Katrina B. Olds

Forging the Past: Invented Histories in Counter-Reformation Spain. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 440. Hb, \$65.

We humans are exceedingly curious about our collective past, often craving material objects as witnesses to earlier ages. The sudden discovery of artifacts, whether the skeletal remains of a slain English king, treasures from ancient Egyptian tombs, or gold coins from sunken ships, invariably causes great excitement. When actual items of artistic or historic value cannot be found, there are those who seek to satisfy this hunger for a tangible past by creating ingenious replicas. Thus, the forger emerges as a figure of fascination, as, in our time, the careers of Wolfgang Beltracchi, the art forger and artist, and Frank Abagnale, protagonist of the film “Catch Me if You Can,” attest.

In this thorough and thoughtful study, Katrina Olds explores these themes of discovery (Latin: *inventio*) and forgery in the world of scholarship in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. Jerónimo Román de la Higuera (1537/38–1611) is certainly not a household name, but, as Olds shows, his fabrication of the texts that would come to be known as the “false chronicles” (*falsos cronicones*) had implications for the writing of sacred history in Spain far beyond his own lifetime.

In 1594, Higuera, then “a middle-aged Jesuit priest in Toledo,” in central Castile, claimed to have found four long-lost chronicles that documented the history of Christianity in Iberia, from late Roman times through the Middle Ages. These texts provided copious information about previously unknown bishops and saints, and the communities from which they sprang. “If the chronicles sounded too good to be true,” Olds mordantly comments, “that is because they were” (2). Nevertheless, despite some doubts about inaccuracies, anachronistic references, and puzzling lacunae, most scholars and clerics accepted the texts as authentic and used them as sources for writing the history of the church in Spain for centuries to come.

Olds introduces us to Higuera in her first chapter, sketching his “complex role as a respected yet divisive man of learning and religion” (29). Earlier in his career, using spurious sources, he had tried to convince his fellow *toledanos* that a different figure had been the city’s first bishop, rather than the one they had venerated for centuries. Olds uses this incident as a “fitting introduction to Higuera as a complicated character who [...] drew upon archaeological, documentary, and hagiographical traditions in order to formulate a vision of the past that was as seductive to some as it was repellent to others” (31). In chapter two, she continues this profile of a controversial figure, discussing Higuera’s

embroilment in internecine politics among Spanish Jesuits as well as his scholarly peers.

At this point in the book, Olds makes an important authorial decision. Rather than focus on the circumstances that might have led Higuera to perpetrate a notorious fraud, she opts for an in-depth analysis of the elements he used to construct (or, “invent,” in the modern English sense) the false chronicles. She points out “how much profound knowledge, subtle learning, and hard work was necessary to produce [the forged texts], positing that “by looking at *what* Higuera did and *how* he did it—we might come closer to understanding *why*” (98, author’s emphases). After all, Olds reasons, in order to “create a convincing forgery, one needs to be intimately familiar with the *authentic* sources of the past” (99, author’s emphasis). Appropriately, if ironically, she entitles her third chapter “How to Forge a History: The Authentic Sources of the False Chronicles.”

Thus, in chapters 4–6, Olds examines in intricate detail the ways in which Higuera deployed his study of philology, ancient inscriptions, antiquarian texts, mythology, and other fields in the making of a usable past. Put another way, she uses Higuera’s creation of the false chronicles as a window into the rarified world of intellectuals in early modern Spain and Catholic Europe generally.

In the book’s last four chapters, Olds looks at the manifold ways in which the chronicles were received and utilized by various figures and constituencies. During the seventeenth century, scholars’ long-standing humanist fascination with classical antiquity merged with the imperative of a Counter-Reformation Catholic Church to document its apostolic origins and reaffirm an unbroken succession of bishops. Cities, towns, and regions, too, sought to establish ancient origins and emphasize the continuity of their histories as Christian communities. This was particularly true in Spain’s southernmost region of Andalusia, subject to Muslim rule for centuries after the Moorish invasion of the Iberian peninsula in 711 CE. Using the case of the town of Arjona, in the diocese of Jaén, Olds deftly shows how local antiquarians, clerics, and ordinary believers made use of the chronicles to read about native early Christian martyrs, “invent” (in the Latin sense) their relics, and establish new cults of old saints that would integrate them into a larger sacred history. In these ways Olds connects intellectual history with local, national, ecclesiastical, and identity politics in seventeenth-century Spain.

I would just make two comments. *Forging the Past* is not for non-specialists, undergraduate students, or the faint of heart. This is a serious book about scholarship, meant for scholars. Moreover, left somewhat unresolved is the

“moral of the story.” Olds uses the terms “forging” and “invented” right in the title of her book, yet at times seems determined to let Higuera off the hook. She acknowledges, for example, that the Jesuit created “forgotten martyrs through the medium of the ersatz medieval chronicle,” but quickly adds that his immersion in the writings of Prudentius makes him “look less like a historical forger, and more like the late antique poet upon whose material he drew so liberally” (124). After reading Olds’s exhaustive examination of Higuera’s efforts to interweave “authentic documentary, numismatic, and epigraphic evidence with pious legend” and sift “the resulting product through his own imaginative filter” (314) is the reader meant to overlook his deliberate act of forgery?

These considerations aside, Katrina Olds has produced an impressive study based on meticulous detective work and careful analysis. Scholars interested in intellectual history, Counter-Reformation Catholicism, and the development of modern historiographical methods will be enriched by this work of authentic erudition.

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