

# BANDIT COUNTRY? VISIONS OF DURANGO BY JOHN REED AND OTHER AMERICAN TRAVELERS OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Sergio Arturo ARZAC WASHINGTON\**

## *Resumen*

El objeto de estudio son cuatro relatos acerca de Durango, Mexico, escritos por norteamericanos durante la Revolución Mexicana y los años inmediatamente anteriores a ella. Se enfatizan las diferencias en la visión y manera de describir tiempo y lugar, apuntando hacia la noción de que los cuatro relatos no son sino diferentes construcciones mentales de individuos, que hubieran informado a los lectores norteamericanos de maneras distintas y opuestas acerca del Durango de la época.

## *Abstract*

This is a study of four first-hand accounts of Durango, Mexico, written by Americans during the Mexican Revolution and the years immediately before it. The differences in view and description are emphasized, pointing to the notion that the four accounts are but different individual mental constructs of a place and time, which would have informed completely different and opposing notions in the American reading public of what the Durango of that period might have been like.

...Durango, the lovely jewel of the Sierra Madre, which, bathed in golden light and softly fanned by gentle breezes caressing it with the softness of a feminine hand, nestles between protecting hills. "The Town of Sunshine" it is called by those who, once having seen it, are homesick for its endearing

\* Profesor de Cátedra, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Departamento de Arquitectura, Garza Sada 2501 Sur, Monterrey, N.L. 64849 México, correo electrónico: [sergioarzac@itesm.mx](mailto:sergioarzac@itesm.mx)

loveliness. Mother Earth, who is not stingy when once she has a mind to make a present, has placed on one side of it one of her miracles of nature, the “Cerro de Mercado”, a mountain of pure iron, six hundred million tons of pure iron ore.

Bruno Traven, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*

### *Introduction*

In northwest Mexico, the landscape of Durango changes dramatically from East to West. From the Chihuahuan Desert, to grasslands of twice as much rain at the valleys beneath the Sierra Madre Occidental, up to the mountains where one hundred twenty five centimeters of rainfall a year make a pine-oak forest possible. And at the western end of the gradient, the canyonlands form the Pacific side of the watershed.

The population of Mexico’s fourth largest state consists of about a million and a half, of whom roughly one third live in the capital city of Durango, founded 1563 in the Spanish quest for Empire and settled in the fertile valley on the eastern flank of the *Sierra*. The city would become capital of the huge Nueva Vizcaya province, which extended from South of the Tropic of Cancer to present-day New Mexico and beyond. This paper studies the constructed views of Durango by American travelers of the early twentieth century, made available to the American public as first hand accounts. These are contradictory views, by people coming from backgrounds at opposite ends of the political spectrum, and motivated by very different interests: on the one hand, businessmen seeking for profit, under heading two, and then journalist John Reed: “By afternoon we had climbed out of the mountains to the great upland plain of Northern Durango, and were jogging down the mile long waves of yellow prairie, stretching away so far that the grazing cattle dwindled into dots and finally disappeared at the base of the wrinkled purple mountains that seemed close enough as if they could be hit with a thrown stone” (Reed, p. 50).

### *Accounts of Three American Businessmen in Northern Durango*

One came scouting for business opportunities, because “in these days of twentieth-century enterprise no land like Western Mexico can long remain in reposeful slumber” (Wallace, p. 2). Another came as the son of a mining tycoon, and yet another was a former doctor lured by “the fabulous wealth of Mexico’s silver mines, especially in the Durango district” (Parker, p. 11).

Dillon Wallace wrote *Beyond the Mexican Sierras*, about his 1907-1908 travels in several Western Mexican states, one of which was Durango. Harry Arthur Buick authored *The Gringoes of Tepehuanes*, a chronicle of his time in Chihuahua, Durango and Sinaloa from the turn of the century to the first years of the revolution. And George Parker's *Guaracha Trail* is his memoir as a silver mine owner and operator before and during the same first revolutionary years as Buick's.

All three of them traveled in Northern Durango from the turn of the century to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917, the final era of the Porfirio Díaz 34 year dictatorship. Under his rule, what was (and still is) called "economic liberalism" had sold out Mexican business to foreign investors, "progressive" ideals pushed industry to develop to great heights at whatever human cost, and "enlightment" philosophies continued to dominate, with scientists being an important part of the Díaz government. To cite Wallace, "the late enlightened governor of Sinaloa a few years ago granted an American corporation a concession to survey the state's agricultural lands, giving a certain proportion of the lands surveyed as compensation for the work. The American company has title now to more than two million acres. Under the broad minded and far sighted policy that has characterized the administration of president Díaz, the most liberal concessions and fullest encouragement were given the new enterprise" (Wallace, p. xvii, xx).

