

Sloan addresses a couple of topics that will be familiar to scholars of Mexico. She gives considerable attention to the artistic renderings of José Guadalupe Posada. She discusses the suicide of María Luisa Noecker, the daughter of a well-to-do German businessman. The famous bullfighter Rodolfo Gaona was suspected of “deflowering” the young woman, prompting her suicide. He was never convicted of wrongdoing. There were two other suspects, Rodolfo’s brother Enrique and Cirilo Pérez, an acquaintance of María’s. Enrique admitted to having sex with María, but medical examiners concluded that he and Cirilo could not have had sex with her because both men could not have achieved a hard-enough erection, an impairment caused by syphilis. The bullfighter was apparently full of virility and not full of syphilis, but had an alibi. Sloan does not solve the mystery, but concludes that the experts used in the case were driven as much by judgments about honor, class, and morality as by physical evidence.

One issue with the book, a problem that Sloan discusses, is the statistics she uses. In addition to newspaper articles, she relies heavily on 157 official suicide reports. Although this is a significant number of cases, it surely does not represent a clear picture of the true number of suicides during the 30-year period she studies. And it can be safely assumed that many suicides were covered up, especially among prominent families. The book also suffers from redundancy at times; the same causes of suicide, and even the same suicides, crop up throughout the text. But, overall, the book is excellent.

This book is an important contribution, not only to the study of suicide in early twentieth-century Mexico, but also to the history of science and medicine, media studies, intellectual history, and the study of public spaces. There is a lot that scholars across specializations will find of interest. It is well-written and intriguing enough to work in undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

*Arkansas State University*  
*Jonesboro, Arkansas*  
[jcastro@astate.edu](mailto:jcastro@astate.edu)

J. JUSTIN CASTRO

*Routes of Compromise: Building Roads and Shaping the Nation in Mexico, 1917–1952.* By Michael K. Bess. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Pp. xiv, 206. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$60.00 paper.  
 doi:10.1017/tam.2018.88

In 1946, a committee of local worthies in Monterrey approached President Miguel Alemán to present their case for a highway to Paredón, Coahuila, arguing that construction would be cheap, as the Ferrocarril Central Mexicano had over time cleared, graded, and then abandoned the route. The president agreed and transferred

the land from the department of railroads to the roadbuilders of the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas. The symbolism could not have been more clear: roads were to be to postrevolutionary Mexico what railways had been to the Porfiriato, the principal conduits of centrally driven economic and social development.

Even though scholars of modern Mexico know quite a lot about railroads (their construction, economic benefits, social costs, cultural status, and labor radicalism have all received serious study), we know rather little about roads. The Paredón story is one of many that Michael Bess presents to address this collective ignorance with his national history of roadbuilding in Mexico, which is based on two regional studies, Veracruz and Nuevo León. Introduced with Venustiano Carranza's proclamation that roads were a 'good thing,' the book starts with the first presidents who could do something about that realization, namely the Sonorans. The author then dives into the nitty-gritty of regional development, with the early demand for and bureaucratic supply of highways in his two selected states, and goes on to weave back and forth between federal and regional stories in each of the next three chapters (divided by *sexenio*), before wrapping up after the Alemán years with a precise conclusion.

Bess's history is one of ambition tempered by the pressures of reconstruction and economic depression, which kept the major expansion of Mexico's road system from occurring until the extraordinary boom of the postwar decade. Roads were central to state formation and economic development at all levels, from dirt tracks linking hamlets all the way to the Pan-American Highway. The political significance this gave them, again at all levels, was increased by their status as "a symbol and a metric of material progress" (149).

Bess's focus on the metrics of road building, is one of the strengths of the book. His statistics include traffic density, kilometers built in relation to the roadbed (dirt, macadam or asphalt), workers' minimum wages, and federal road spending adjusted for inflation (figures Bess derived himself). The statistics on the money spent are more reliable than those on the work done—references to roads that were never built are common enough, and contemporary motorists' maps do not record the vast expanses of asphalt that the government claimed—but all are useful for broader insights, bearing out Bess's proposal that in roadbuilding the sinews of power are laid bare. He provides, for example, one of the very few metrics of corruption with the real cost per kilometer of road built each year, showing soaring expenses in the second half of the 1940s. We know of Alemán's fabulous corruption from diplomatic reports, anecdote, and rumor—the migrating gold reserves, the tunnel to María Félix's house, the ranches in Africa—but these numbers give a comparative quantification of that corruption.

Numeric data complements the book's detailed qualitative examination of the technical, bureaucratic, and political complexities of choosing where to build roads and then getting the job done. Bess made an astute choice of research sites: both Veracruz and Nuevo León are resource-rich states and key transport corridors, but their political and

social structures are profoundly different, and the ensuing contrasts allow a much more comprehensive picture to be drawn than would either state considered alone. In Veracruz, the legacy of agrarian radicalism met with the failing state of the mid 1930s to the mid 1940s to create a decentralized world of road-making fiefdoms, some run by local communities and others by crony capitalists, resulting in a web of roads without a single hub. In Nuevo León, by contrast, a business-friendly administration built a centrally planned network of highways linking Monterrey to the border and Mexico City, with feeder roads from these running out to the state's smaller towns and villages. In both states that Bess considers, however, the fundamental reality was what he calls "a dynamic, robust, and exceedingly contentious political process" (144), in which the federal government acted as a gatekeeper to the postwar boom, and a host of local, bureaucratic, and capitalist actors alternately struggled and cooperated to build the roads that led there.

As will be apparent, this book is not just an important piece of political economy, but also a microcosm of the broader functioning of postrevolutionary politics, with its haggling, force, pragmatism, corruption, and strategic delivery of benefits—a world wherein, as Bess observes, left-wing presidents work with conservative businessmen, and right-wing presidents with revolutionary peasants. Its rich research would have benefitted from further contextualization in national terms—the *Cristiada* goes unobserved—or comparative terms.

Introducing the story from Brazil, with some of the same resources, challenges, and even *bochos* (there, *fuscas*) would have been interesting in gauging just how specific Mexico was. Above all, it would be extremely interesting to know how far the promises of roads were fulfilled, going beyond the individual sketches of economic and anomic impact that we have for places like Zinacantán or San José de Gracia. Yet, this would fill another book, and one with different intentions, built on the basis of this fine study. It is to be hoped that there will be a sequel.

Northwestern University  
Evanston, Illinois  
[gillinghamp@gmail.com](mailto:gillinghamp@gmail.com)

PAUL GILLINGHAM

*From Idols to Antiquity: Forging the National Museum of Mexico.* By Miruna Achim. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Pp. 327. \$60.00 cloth; \$30.00 paper. doi:10.1017/tam.2018.89

Visitors to Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum have for the last 54 years marveled at that institution and its integration of cultural heritage with both monumental modernist architecture and the modern nation-state. Miruna Achim's invaluable new book, a history of the first half-century of that museum's predecessor,