populations only loosely united by language and ethnicity. The cultural and political identities of Afro-Yucatecans were similarly multi-faceted: free black militiamen, protected by military *fuero* (p.51), naturally lived very different lives to black slaves, to the extent that many of the former, pushed into the indigenous countryside by new policies that aimed to reduce the quantity 'of armed Mayas defending the province,' forged alliances with local factions and were so integrated into Maya lifeways, culture, and language that their descendants became 'indistinguishable from the Maya majority' (pp.124-5). All of which, Lentz argues, challenges the 'widely accepted model of gradual Hispanicization as a one-way process' (p.135).

Lentz's book is also a valuable contribution to our understanding of Mexico's *criados*, 'whose very existence is often overlooked' (p.84). Some of these domestic servants were free black or even Spanish individuals, raised from a young age in the households in which they served; others were the illegitimate (and often mixed-race) scions of elite families; but the majority were 'nominally orphaned' Maya or mestizo children from rural areas that, thanks to the demographic recovery of the Maya, became 'too parched or poor to feed all of its inhabitants' (p.84). Priests and local officials rounded up these children and sent them as

‘gifts’ to elite Spanish households, where they worked, often for life, as bonded servants.

Although in many ways politically, socially and economically powerless, Lentz shows that some *criados* and slaves reclaimed some of their agency in the wake of Gálvez’s murder, using their inside knowledge of Mérida’s elite households, and the importance that the Spanish legal system accorded to ‘gossip and hearsay’ (p.42), to protect benevolent patrons or, alternatively, revenge themselves on their enemies (p.66). Thus *Murder in Mérida* sheds compelling light on a world of spin and innuendo, particularly in subsections such as the excellently-titled ‘The Bad Lieutenant: Sex, Violence, and don Toribio’s Reputation,’ which explains how rumours of the ‘violent outbursts’ of the Bishop’s nephew, combined with accusatory anonymous poems that appeared on the walls of Mérida’s streets overnight, led to his being identified as the chief suspect in Gálvez’s murder (p.164).

Ultimately, then, *Murder in Mérida* is an engaging study of the local dynamics of Bourbon rule in a particularly diverse corner of the Spanish Empire, as well as an exploration of cultural, political and socio-economic change in late eighteenth-century Mexico. It could usefully be employed for teaching both graduate and undergraduate history, anthropology or Latin American studies classes, especially as the investigation into Gálvez’s assassination grows increasingly surreal – eventually drawing in drunks, pirates, and a last-minute twist centred on the attempted poisoning of a chicken – in a way that will enthral any student with a taste for magical realism.

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