During the *porfiriato*, industry grew and the oligarchy grew richer and more powerful. Foreign companies consolidated their colonialist foothold in Mexican business. And the vast majority of the Mexican population, the rural workers, the peasant class or *campesinado*, fell into utmost misery under the agricultural form of production organization known as the *hacienda*. A true feudal system similar to that of Europe's Middle Ages, the *haciendas* were huge landholdings or *latifundios*, (those in Northern Durango being some of the largest) in which an owner or *hacendado* kept the workers in debt for life. Debts were not pardoned after the peasant died, but were transferred to the surviving family. Company stores regulated this system by paying for work with food, always being "owed money" by the workers.

Under these conditions, it is no wonder that the bloody Mexican Revolution was about to explode. Buick and Parker got caught in the violence, whereas Reed arrived after the start of the revolution, commissioned to report on it. Only Dillon Wallace made all his travels through the Western Sierra Madre and the valleys of Durango before 1910. To him Don Porfirio was a hero, and describes him in this way: "Porfirio

Díaz is perhaps today the most remarkable man in the world. When Díaz came to the presidency in 1876, the country was infested with bandits. He organized the *rurales*, Mexico's efficient police force, and to-day travel is as safe in Mexico as it is in the United States" (Wallace, p. xv). The *rurales*, while imposing order, were one of the most brutally repressive forces that have ever existed anywhere.

Wallace was a staunch capitalist, proposing that for Western Mexico "colonizing schemes will spring into being as they did in California, the great haciendas will be divided into small ranches, and the country will be settled and civilized. It will be robbed of its seclusion, its quaint Indian and Spanish customs, and perhaps, of its contentment. It will be roused of its repose to a new era of push and enterprise" (Wallace, p. 2). He got some things right. Mexico is still a colonized country in the post-modern way. The haciendas were divided by the revolution, but not into small capitalist farms; rather agrarian reform gave them to the *campesinos* (many of the best lands, however, remained in the hands of the already powerful). Much of the vast country is not settled, and being taken over by the illegal drug production trade, it is not exactly "civilized". Mexico is definitely being robbed of its customs. As for contentment, Wallace had read this wrongly in the first place. Traveling in the Mexico of 1907 and 1908, the revolution was just around the corner.

When describing the local populations of the *Sierra de Durango*, as he crossed the mountains on horseback from Culiacán to Tepehuanes accompanied by a guide, Wallace writes: "this was the filthiest aggregation of humanity I had yet come in contact with, and evidently as degraded as filthy. Their miserable huts usually contain a single room with an overhanging roof in front to form a shed. Their fire consists of a tiny blaze, for they are very sparing of wood. This is pure laziness. The pine forests in which they live offer an abundance of fuel for the wielding of an axe" (Wallace, pp. 239, 241). But however awful the description of these "indians" might have been (all three of the travelers under this heading mistakenly called mestizos "indians"), Wallace was quick to accept their hospitality: "It was our custom to halt at night to one of these indian huts, where we were always sure of a cordial welcome..." (Wallace, p. 266). The kind of language he used to describe his hosts seems inappropriate. And however inhospitable the buildings of the locals appeared to him, once arriving in the town of Tepehuanes Wallace would be comforted by a different kind of architecture: "...rode over to the railway station to verify the landlord's statements as to trains. It is a typical American station, and in contrast to the native buildings of Spanish design —those cold, cheerless, unsympathetic

blocks of masonry— appealed to me as exceedingly cosy and homelike” (Wallace, p. 250).

At least Wallace did acknowledge some positive aspects of the culture of his host country (all four of the travelers in the paper acknowledged the natural beauties with great emphasis). The kindness of the destitute farmers in offering a place to stay, and also, the fact that he never had anything stolen. In his words, “Every one told us that nothing was safe anywhere from thievery, though I did not lose a single article while in Mexico” (Wallace, p. 50). A colonialist, yes, but one who did regret the loss of cultures. Wallace put down the hosts, but dismissed myths about their all being thieves. He describes Northern Durango as a land of filthy “indians”, but not of bandits. Revolutionaries he does not seem to have envisioned, for to his eyes, all was well regarding the structure of society and power. His writings are biased, but considering his adventurer-businessman background, somewhat reasonable. He does not seem to excessively romanticize Mexico, and his travel went more or less as he had expected. Buick and Parker were not so fortunate, for the revolution caused many changes in their plans.

