

PARTING WORDS:

Review Essay of *The General and the Jaguar: Pershing's Hunt for Pancho Villa* by Sergio Troncoso

The General and the Jaguar, by Eileen Welsome (Little, Brown, 2006), is a historical account of General John Pershing's pursuit of the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa, after the latter's attack on Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916. The book is a lively, highly readable history of this episode and its aftermath, but ultimately, and unfortunately, it does not give a balanced view of its main characters, particularly Villa.

Welsome chooses to focus on the details, which is fortunate for the casual reader who wants to be entranced by a good story and fascinating characters. The author does briefly turn her attention to some of the systemic causes of the Mexican Revolution—land concentration among the Mexican elite during the Porfiriato, the blatant and brutal usurpation of village communal lands, and the rampant political corruption of the Mexican regime. But the author lingers on the personal passions, and even savagery, of Villa, what he wore the night before the attack, and the minute-by-minute rendering of the action as Villa brazenly invades the United States.

Villa's attack is primarily, according to Welsome, a vengeful act to repay the United States for its support of Villa's archenemy Venustiano Carranza, an act born of a crazy hatred for gringos and other foreigners. An act, literally, of an animal human being. It's of course a stereotypical view of Villa, and perhaps Villa was in part such a person. But Welsome downplays what a great historian like Friedrich Katz, author of *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*, concentrates on: Villa the military tactician, Villa the successful bureaucratic administrator, Villa the savvy counter-puncher. For the Columbus raid strategically resurrected Villa's revolutionary movement from a low point. It gave Villa a slim, but credible chance to regroup and regain momentum, and it was the best he could do given his dwindling resources and manpower. The Columbus raid was a gambit that almost worked to restore Villa to national power after his disastrous military decline of 1915.

But placing Villa's reasons for revolution and his subsequent raid on Columbus in historical context may seem boring to the reader, even if true. So an author like Welsome focuses instead on gripping hour-by-hour accounts of many of the 17 American citizens who were killed in the raid; on the blisters, sunburn, and frostbite of Pershing's American soldiers deep in Mexican territory in a bumbling search for Villa and the remnants of the División del Norte; and on Pershing's indigestion and Villa's desire for a glass of milk. The historical characters come alive, at least from a certain perspective, and the reader is taken happily along an action-packed novelistic ride through border history.

What becomes a critical problem for *The General and the Jaguar*, however, is what we might call the "morality of description." What we focus on or how we focus on it, whether we are fiction or nonfiction writers, gives it importance, or takes the focus away from something else. In Welsome's book, the murdered American citizens are named, given personal histories, and described in loving detail. But the one hundred Mexicans who died in the raid are, well, just formless "Mexicans." They die, but no reader feels their pain, or knows them as full characters or why they died. And so it goes for much of the picture of Villa, the raid, General Pershing's punitive expedition, and the ensuing border drama: The perspective is primarily from American and British historical sources, like military documents and newspapers, and it's a limited one.

Too often, Welsome simply repeats the stereotypes from these sources: Mexicans are "treacherous," while American soldiers are "professional" and "magnificent." When General Hugh Scott meets with General Alvaro Obregón in El Paso in May 1916 to discuss the puni-

tive expedition, the spotlight is on what the American War Department wants from the Mexicans. Scant attention is given to internal Mexican politics and how they might influence Obregón's position. A glaring example of the problems of Welsome's limited, English-only perspective is her mention of the Cristero Rebellion, which she describes as "a violent revolt that erupted in the 1920s when the Mexican government decided to deprive clergy of their civil liberties." No mention is given of why the "revolutionary government" despised the Catholic Church: The church had eagerly supported the Porfiriato; the church had been one of the biggest landowners in Mexico; the church had one of the most conservative perspectives against social change.

A careful reader of this book might uncover the basic reason for Welsome's limitations: The Pulitzer Prize-winning author does not know Spanish, or at least not very well. The first clues are grammatical mistakes in the Spanish used in *The General and the Jaguar*. Another clue is Welsome's thanking a colleague, in her acknowledgments, for reviewing the Spanish portions of her text. Finally, in her selected bibliography, only two of 385 sources cited are in Spanish. Unfortunately, this language deficiency distorts the often-captivating character portraits and scenes in her history.

As readers, we imagine what could have been: a picture of Villa and his men through their own eyes, a perspective of what Villa really meant to the poor people of Chihuahua and beyond, a view of Pershing and his men not only from the military's point of view but also from the perspective of Mexicanos who saw American soldiers hunting for Villa in their country, and imagined, correctly as it turns out, that powerful figures in the American establishment contemplated taking over Mexico permanently. *The General and the Jaguar* is an easy read, and that in turn is its greatest strength as well as its greatest weakness.

Recommended alternative readings on Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution:

Azuela, Mariano. *The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Modern Library, 2002 [a new rendition, with notes by Beth E. Jorgensen, based on the E. Munguia Jr. translation].

Fuentes, Carlos. *The Old Gringo: A Novel*. Trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985.

Katz, Friedrich. *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998.

McLynn, Frank. *Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2002.

Peterson, Jessie and Knoles, Thelma. *Pancho Villa: Intimate Recollections by People Who Knew Him*. New York: Hastings House, 1977.

Romo, David. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution*. El Paso, Tex.: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005.

Womack, John. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Vintage, 1970.

Sergio Troncoso is the award-winning author of *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories* and *The Nature of Truth: A Novel*. Please visit his web site at www.sergiotroncoso.com or e-mail him at STroncoso@aol.com.