

BOOK REVIEW



The Silver of the Sierra Madre: John Robinson, Boss Shepherd, and the People of the Canyons by John Mason Hart. 237 pp., 23 illustrations, 2 maps, Index, Bibliography. University of Arizona Press, 2008. \$45.00 (Cloth). ISBN 978-0-8165-2704-5.

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As described by John Mason Hart in this well-written book, deep in the *barancas* of western Chihuahua, Mexico, in a small, isolated mining town, Batopilas, was located hell on earth, perhaps not unlike in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, presided over by a late-nineteenth-century Kurtz, Alexander "Boss" Shepherd. Between 1880 and 1902, Shepherd operated the Batopilas (Consolidated) Mining Company, which produced millions of dollars in silver. According to Hart, the mining tycoon ruled a macabre empire, where slaves and indebted peons comprised much of the work force, supplemented by transient starving Tarahumara Indians from the nearby canyons. The slaves were Yaqui Indians, purchased from Mexican generals who had captured the unfortunates during the endless war for land in Sonora. Bizarrely, the company locked the slaves in the main mine shaft each night in order to prevent their escape. In Batopilas daily life was a horror, for workers were in constant danger of explosions and cave-ins. Breathing in the air in the shafts was a death sentence. Miners were assured of an excruciating end from silicosis. Above ground conditions were no better. Batopilas's drinking water was poisonous from wastes from the mines and ore-processing plants. Sanitation facilities were such that epidemic disease killed even the children of the wealthy. The Tarahumara people who came in and out of the dreaded camp for work were endemically malnourished and disease-ridden.

Hart depicts Boss Shepherd as a madman. Puffed up by his power, he was at best an embezzler and at worst a psychopath. He rode roughshod over an immense territory, dispensing his own law to those subordinate to him and disobeying the laws of state and nation. In cahoots with no less than the dictator Porfirio Díaz, who regarded him as one of the few foreigners he trusted, and allied with the mighty Terrazas family of Chihuahua, Mexico's greatest landowners, who dominated the state as if it was their own fiefdom, Shepherd reigned for two decades.

Batopilas's isolation was the source of oppression, for it allowed Shepherd his autonomy. Aside from an occasional requested foray from the national army to squash the ill-fated protests of disgruntled local workers or town folk beset by the relentless grasping policies of the Batopilas (Consolidated) Mining Company, Shepherd was free to conduct his business as he saw fit. Even the mighty New York financiers who backed him were powerless. For example, surprisingly, they never saw the complete records of the company until after he died.

Despite the enormous quantity of silver dug out of the Batopilas veins during the bonanza days of the mines by their foreign owners—first John Robinson (1861–1880), then Shepherd (1880–1902), and then Shepherd's sons (1902–1921)—by Hart's estimation there was little benefit except to make the Robinson family rich and to allow the Shepherds to live regally for three decades. Silver production never brought economic development to the region. The ordinary working people of the neighboring towns and countryside derived no benefits. In fact they suffered bad treatment as employees, endured disruption of their traditional lifestyle, and confronted the ecological ruin of their land. To Hart, the foreigners brought a catastrophe from which there was no recovery.

Because we have few depositories of company records from which to sketch the everyday operations of large companies in Mexico during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hart does us a great service by illuminating conditions at Batopilas. In Batopilas, moreover, we have a classic case of a company town—in this case run amok. The most notable other case of a company town in Mexico with available archives is Cananea, Sonora, where there was a violent strike at the Cananea Copper Company in 1906. Batopilas provides a very valuable comparison with Cananea, because it did not experience a strike. It is rather extraordinary that by using the Batopilas Company's own records Hart is able to paint such a dismal and damning picture of its operations.

While Hart masterfully emphasizes the connections that foreigners forged with state and national elites and their conflicts with local elites, he sometimes muddles the specifics of Chihuahuan politics and society. Most importantly, he mistakenly sees dictator Díaz and the Terrazas family as working in unison, in particular overestimating the cooperation between Díaz and Enrique C. Creel, the financial wizard behind the Terrazas. Hart also overstates the closeness between the Terrazas and the foreigners. The Terrazas were not simply at the beck and call of Robinson, Shepherd, or any other foreigner. The family (and other Mexican elites of the time as well) cooperated only when it was in their best interest. They may have socialized, even married their daughters to the foreigners, but business was still business.

Through the past three decades John Mason Hart in his two award-winning books, *Revolutionary Mexico* and *Empire and Revolution*, has compiled a massive indictment of the impact of foreign investment on Mexico during the era of Porfirio Díaz. In *The Silver of the Sierra Madre* he continues this task, this time on the micro-historical level.