

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Felix Diaz, The Porfirians, and the Mexican Revolution. By PETER V. N. HENDERSON. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. xi+239. Index, bibliography. \$18.50.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0w36t2zv>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 4(0)

Author

Gorell, Richard A.

Publication Date

1983

Copyright Information

Copyright 1983 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

which affected people in their daily existence.

Flory's book is not without some problems. Although he provides much information about the social and economic background of the justices of the peace (much of it gleaned from their personal and official correspondence), he fails to do the same for the litigants who appeared before those justices. This is understandable since his primary purpose is to analyze the lower court judiciary, but more attention to the litigants' background would strengthen his thesis. Although periodization of history is increasingly becoming a subjective endeavor, one wonders why he ended his study in 1871 rather than in 1889 when the monarchy was overthrown. These objections aside, Flory's book provides information on a neglected topic and is a good model for future historical investigation.

Isabel Levinson
University of Minnesota

Felix Díaz, The Porfirians, and the Mexican Revolution. By PETER V. N. HENDERSON. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. xi+239. Index, bibliography. \$18.50.

When the Mexican Revolution forced President Porfirio Díaz to leave the country in 1910, it was generally believed that the effects of thirty-four years of despotism, injustice, and favoritism toward foreigners would be transformed into a society more cognizant of the needs of its own people. The next ten years, however, witnessed fratricidal warfare that destroyed the economic gains the old dictator believed would be his enduring legacy. Disparate factions representing every ambitious leader with designs on controlling the administrative apparatus and advocating every nuance of political differentiation between old and new Mexico played their role in the decade-long struggle.

Felix Díaz, the nephew of the dictator, because of his name, position, experience, and ambition, was one of those who aspired to be the focal point around which the country would stabilize militarily, politically, and economically. For several years after his uncle's departure, he received substantial assistance from supporters of the old regime which enabled him to offer a serious military challenge to the other aspirants. Eventually, his aspirations and the faction he represented were rejected. Despite his willingness to accommodate the demands of the other leaders, he never regained

the momentary prominence he achieved in 1911 when he and General Victoriano Huerto staged a successful *coup d'état* against Francisco Madero, Porfirio Díaz's successor.

This book is a detailed account of the machinations of a political hack, Felix Díaz, who, having made a career of prospering on the periphery of power, tries to take advantage of his name to catapult himself into the presidency of Mexico. He was driven by ambition but was unable to demonstrate the military ability or the political prowess necessary to lead his faction to power based on the programs and policies of his uncle. His attempt, by its very nature, betrays his own inability to understand the extent of the discontent centering on the old regime which was ravaging Mexico at the time.

Peter Henderson presents a well-documented account of Felix Díaz's attempt to gain the presidency. The fact that Henderson was not allowed to use Díaz's post-1916 personal papers, which were in the possession of the son of the original biographer, adds to the accomplishment of the author. This can be a mixed blessing, however, since personal papers run the risk of being self-serving while at the same time they offer needed insight. The author does present Díaz from a traditional perspective, focusing on him as representative of the body politic. This presentation of one man during a short but significant period is supposed to give insight to the tumultuous nature of Mexico during a very trying and violent time. What we learn is that at best Díaz was ineffective, continually forfeiting advantages because of deficient leadership and an inability to recognize the facts for what they were. At worst, he was a conniving egomaniac fearful of losing a privileged position he neither deserved nor understood.

The most glaring weakness of this work is its failure to present Díaz or the time period within a general theoretical framework. What we learn is that this was a confusing, difficult, and violent time, but this is not new. Was the violence necessary, avoidable, or part of a general pattern? What of the causes — were they endemic or were they circumstantial? This we never find out. Are we to assume that the existence of these circumstances ensure a decade of destruction or is it the other way around? Is the point to be made that we should be wary of well-heeled political hacks with delusions of grandeur? The author suggests that Díaz's life typifies the harsh and sometimes undeserved fate of many Porfirians who, because of their prominence during the dictatorship, were denied positions in the post-1920 Mexican state. The implication is that Felix Díaz prolonged the agony of Mexico by his actions more than he calmed the situation. While Henderson attempts to show that Díaz did this

with the best interests of Mexico at heart, the impression is that Díaz was more interested in regaining his privileged position.

There are still questions that arise about the revolution that need to be addressed, especially when dealing with a figure as important as Felix Díaz and his alleged complicity in the assassination of Francisco Madero. The information presented offers nothing new or sufficiently convincing to suggest that Diaz was not deeply involved. Although Díaz maintained a military posture against Huerta and Carranza, was it because of wide spread support or was it because of the rampant confusion characterizing the general anarchy throughout Mexico? The evidence presented by Henderson suggests the latter and at best is ambivalent. The Mexican Revolution is an important event that stretched for more than a decade and had wide-ranging implications beyond its borders and the time period in which it occurred. It is important that the revolution continue to be studied. Unfortunately, this well-documented traditional historical approach does not elucidate the major questions that still remain.

Richard A. Gorell
University of Kansas

Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980

By DAVID R. GOLDFIELD. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982; Pp. xiv+ 232. Bibliographical essay, index, illustrations. \$20.00.

David R. Goldfield's *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers* is a broadly interpretive work tracing urbanization in the South from its colonial beginnings to present. The South Goldfield explores is geographically limited to the eleven states of the Confederacy plus Kentucky. Urbanization, however, is less neatly defined, for the "urban" areas considered range in size from small farm towns to bustling Atlanta and sprawling Houston. Goldfield's purpose is to place southern cities in what he feels is their most appropriate context: they are southern first, cities second. He accomplishes his goal by discussing those factors and forces common to southern cities which have made them different from cities elsewhere: a single-product economy, traditional rural values, and a biracial society.

In colonial times the single-product economy was apparent in southern dependence on staple crop agriculture. Southern towns were closely tied to their surrounding countryside from the very