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Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752-1863*

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This lively and engaging book will be especially appealing to historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Cuba. Martí wrote and spoke about slavery, race, nationality, and the threats of Spanish and North American imperialisms. Questions that he raised remain at the core of historical research. As scholars explore the tensions of empire and nationality in Cuba, it will be fruitful for them to reflect on the uses and abuses of his writings, image, and memory.

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Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752-1863. By Margaret Chowning. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 296 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.)

Rebellious Nuns is the result of a fortuitous archival discovery. While researching another project, we are told, the author encountered a thick bundle of letters, questionnaires, inspection reports, and other material documenting a "rebellion" that occurred during the late eighteenth century in the Conceptionist convent of La Purísima, located in the town of San Miguel el Grande, New Spain (now San Miguel de Allende, Mexico). Margaret Chowning thus lived that dream of historians, discovering a cache of overlooked documents that cry out for a book-length treatment. Chowning has done justice to the sources, offering one of the most revealing glimpses inside a Mexican convent yet written. Just as impressively, the book situates the story of La Purísima within broad religious, political, and economic transformations, without blunting the nuance and historical idiosyncrasies of the convent and the nuns themselves.

The book follows the convent from the commitment to found it in 1752 to its demise in 1863, thus providing an institutional life history of sorts. The early chapters focus on the series of rebellions in the convent, which played out over many years and were at times punctuated by intense and rancorous power struggles. At their core, the rebellions pitted against one another two seemingly irreconcilable factions and the frameworks for conventual life they advocated—the *vida común* and *vida particular*. In a nutshell, the *vida común*, whose central tenets formed part of La Purísima's founding constitution, required a rigorously collective and communal life. Under the *vida común*, nuns were expected to share in all of a convent's work, to pool their dowry funds, to share meals and sleeping quarters, and to conduct their spiritual labor collectively. In contrast, many Mexican convents of the time followed some version of the *vida particular* that allowed nuns a great deal of autonomy in their living arrangements, and often resulted in a much

less rigorous interpretation of vows of poverty and a more relaxed spiritual practice.

While extremely well documented for this case, these struggles were not unique to La Purísima or, for that matter, New Spain's other convents. While space precludes a full discussion in this review, the seemingly hermetic disputes within La Purísima's walls spoke to much broader historical processes in late colonial and early republican Mexico, including a tension between individualism and collectivism, evolving notions of spiritual and economic utility, and changing relations between Church and State. Admirably, Chowning weaves these two sets of stories—one internal to the convent, one external—into a coherent and balanced whole.

By the time of Mexican independence, the feud within La Purísima over the *vida común* had mostly played out. The Church hierarchy eventually imposed the *vida particular*. Church officials felt that doing so would quiet some of the lingering discord from the rebellions, but also improve the convent's fiscal health, since individual budgeting would, in theory, reduce waste. After independence, La Purísima followed the downward spiral of most Mexican convents, as it experienced a steady decline in the number of professed nuns, due to a chronically weak economy that made it more difficult for families to fund dowries, the economic attacks on Church wealth by republican governments, and the arguments made by Mexican liberals against the supposed "parasitism" and social inutility of monastic orders. The convent dissolved under the exclaustation decree of 1863, which closed all of the country's convents. In a nicely crafted epilogue that relies in part on oral history, Chowning sketches the post-exclaustation history of the convent, such as it can be reconstructed. Demonstrating the resilience of religious culture in Mexico, the convent twice reconstituted itself in the first half of the twentieth century and remains a thriving institution up to the present. Indeed, by the 1950s the number of nuns exceeded the convent's previous apogee in the eighteenth century.

Chowning advises the reader that she has foregrounded the narrative of La Purísima, rather than a more consciously "analytic" voice. This narrative style keeps the reader's attention "inside the convent," at times letting the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century voices of the cloistered nuns and their worldly interlocutors wash over the reader. But Chowning is perhaps a bit too modest, since she also offers deft and nuanced readings of sources that resist simple interpretation, laden, as they are, with rhetorical flourishes, politicking, and outright dissembling. In general, these passages of self-reflective analysis are so successfully wrought that the earlier chapters could stand a greater sprinkling of them.

Rebellious Nuns is a book of many virtues and few vices. It offers an engaging portrait of a convent, one that highlights the voices of the nuns who inhabited it, along with the churchmen who tried to exert influence over them. It also expertly places these men and women against a century-long backdrop of religious transitions. Specialists will find the book a rich addition to the

field, but no doubt it will also be used profitably in both graduate and advanced undergraduate classrooms. Chowning had her lucky strike. Now readers will have one, too.

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The Many Meanings of Poverty: Colonialism, Social Compacts, and Assistance in Eighteenth-Century Ecuador. By Cynthia E. Milton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xxi + 356 pp. Illustrations, maps, chart, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth.)

Based on sources drawn from archives in Ecuador and Spain, Cynthia E. Milton writes an illuminating work on poverty and its meanings in Quito during the eighteenth century. The author studies how the concept of the urban poor changed during the transition between Hapsburg rule and Bourbon governance and how these transformations of the meanings of poverty impacted the lives of subjects under a colonial state that delineated certain categories of poverty.

Divided into four main sections and eight chapters, excluding the introduction and the conclusion, this study has three basic arguments. The first argument deals with the many meanings of poverty and how it was mainly a social construction influenced by values of age, gender, race, and ethnic ideologies. While noting that the poor were not a homogenous group, the author uncovers how the relationship between the benefactor and the pauper changed during the century under study. That relationship became more repressive and began to include forced labor and mandatory education.

The second explains the link between political culture and poverty discourses. Medieval practices of paternalism and the protection of the poor shaped the system of rights and obligations between the poor and the benefactor according to their assigned roles in the feudal colonial pyramid. For example, the pauper had the right to request alms from wealthy patrons and assistance from the king. The affluent as well as monarchs had the obligation to alleviate the misery of less fortunate members of society. In return the impoverished prayed for the benefactors and provided labor and tribute.

Finally, the third argument explores the resources that the poor used to shape the implications of poverty and poverty compacts, which addressed the rights and obligations of both the poor and their benefactors. Paupers altered their arguments in terms ranging from unmet social expectations to economic hardship. Because the state provided several poor relief institutions