

[Rothera on Carrigan and Webb, 'Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928'](#)

Review published on Tuesday, July 22, 2014

William D. Carrigan, Clive Webb. *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiv + 304 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-532035-0.

Reviewed by Evan Rothera **Published on** H-SHGAPE (July, 2014) **Commissioned by** K. Stephen Prince

Mob Violence in the Southwestern United States

William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb's *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence Against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928* is an important contribution to a growing body of literature analyzing lynching in the United States.[1] Rather than discussing lynchings of African Americans in the eleven states that composed the Confederacy, Carrigan and Webb offer an extended treatment of mob violence against Mexicans in the Southwest.[2] They are quick to note that the work focusing on African Americans has had a profound impact on the way historians analyze the postbellum United States, but they assert, correctly, that a single-minded focus on one group ignores the complexities of mob violence. Carrigan and Webb chide historians, because "by simply not investigating or analyzing the lynching of Mexicans, historians played their own role in the creation of the 'forgotten dead'" (p. xiv). *Forgotten Dead*, therefore, is a significant and useful book because it focuses on the experience of Mexicans and illuminates an overlooked experience. Furthermore, Carrigan and Webb employ a comparative approach and juxtapose the struggles of African Americans and Mexicans to help historians gain a better understanding of mob violence.

As the title suggests, Carrigan and Webb do not focus solely on the postbellum United States, but employ a longer chronology and thus begin with the end of the U.S. war with Mexico. As U.S. citizens began to migrate west into the new lands the United States wrested from Mexico, they often came into conflict with Mexicans. Carrigan and Webb contend that one of the principal justifications vigilantes employed was the slowness of the courts. In addition, some Anglos were frustrated about Mexican influence over local government. Carrigan and Webb conclude that "the two most important factors in generating conflict between Mexican and Anglos were economic competition and racial prejudice, which were inextricably linked" (p. 33). They are attentive to the fact that mob violence did not look the same throughout the Southwest and examine different manifestations in the various states.

After discussing chronology and justifications, Carrigan and Webb provide analysis of the distinctive forms, dynamics, and characteristics of mob violence against Mexicans. To begin, they argue for the "relative importance of theft in the story of mob violence against Mexicans" (p. 65). Mobs were concerned about property crimes, an important point when we recall that mobs often lynched African Americans for alleged sexual offenses. Carrigan and Webb assert that Mexicans were rarely lynched for sexual offenses because "Anglos did not perceive Mexican men as being as great a sexual threat

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Rothera on Carrigan and Webb, 'Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928'*. H-SHGAPE. 07-22-2014.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/20317/reviews/35705/rothera-carrigan-and-webb-forgotten-dead-mob-violence-against-mexicans>
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

as they did African American men,” due to the gendered construction of Mexican racial identity (p. 67). Furthermore, unlike most African American lynchings, Mexican lynching victims often died together in small groups. This occurred for several reasons: Mexicans lived and worked with other Mexicans, theft and robbery were seen as group crimes, and many white people did not want to live alongside Mexicans, but to expel them from the United States (and the lynchings were supposed to spark a mass exodus).

Carrigan and Webb then take up an important theme: Mexican resistance. Their thoughtful discussion contains two critical points: Mexicans were not passive victims, but neither was the story of Mexican resistance a straightforward one “of an oppressed people heroically defending themselves against tyrannical adversaries” (p. 97). Indeed, some Anglos vociferously protested against mob violence, due to their practical concern for law and order as well as personal relations. Carrigan and Webb contend that Mexicans, in contrast to African Americans, engaged more frequently and forcefully in armed resistance due to a variety of factors. These factors included the sparse settlement of the Southwest, the fact that in some places Mexicans outnumbered Anglos, greater access to firearms, and an economically independent middle and upper class. Carrigan and Webb assert that most acts of armed resistance were “localized and ephemeral” (p. 107), but also note that the exploits of men like the outlaws Juan Cortina and Joaquín Murieta inspired their fellow Mexicans and frightened Anglos. Finally, Mexican journalists voiced trenchant and persistent political protests. Resistance, in other words, came in many forms. On the whole, however, Carrigan and Webb conclude that Mexican protest was limited and “too disparate to withstand the forces of repression” (p. 127).

Carrigan and Webb also spend time analyzing diplomacy. In comparison to African Americans, Mexicans benefited from an additional resource: diplomatic protest. Although Mexican diplomats did not experience success for decades, they did score a notable victory in the late 1890s when the U.S. government paid an indemnity to the family of Luis Moreno, a Mexican national who had been murdered by a mob in California, and the “success of Mexican diplomatic protest contributed to the marked decline of mob violence in the first decade of the twentieth century” (p. 141). Diplomatic officials gave Mexicans an advantage that African Americans did not have. Although diplomats such as Manuel de Zamacona and Matías Romero may have been largely forgotten (especially when compared to the outlaw Juan Cortina), Carrigan and Webb assert, correctly, that “their slower and more deliberate pursuit of justice did more to promote stable race relations in the southwestern borderlands” (p. 158).

Carrigan and Webb conclude with a brief discussion of how memories of the historical brutalities inflicted on Mexicans have receded. Carrigan and Webb note that this is reflected in the current scholarship, which largely focuses on African Americans and excludes Mexicans. Carrigan and Webb do not want to see less attention devoted to African Americans, but rather want people to know more about Mexican victims of mob violence. They posit that “Mexicans’ collective memory of mob violence informs their perception of contemporary vigilantism” (p. 176) and conclude on an optimistic note: recovering and uncovering the forgotten dead is not about opening old wounds, but a “means to enhance mutual understanding” (p. 177).

This is an important book. For one, it skillfully reminds historians that mob violence occurred throughout the United States and was not just a southern problem. Carrigan and Webb’s effective use

of comparative analysis is a reminder that comparative history does not solely consist of comparing two nations, but can be used to great effect to compare the experience of two groups over a period of time. Carrigan and Webb also deserve commendation for their archival work and for their skillful use of nontraditional sources to discuss mob violence. This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in mob violence, borderlands history, the postbellum United States, and diplomatic history and will prove useful in upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars.

Notes

[1]. For examples of other studies of lynching see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002); Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011); and Michael J. Pfeifer, *The Rough Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

[2]. Carrigan and Webb use “Mexicans” to refer both to people born in Mexico who resided in the United States as well as people of Mexican descent born in the United States. Their reason for so doing is the fact that the sources often do not distinguish between Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans.

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=41260>

Citation: Evan Rothera. Review of Carrigan, William D.; Webb, Clive, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41260>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).