

**UCLA**

**UCLA Historical Journal**

**Title**

Norman B. Schwartz. *Forest Society: A Social History of Peten, Guatemala*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gt622pp>

**Journal**

UCLA Historical Journal, 11(0)

**Author**

Herrera, Robinson

**Publication Date**

1991

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1991 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

should be equally useful to historians, ethnohistorians, anthropologists, linguists, and even naturalists and ecologists.

As for drawbacks I have only one minor quibble. Though the book is illustrated with sketches and drawings from the original documents, along with a reproduction of the Rouillard map (which also adorns the cover), I often found myself wondering where I had misplaced my road atlas of the Gulf Coast area. A good map included in the text and marked with the probable routes of expeditions would be a welcome addendum for future editions.

John A. Crider

*Tulane University, New Orleans*

**Norman B. Schwartz.** *Forest Society: A Social History of Petén, Guatemala.* University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

For many years cultural anthropologists interested in Mesoamerican Indians during the colonial period shunned the use of documentary sources preferring instead to rely on material evidence to construct their histories. The work of such giants in the field as Eric Thompson demonstrated to anthropologists the many benefits that derive from working with colonial manuscripts. Norman Schwartz, himself an anthropologist, follows in the footsteps of his predecessors in his use of sources. Schwartz attempts to study the Maya of the Petén region from the colonial era to the contemporary period. Woefully Schwartz demonstrates a poor understanding of colonial documents. While the book does make some interesting points it falls short of fulfilling what the title promises, a social history from the colonial period to the present.

Taking a cue from the pioneering work of Robert Carmack for the highland region of Guatemala, Schwartz worked heavily in both local, national, and foreign archives. The archival work unfortunately yielded little for the colonial period since the Petén region was the epitome of a fringe area. Petén was such a marginal area that it depended on the Yucatán, itself an area of little economic activity until the advent of the henequen boom. Thus Schwartz, much like Linda A. Newson in her book *Indian Survival in Colonial Nicaragua*, suffers from a severe lack of documentation. When he does come upon numerous documentary sources, mainly for the 1890s on, he fails to exploit them fully. By concentrating on in-

stitutions Schwartz fails to use documents from the Ramo Criminal of the Archivo General de Centro América to full effect. Only rarely does he demonstrate a sophisticated use of documentation as on page 125 where he discusses the reasons why Indians were often given lighter sentences than their Spanish counterparts. Yet such insights are few and far between.

Schwartz divides his work into six chapters which are separated along both temporal and economic themes. His first three chapters are based mostly on the works of Nancy Farriss and Murdo MacLeod. Schwartz provides an excellent synthesis of current scholarship on colonial lowland Guatemala. Lamentably these chapters provide little in the matter of original contributions.

The remaining three chapters, in particular chapter five, are the core of the book. Schwartz provides a good deal of information useful towards the understanding how Indian groups react to pressures exerted on them to both acculturate and assimilate into the national economy. The popularity of chewing gum made chicle (the natural resin from which gum is made) a coveted product. Similar to the rubber boom in the Amazon, Petén was quickly flooded with individuals seeking to make a quick fortune. In chapter five Schwartz investigates the impact that chicle, known as "oro blanco" (white gold) to the Peteneros, had on local society.

Schwartz stands on firm ground for most of his hypothesis in regards to the post World War II period. In fact most of his research concentrated on this period, the ready availability of informants probably accounts for this. One of the most glaring contradictions in his work has to do with his appraisal that Peteneros, unlike the majority of Guatemalans, have little tolerance for ethnic discrimination. He then goes on to state that the "descendants of the Indians and of the eighteenth-century Petén have retained their structural positions relative to each other up to today despite all sorts of political, economic, and cultural changes over the years." (p 32). The "structural positions" which he refers to are ones which place Indians in subordinate, subservient standing in comparison to the Spanish descended elements in society. Schwartz's claim to the uniqueness of Peteneros in regard to their inter-ethnic relationships seems to be a chimera.

Though the term social history has as many definitions as individuals who profess to write works of this genre, certain elements must be present before a history can justifiably be termed social in substance. Schwartz does not attempt to construct career patterns of persons, or trace families through time in any significant manner, or

concentrate more on individuals than on institutions, or even give more than a hasty glance at the roles of women in Petenero society. One comes away from reading Schwartz with the disturbing notion that women were nearly wholly absent from Petenero society.

Schwartz would have done greater justice to his work by dropping the "social history" from the title, for his work scarcely fits the social history mold. His work provides an excellent interpretation of contemporary Petenero society, the adaptation of Indian culture to high "foreign" internal migration, and to the development of a frontier consciousness among individuals living in what amounts to a pioneer society. *Forest Society*, despite its faults, makes for informative reading for those interested in investigating the impact of agricultural booms on Indian societies.