Harry Arthur Buick came to Northern Durango as a small boy at the turn of the century, and spent most of the next fifteen years in the region before going to World War I. His father had bought a mine near the small town of Tepehuanes, at El Tovar. The family lived in grand style, bringing their luxuries from the United States, grand piano and all. Their mining venture was a big success and they amassed a fortune from it, which they banked in Texas and Colorado. But they also had their share of misfortune: a flood destroyed their mining installation, and they were forced to escape the Mexican revolutionary violence, separated from the father who was taken prisoner. All went well in the end, and they reunited back in the United States to continue their opulent existence.

Their travels, unlike Wallace’s, were full of unanticipated and unpleasant experiences. When going to Tepehuanes from Parral, seven of their mules were stolen one night. “About a month later the rest of our mules and some horses were stolen and this time it became necessary to pursue them, as only four horses remained to us” (Buick, p. 53). The Buicks showed great character and determination in their enterprise, and just like they enjoyed a privileged position and many comforts, they also endured many ordeals. “Most of the Mexicans who accompanied us from Parral refused to go into Durango and turned back. At one modest hacienda (?) we came to, the owner strongly advised us not to go further into this wild and bandit infested country” (Buick, p. 54). This literature describes Northern

Durango as a land of bandits and of revolutionaries. But it so happened that the Buicks' unpleasant experiences came more from the latter. In a period of anti-Americanism, the elder Buick was beaten when arrested (other than that no one suffered physical harm). Their store was ransacked (mine owners also owned stores in the mining settlements). This made Harry Arthur Buick, the author of the memoirs, rather bitter about Mexicans, so much as to describe them as "a nation of sadists and masochists, their ingenuity in inflicting death and suffering in the most painful and humiliating forms having nowhere been exceeded" (Buick, p. 113).

Doctor George Parker retired from his practice in New Mexico, after spending most of his career as an oil field physician, to go in search of a Mexican silver mine to exploit. His is probably the most exciting account, and his personality, as perceived by his writings, the kindest, most compassionate and most understanding of all three writers discussed under this heading. His accounts do not seem intentionally distorted or particularly biased, but he, like Buick, also had to endure the troubles of being caught in a revolutionary war. However, his descriptions of both bandits and revolutionaries show a broad minded perception and an understanding attitude.

Apart from his exploits as a hunter, Parker seems respectful of the place. About his early days in the mountains of Durango, traveling on horseback toward an old Spanish mine, he writes "Life was beginning to look better for me, and for the first time, I took my rifle out of its scabbard and began to kill ground squirrels and *guacamayo* with long tails and plumage of the most beautiful colors-red, green, blue, white and golden yellow" (Parker, p. 28).

Parker was not exactly an altruist doctor on a healing mission, although he did do some of that. Ambition was what took him to Mexico, together with a longing for adventure. "From what I had seen, I knew that it (the mine) had been fabulously rich, the bodies of ore large, and I was sure in my mind that the Spaniards had only scratched it and that larger and richer bodies of ore would be found below the deepest working we had been able to examine. With Mexico being the largest silver-producing country in the world, and so many English and American companies producing and smelting gold and silver on such a tremendous scale, why had such bodies of high-grade ore been allowed to lie idle for so long?" (Parker, p. 37).

Parker succeeded in finding a rich mine to buy and make productive. In fact, very productive. It turned out to be a great money maker, even though the account includes descriptions of thievery by workers. Parker was

tolerant of this and did not repress it violently. As was the custom at the time, foreign investors received protection from government forces when threatened by banditry or, especially, revolution. Parker's mine was no exception, and the state governor himself sent troops to protect the place when violence escalated in the sierras, both in terms of crime and of armed revolutionary action. By then the mine had been attacked by bandit gangs twice, and successfully defended by Parker and his workers both times. "The scout said they were planning to come over and rob the mine, but he didn't know just when. There were about forty of them. They would go into a village or ranch, sometimes burn the men to make them tell where their few *centavos* were hidden, then kill them for not having more; they would take the women and the girls to the mountains with them, leaving little children and babies by themselves. Now many of the people were leaving their ranches and small villages, going into the mountains and living in caves" (Parker, p. 146).

