

## Book Review

- *Jenkins of Mexico. How a Southern Farm Boy Became a Mexican Magnate*, by Andrew Paxman, Oxford University Press, 2017

I first learned about William O. Jenkins shortly after my arrival in Puebla in the mid-1980s. I can't recall the content of my first conversation about him, but I am certain that the information provided to me was 'framed' by what Paxman sees as a modern Black Legend, a 'catalogue of hyperbole and selective criticism about Jenkins' (pp. 8-9). A key objective of this magnificent book is to historically contextualize and understand the vilification of the American businessman (cast in the language of 'gringophobia'), who settled in Puebla in 1905. Paxman is motivated by the desire to refute the claim, still accepted in certain circles, of Jenkins as, above all, a ruthless imperialist bogeyman. A key element of this narrative is the allegation that, while he was the United States consul, Jenkins participated in and profited from his own kidnapping by Zapatista rebels in 1919, a conspiracy theory Paxman convincingly rejects. The book contains many passages in which the author effectively moves our understanding of the man, his business and politics away from dichotomic thinking. This overall approach results in excellent history. Why?

First, because Paxman has written a work that interweaves the personal and family tale of Jenkins with a broad examination of Mexican history from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s – a remarkable achievement. Nowhere does the book read as if the narrative is overtaken by one of these two strands; they continually inform each other. With an entrepreneurial spirit and driven by his desire to provide for his wife, who came from a prosperous family, Jenkins started his first business in hosiery, after which he acquired real estate and textile mills at the time of revolutionary upheaval. During the 1920s, he came to own and develop one of Mexico's largest sugar producing complexes. In a particularly interesting section of the book, the author demonstrates how Jenkins enlarged his agricultural empire by buying out, often through foreclosures, old money families. While Jenkins despised their haughtiness, noble surnames and empty bank accounts, they most likely reviled his frugal, hands-on and Protestant mentality that amassed millions of dollars. After

losing or selling most of his industrial and agricultural properties in the 1930s, he started investing in cinemas, film production and banking during the 1940s and 1950s, making him one of Mexico's wealthiest men. Shortly before his death in 1963 he had put 60 million dollar into a foundation named after his wife. His economic influence jumpstarted new business dynasties, most notably that of the Espinosa Yglesias family. The book shows how, while accumulating riches, Jenkins lost his family. Paxman strikingly portrays the solitary visits to his wife's grave: 'Moribund with cancer, unsure of his legacy, distanced from his daughters, and wracked with guilt, Jenkins, like an American King Lear, had full cause of weeping' (p. 356).

Secondly, my appreciation of the book's quality as an excellent history stems from the fact that, between biography and excursions into revolutionary struggles, the history of sugar plantations, and U.S.-Mexican relations, the book is held together by its systematic analysis of the shifting relationships between government and business, and between political power and capital in the context of the Mexican revolution and the changes it produced in subsequent decades. Paxman's crucial argument is that this relationship transformed from one of 'symbiotic imperative' to one of 'symbiotic convenience'. While the former was informed by interdependence and mutually understood needs (politically and financially weak provincial governments needed the cash from successful businessmen, and these needed protection against political volatility and legal uncertainties), the latter is ruled by mutual self-interest, the exchange of favours among elites, covert business deals, and impunity. For Paxman, the former is more the product of systemic conditions, above all during the 1910s and 1920s, the latter of individual choices, corrupt arrangements and true cronyism, especially since the 1940s. In the case of Jenkins in Puebla, this framework enables the author to discuss the rings of protection the businessman built around his sugar empire at Atencingo, which included the cultivation of friends in very high places (who even had access to presidents), but also the employment of heavy handed enforcers, who intimidated peasants and workers, and, if necessary, eliminated activists. After 1935, the career of Jenkins is inextricably connected to the cacicazgo of the Ávila Camacho family. He may have disliked selfish revolutionary generals-made-politicians-and-businessmen, as a pragmatist he donated generous sums to their election campaigns. Out of conviction he spent even bigger sums on schools, hospitals and sports facilities, coming to the rescue of strapped local governments. Jenkins introduced U.S.-style philanthropy in Mexico. With Alemán in the presidency, Jenkins increasingly operated as a national businessman. By then he had fully interiorized the rules of the money-making-revolution game; something that, as Paxman makes clear time and again, didn't really differ that much from the business culture of the southern US. In sum,

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this book tells the reader a lot about how a country, after having gone through a profound and violent social revolution, faced the question of what actually had happened to that revolution by the time Jenkins passed away in 1963.

Despite the imprudent loss of Jenkins' business archive and the deliberate disappearance of state archives, Paxman has succeeded in reconstructing this fascinating history with tens of interviews (some already conducted in 2000) and the consultation of archival and newspaper collections in Puebla, Mexico City and the United States. Thoroughly researched, this book is written with outstanding elegance, skill, and persuasion. Jenkins of Mexico is both a major history of state-business relations during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a superb biography.

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