

The Silver King: The Remarkable Life of the Count of Regla in Colonial Mexico. *By Edith Boorstein Couturier*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. x + 224 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$45; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth 0-826-32873-3; paper 0-826-32874-1.

Reviewed by Richard Salvucci

The face of Pedro Romero de Terreros that adorns the cover of Edith Couturier's thoughtful biography of Mexico's first count of Regla, who lived from 1710 to 1781, is not an open one. The severity of Regla's portrait, revealing an ascetic, dour visage, burnished by a heavy five o'clock shadow, is relieved only by the long, graceful fingers of his right hand, which are extended in a gesture of command. The image does not mislead, for Regla, perhaps the world's wealthiest man in his heyday, was a figure who alternately inspired respect, fear, dislike, and, one suspects, not a little envy. He was a poor immigrant from a frontier region of Andalusia, who found great success in Mexico as a merchant, a silver miner, and finally, after inheriting properties made available by the expulsion of the Jesuit order in 1767, as the greatest landowner in the colony.

In her charming introduction to this exceptionally well-researched and well-crafted biography, Edith Couturier ponders the secret of Regla's apotheosis. It is a sensitive historian's question, one that quickly becomes all absorbing. Ironically, there is much about Regla's story that is familiar to students of early Mexican history, for, albeit idiosyncratically, Regla followed the path trod by many others of his caste. He diversified his investments, used family and political connections to accumulate capital and finance his mining ventures, married well, worked long and hard, and above all, like any other millionaire silver miner, was very lucky in his choice of workings. How lucky? Regla's immediate predecessor in the operation of the Veta Vizcaína mine near Real del Monte, about sixty miles northeast of Mexico City, one Isidro Rodríguez de Madrid, was afforded a pauper's funeral when he died. Yet "fortune, friends, wise investments only partly explain [Regla's contrasting] success," Couturier writes, for, she adds, Regla was "a fearless man, always convinced of the rightness of his actions" (p. 72).

Regla was considered especially rigid and ruthless in his dealings with his mineworkers, and there can be no doubt that he was in the vanguard of employers who sought to take advantage of less favorable market conditions for labor after the middle of the eighteenth century. Yet, in the confines of his family circle, Regla appeared much more genial, doting over his many children and grieving over the early death of his young and adoring wife. His charitable contributions to the Church were remarkable. During his lifetime, he may have provided as much as 190,000 pesos (dollars) to support the dowries of conventual nuns in Mexico City and Querétaro, some fifty-eight in all. He financed the unsuccessful mission of San Sabá in Texas, and, most famously, established Mexico's National Pawnshop, the Monte de Piedad, an institution that endures to this day.

Although Couturier does not say as much, it is hard not to see in Regla a kind of culmination of Mexico's Tridentine baroque Catholicism, with its characteristic mix of public spectacle and spiritual and temporal affairs. The great miners' strike at Real del Monte, an event that nearly cost Regla his life, broke out on August 15, 1766, the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a holy day of obligation by canon law. While Couturier believes that Regla's decision to stop to hear mass in an interior chapel at the mine was "foolhardy" (p. 88), she overlooks the fact that Regla would have been guilty of serious sin had he *not* heard mass that day—his choice of chapels may have been foolhardy, but his observance of ritual was assuredly not. When Regla escaped the riot that broke out at the mine, he did so under cover of a canopy for the Blessed Sacrament. Even Regla's contempt for the mineworkers, many of whom were dragooned into working at the mine from neighboring Indian villages, was very much part of a worldview in which the native population, considered to be hopelessly lost in drunkenness and idolatry, suffered the consequences of the numerous eighteenth-century plagues as part of a divine act of retribution. Regla spent many of his early years in Mexico (1730–1750) in Querétaro, a flourishing center of baroque Catholicism, where he started out as an apprentice to his "pious" (p. 37) uncle, Juan Vázquez. And Regla's wife "attended Mass at three churches in one day" (p. 105), a degree of religiosity that was considered a bit excessive, even then.

The point, simply, is that Regla was part of an elite whose members, European or American by birth, socially distinguished or merely arriviste and nouveau riche, assumed

a prescriptive control over Mexican resources, particularly its native peoples, whom they regarded as the “fifth element” (p. 3). Regla could well be hyperentrepreneurial—“angry, imperious, single-minded [and] overwhelmingly ambitious” (p. 112)—because, in his world, he was literally always right. He may not have been godly because he was successful, or successful because he was godly, but for Regla, the *imitatio Christi* was “letting God fill his coffers” (p. 130). It is hard *not* to think of successful Mexican miners like Regla as the ripest fruit of baroque Catholicism.

Edith Couturier has written an evocative account of a fascinating figure. It is impossible to read this tale without deriving from it some feeling, however tentative, for this enigmatic and oddly unattractive man, who has long inspired such a range of contradictory views and emotions. It should find an audience that goes well beyond students of business history, let alone the narrower confines of classrooms in which Mexican history is taught.

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