There is a clear distinction made by author Parker between bandits and revolutionaries, which is something that Wallace and especially Buick did not do. In Parker's experience, unlike in Buick's, the revolutionaries were decent people. An army of the revolution, led by a General whose name is not given, stopped at the mine having heard that there an American doctor could be found. Doctor Parker tended to the wounded men, and both himself and the commanding officer were impressed with each other. The General asked the doctor for supplies from the store (owned by Parker, as mine owners would also own the store in the settlement). Parker opened the store and made it all available for the revolutionary. Then, the General sorted out only the cheapest blankets, hats and *guarachas* (distorted from *huaraches*). Parker describes: "The General had not taken anything for himself. I saw him looking at my cases of cigarettes. He left me most of them. Then he began begging me to go with him, as an army doctor. The General treated me very decently" (Parker, pp. 152-152, and 174). Doctor Parker, while in the city of Durango later on, was requisitioned by the same General to have him treat his wounded shoulder, for he so trusted and admired the American doctor. A personal relationship emerged between the two men.

### *John Reed's "Insurgent Mexico"*

Harvard-educated American journalist John Reed was commissioned by *Metropolitan Magazine* and the *New York World* to cover the Mexican Revolutionary War in 1913. A sympathizer of the Revolutionary

movement, Reed had no problem in relating to the Mexican peasants with whom he shared living quarters in the occupied *haciendas* and shared also the risk of dying under the bullets of the government forces. An idealist who believed in a socialist ethic, Reed identified with the struggle against oppressive powers.

It is a delight to change readings from Parker, Wallace and Buick to Reed, simply because of the gap in literary quality. The value of the first three lies in their being first hand accounts, rather than being meritorious as writing. Reed's book *Insurgent Mexico* is both. The first three were not professional writers, whereas Reed was that and more. His first hand account of the Bolshevik revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, was so successful that it eclipsed *Insurgent Mexico*.

Not only sympathizing with the left but also himself being a member of the communist party, Reed emphasized what he saw as good in the Mexican revolutionary struggle. Particularly his admiration for Pancho Villa alienated him from the American mainstream. "In 1913 Villa set out to conquer Mexico with four companions, three horses, two pounds of sugar and coffee, and a pound of salt. He recruited in the mountains near San Andres, and so great was his popularity that within one month he had raised an army of three thousand men; in two months he had driven the federal garrisons all over the state of Chihuahua to Chihuahua city; in six months he had taken Torreon; and in seven and a half Juarez had fallen to him, the federal army had evacuated Chihuahua, and Northern Mexico was almost free" (Reed, p. 118).

But however well he might have spoken of Villa, Reed would also mention atrocities committed by Villa's high-ranking men: "At the first taking of Torreon, Pablo Seanes and two other officers, Major Fierro and Captain Borunda, had personally executed eighty unarmed prisoners, shooting until their fingers got tired of pulling the trigger..." (Reed, p. 56).

The chaos and lack of discipline of the revolutionary forces was described by Reed in rather brilliant fashion, without any attempts at making this army appear like anything pretty: "They came on the dead run, all shouts and cracking revolvers, until they were only a hundred feet away, then jerked their little cow ponies cruelly to a staggering halt with bleeding mouths, a whirling confusion of men, horses and dust" (Reed, p. 59).

Regarding his perception of the peasant guerrilla fighters with whom he shared quarters at the occupied *Hacienda la Mimbrera*, Reed writes that "pretty soon somebody shut the door. The room became full of smoke and fetid with human breath. What little silence was left from the chorus of snoring was completely obliterated by the singing which lasted, I guess,



until dawn. The *compañeros* had fleas... But I rolled up in my blankets and slept better than I had before in Mexico” (Reed, p. 68-69).

About his experience with honest peasant members of the guerrilla revolt, which contradicted the warnings he had received in the States: “Americans had insisted to me that the Mexican was fundamentally dishonest. That I could expect to have my outfit stolen the first day out. Now for two weeks I have lived with as rough a band of ex-outlaws as there was in the army. They had not been paid a cent for six weeks, and were so desperately poor that they couldn’t boast sandals or sarapes. I was a stranger with a good outfit, unarmed. I had a hundred and fifty pesos, which I put conspicuously at the head of my bed when I slept. And I never lost a thing. But what is more, I was not permitted to pay for my food. In a land where food was scarce and tobacco almost unheard of, I was supplied all I could smoke by the *compañeros*. Every suggestion from me that I should pay was an insult” (Reed, pp. 70-71).

Reed tended to romanticize this land of revolution, but he also described many horrors that could characterize it as bandit country: “Almost every hundred yards along the road there were little heaps of stones surmounted by wooden crosses, each one the memorial of a murder. And occasionally a tall, whitewashed cross arose in the middle of the side road, to protect some little *rancho* from the visits of the devil. Spanish bayonet and the great barrel cactus watched us like sentinels from the skyline of the desert and always the mighty Mexican vultures circled over us, as if they knew we were going to war....” (Reed, p. 60).