Robinson Herrera

*University of California, Los Angeles*

**Ron Chernow.** *The House of Morgan: An American Banking Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Finance.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 812 pp. paperback.

The House of Morgan has been a fascinating topic for historians, journalists, political pundits, and social commentators. Chernow presents an excellent outline of the origins and development of this pinnacle of American finance. He falls into the tradition of the apologists of the Morgans who identify the House with the positive development of the American economy. Chernow treats the two most recent periods of the House of Morgan more in depth compared to the sophisticated and critical work of Vincent Carosso's *The Morgan's: Private International Bankers, 1854-1913* (1987) which treats the formative period. The quick pace and broad audience approach of the text pales in comparison with the erudite and analytically powerful work of Carosso.

Chernow's primary focus is on developments within the bank(s) and its reflection in a changing economic and state climate. However, he includes extensive descriptions of the personal and social milieu of the Morgans including Junius, J. Pierpont, Jack and Harry Sturgis as well as important partners. The social and personal in Chernow's mind take on an important function in banking activities--especially in the formative years of the House of

Morgan and less so in the more "egalitarian" 1970s and 1980s. Three phases, 1838-1913, 1913-1948, 1948-1989 encompass both the spirit of banking and the strong guidance of Morgan partners. The first period is dominated by Junius Morgan and then more imperiously by J. Pierpont Morgan. This period, entitled "Baronial Age" after Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons* (who would be a bit appalled at the slightly hagiographic presentation of financial potentates), deals primarily with the establishment of the American branch of the House of Morgan. According to Chernow, the age is typified by lordly grandees, namely J. Pierpont, ruling over the fledgling development of American industry, trade and transportation.

In the second period, "The Diplomatic Age," Henry Davidson, Jack Morgan and Thomas Lamont first cooperated with, and after 1929, fought with an augmented and intrusive state and the increasing development of an international market. During the second period, the House of Morgan was divided by Glass-Steagall. By the third period, "The Casino Age," House of Morgan had fallen into three competing concerns with new ties. The post-World War II period was marked by increasing competition of banks in the form of investment banks, commercial banks, and state central banks, as well as mature industries and insurance companies. These new holders and investors of capital contributed to the decline of traditional banking, the destruction of "The Gentleman Banker's Code," and the consequent increase of more speculative activities by banks culminating in the frenzied and destructive Eighties.

Chernow writes for an audience that would be put off by economic theory and sophisticated business analysis. These facts inhibit Chernow's study as he reduces decisions more to temperament, tradition, and whim and the ever present "Gentleman Banker's Code." While these are important factors, the disregard for any examination of the political economy of Morgan partners leaves the reader critically uninformed. Thomas Lamont was a Republican who rejected party foreign policy but also rejected Democratic domestic policy. Is it possible that Lamont is a corporate liberal? There is much discussion of anti-semitism (at points confusing, see pp. 74-75 where it is anti-semitic to refuse a deal with Speyer but not with Rothschild) but only fleeting of references to labor, inter-capitalist competition and cooperation, or the marketing of stocks and bonds prior to the Casino Age. He goes so far as to say the Baronial Age "was one of unbridled laissez-faire marked by often unqualified hostility on the part of bankers to-

ward government." (p. 131) Where comes the hostility if the state is not involved? Tariffs, currency and banking policy, treasury payments, labor policies et cetera are extra-business affairs?

Chernow's fast paced presentation may have contributed to numerous factual errors and/or misrepresentations and occasional redundancies. For example, George Perkins was actually offered a Morgan partnership twice not once before accepting; Willard and Dorothy Straight's support of Roosevelt in 1912 could not have been "subversive" to Morgan partners as Perkins was Roosevelt's primary fundraiser; and Pierpont Morgan had little to do with the resolution of the Northern Pacific Corner as he was in Europe, and Hill, Bacon and Perkins developed and executed the plans that led to the establishment of Northern [Securities, see original] Company. Likewise, Chernow argues that "The Yankee-Jewish banking split was the most important line in American finance." (p. 90)--where was National City Bank and Rockefellers in this so-called split? Was John D. Rockefeller, the devout Baptist, a member of the Jewish financial camp?

These criticisms should not detract from the wealth of research and helpful information that is presented in a well-written and engaging fashion. It is an important addition to Morganalia and an informative overview of banking history for the past century-and-a-half.

Tom Mertes

*University of California, Los Angeles*

**Paul Sullivan.** *Unfinished Conversations: Mayas and Foreigners Between Two Wars.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. 294 pp.

**Grant D. Jones.** *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: Time and History on a Colonial Frontier.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. 382 pp.

"So you're going. Well, take me to your village, too," said a thin voice emanating from a stone figure in the forests of Quintana Roo. This talking effigy was found by Maya boys not centuries ago in the prechristian past, but in 1985--according to a report used by Paul Sullivan to give a final twist to his tale of *Unfinished Conversations*. The story, though not authenticated by Sullivan,