

PAUL J. VANDERWOOD: *Satan's Playground: Mobsters and Movie Stars at America's Greatest Gaming Resort*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Satan's Playground by Paul Vanderwood takes the reader into a land of jack-pots, fine food, and copious amounts of alcohol, all served up amongst plush, glittering surroundings. Of course, a good tale (and good history) is never truly complete without a little violence. True to its reputation, the Mexican resort of Agua Caliente does not disappoint. The crown jewel of the underworld, its story is one of mobsters, gambling, a hijacking gone wrong, and a very public murder trial. Vanderwood's history reads much like Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* come to life. Indeed, the author himself observes that had the resort's Barons lived on the East Coast, they "would have been seen at [such] Gatsby-like parties" (139). Just like the tale of Gatsby, however, the wonder and magic is only short-lived.

Agua Caliente opened in Tijuana in 1928 and the *Los Angeles Times* hailed the resort as "comparable with the great fashionable watering places of Europe.... [It has] an atmosphere of gaiety, tempered with the refinements of polite society, [and] all of the pleasures of the Old World" (222). Attracting movie stars and the middle-class alike, it managed to bring in enormous profits, with individual losses easily approaching fifty thousand dollars a night (293). When the Eighteenth Amendment came into effect in the United States in 1920 (103), Mexican border towns like Tijuana afforded patrons the opportunity to enjoy copious amounts of alcohol, and at Agua Caliente the Barons saw to it that guests wanted for nothing. A wide variety of exotic liquors adorned the menu, while the finest chefs prepared dishes such as mouth-watering duck in sesame seed sauce, turkey enchiladas, and "chiles rellenos filled with white cheese and hot peppers" (40-41).

Naturally, the decadence and opulence proved far too tempting for some. Enter Martin Colson and Lee Cochran, common bootleggers and hijackers operating out of Southern California (17-18). On May 20, 1929, less than a year into the casino's operations, the pair held up a money car that was making its way from the resort to the Bank of Italy in San Diego. The pair expected the car to be carrying over \$100,000, and as the Ford Model-T they were driving overtook the Cadillac, they fired out its rear tires. This is where their plan went wrong. Cochran and Colson believed the driver and guard to be in on the heist, yet instead of giving in, they opened fire! The pair quickly gunned down the escort and retrieved the money from the locked trunk. In total, the transfer was composed mostly of cheques and a minimal amount of cash. Something had gone terribly wrong indeed (2-4).

At the time of the robbery, Agua Caliente was grossing over \$2 million a month (38). The Barons promised to launch their own internal investigation after police

in San Diego concluded that the robbery had to have been an inside job (59). Cochran and Colson had access to a duplicate key to the trunk of the Cadillac that would have been impossible to obtain without assistance (10). However, if the Barons came to any conclusions, or carried out an internal purge, no such action was made public for obvious reasons. Colson, at trial, indicated that the robbery was actually part of a larger plot to loot and blow up the casino, which the Barons planned (186-189). Although corroborating evidence is limited and a definitive conclusion is hard to reach, given the hardships of the Mexican political situation at the time, such a plan is plausible. Vanderwood describes Colson as “a sociopath with disturbances,” but maintains that he was “not out of touch with reality ... he was a crafty strategizer” (189). Yet in the end, for all Colson’s abilities, he was not able to keep himself or Cochran out of prison. Both received life sentences (217).

The attention paid to these bootleggers early on was a demonstration that a resort that burned as brightly as Agua Caliente could not last forever – it attracted too much attention. The existence of the resort depended on the Barons’ ability to cultivate the goodwill of the Mexican government. Through bribery of local officials and heavy taxation of casinos, Agua Caliente carried out a tenuous existence (76). The resort contributed heavily to the financial improvement of the area. The profits pulled from taxation helped to fund schools, drainage systems, municipal infrastructure and new roads (121). Agua Caliente itself employed 339 people, 90 per cent of whom were locals. These jobs paid anywhere from \$100 to \$250 a month, not including tips (235-236). Compare these salaries to the dollar a day that was generally earned by the local population, and the importance of the resort becomes evident (310).

A new Mexican administration came to power in December 1934 and when the president chose to focus on the moral reform of the population, the Barons knew the end was near. They began to transfer vast sums of money out of the country (the resort was worth \$27.5 million) (304-306). When Agua Caliente finally shut its doors in 1937, the government was forced to deal with mass civic unrest and infuse large sums of cash into the region to quell discontent (318). The grounds were eventually seized by the federal government, and the structure was turned into a technical school that helped to give local residents a chance at improving their livelihood. While it received mass public support nationally, for the locals it was no Agua Caliente (321).

Meticulously researched, critically examined, and playfully told, Vanderwood skillfully merges the story of the rise of a Tijuana hot spot with a tale of a car-jacking that in a bizarre way foreshadows the fleeting venerability of gambling enterprises south of the border. As close as history can come to “page-turning,” *Satan’s Playground* draws readers into a century past, allowing them to explore

a period of history rarely examined. Vanderwood observes that there is yet a lot of work to be done on the prohibition era in the West, and as such this work offers a fantastic launching point for a new generation of historians to set out on their own explorations.

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GILLIAN MCGILLIVRAY: *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.

On first read, specialists in Cuban history may find it pleasantly surprising to discover just how fresh and innovative Gillian McGillivray's book is. Not so long ago, it was the rare study of Cuba that would not interrogate or assume the significance of sugar, rural labor, and capitalism to the island's history. Today, the scholarly landscape looks quite different. Attention to urban life, popular culture, and transnational politics have largely drawn historians away from the countryside, leaving the field of rural history to lie fallow. Moreover, one wonders what we might have to gain from yet another book about sugar and class after generations of studies that have made massive sugar estates the setting for the major events of Cuban history. *Blazing Cane* reanimates the rich historiography of the countryside by drawing insights from some of the very literature that has supplanted it. Moving past Marxist schematics and structure/agency tail chasing, McGillivray describes sugar communities that blurred national boundaries and in which estate managers, owners, and cane farmers all played central roles in the twinned processes of class and state formation. And because those processes touch most regions in the Americas, the book speaks to a far wider audience than Cuban specialists: *Blazing Cane* links a story of export agriculture to one about mass politics and popular nationalism in a way that invites comparisons and connections to histories throughout the hemisphere.

With its multidimensional approach, the book dislodges a fairly static model of social and political relations in which the sugar economy overdetermined the course of Cuban history. The Cuban countryside, and the Cuban Republic's political culture in general, have usually been portrayed as one big puppet show: every actor (or "sector") controlled by some other entity and powerful planters pulling the most strings of all. Here, McGillivray inspects more closely the various compacts that characterized relations between farmers, workers, mill owners, the Cuban state, and transnational sugar conglomerates. These compacts were conditional, strategic, and unequal alliances that, when violated by supe-