In this exceptional account, John Reed described the Northern Durango of the time as a place of violent guerrilla warfare, set against dramatic mountain and desert landscapes. His sympathy for the peasant revolutionary army and their leaders is made clear, and he glosses over many of their defects. However, he also tries to present a balanced view of things, and in fact writes in detail about many of the vices of the revolution.

The descriptions of people and landscape are brilliant. Moving from Western mountains to Eastern desert in Durango, the narrative takes us through the gradual change of scene, both in terms of people and physical place. From his encounter and experience with revolutionary General Tomas Urbina, at the height of his power, in the occupied *hacienda* that had become his headquarters in Las Nieves (meaning “the snows”, at the foot of the Sierra), to the scorching desert near Torreon, where Reed almost died in a famous lost battle at La Cadena. Approaching Torreon, he writes: “So close we were, barely two miles from Gomez Palacio, that we could look down the torn track into the town. We could see the black round water tank,

and back of that the roundhouse, and across the track from them both the low adobe walls of the Brittingham corral. The smokestacks and buildings and trees of La Esperanza soap factory rose clear and still, like a little city, to the left. Almost directly to the right of the railroad track it seemed, the stark, stony peak of the Cerro de la Pila mounted steeply to the stone reservoir that crowned it, and sloped off westward in a series of smaller peaks, a spiny ridge a mile long. Most of Gomez lay behind the shoulder of the Cerro, and at its western end the gardens and villas of Lerdo make a vivid patch of green in the desert. The great brown mountains on the West make a might sweep around behind the two cities, and then fell away South again in folds on folds of gaunt desolation. And directly South from Gomez, stretched along the base of this range, lay Torreon, the richest city of Northern Mexico “(Reed, p. 179).

Finally, there is an aspect of Reed’s writing that separates him from the three other chroniclers, and this has to do not with political position or with literary quality. It is simply about humanity: Reed would always, whenever possible, include the character’s name. Not only in the case of a General or *hacendado*, but in everyman’s case, everyone with whom he had personal contact, such as the peasant revolutionaries, he writes about by name. This in stark contrast to Wallace’s (filthy) “indians”, Buicks “workers”, and Parker’s revolutionary quasi-friend “the General”.

I have included so many passages of Reed’s book for two main reasons: first, they are so charged with meaning, about revolutionary ideals and about solidarity with the underdogs, that I found them deep and philosophical. And second, they are simply brilliant writing. *Insurgent Mexico* is an extraordinary book, not only for its value as a historical document but also for its literary merit: “Now the Western mountains were blue velvet, and the pale sky a blood stained canopy of watered silk. But by the time we reached the great gate of the ranch, above was only a shower of stars....” (Reed, pp. 50-51).

### *Opposing Constructs of Northern Durango for the American Reader (a Conclusion)*

If I were an American reader who had never been to Mexico, never heard of the state of Durango, and read the four books that this paper discusses, then what the books say would be the basis to form my mental construct of Durango, Mexico.

The picture of Northern Durango made available by these books to the American reading public is, like all descriptions, a construct. It is not the

real landscape, but for those who would read the descriptions, and know nothing else about Durango, this would be the closest thing. But different individuals see things differently, and what is more, they can describe things differently using intentional biases to lead them to certain ends, depending on their personal interests, in the case of this paper the interests of the authors being political and economic. A distorted picture is always the result. In order to really know and understand a place, there is nothing like the physical experience of place.

Bruno Traven's book *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* romanticizes Durango to the same degree as the four books studied. Only this one is a novel, and not a real account. No matter, myth and reality cross over in the first hand accounts as much as they do in the novel. Traven, who loved Mexico, did not do much to dismiss the bandit country legend of Durango, rather emphasizing it, for it reached the world in John Huston's film *Treasure*. But why would Traven have wanted to? Is there any reason why he should? Is this land, which certainly was of revolutionaries, also a land of bandits? Bruno Traven was much kinder in writing about the city of Durango, a paragraph that starts this paper. But that image never made the silver screen.

### References

- Buick, Harry Arthur, *The Gringos of Tepehuanes*, Longmans, Green and Company, Ltd., London, 1967.
- Parker, George, *Guaracha Trail: Adventures of an American Doctor in the Bandit Country of Northern Mexico*, E.P., Dutton & Company, Inc., New York, 1951.
- Reed, John, *Insurgent Mexico*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1969.
- Traven, Bruno, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Jonathan Cape, Ltd., London, 1980.
- Wallace, Dillon, *Beyond the Mexican Sierras*, McClurg & Co., A. C., 1910.

