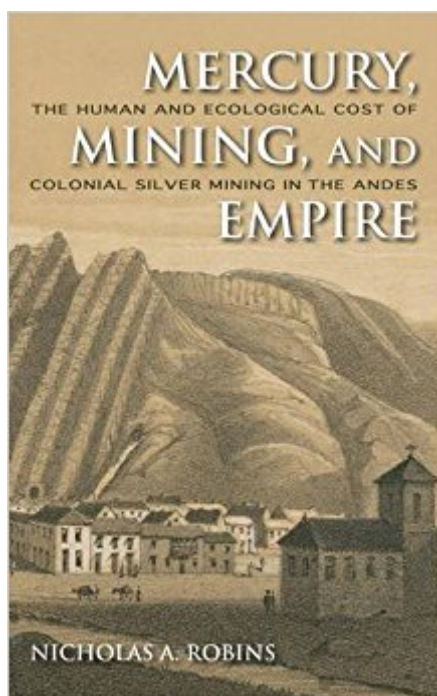


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Mercury, Mining, And Empire: The Human And Ecological Cost Of Colonial Silver Mining In The Andes



Synopsis

On the basis of an examination of the colonial mercury and silver production processes and related labor systems, *Mercury, Mining, and Empire* explores the effects of mercury pollution in colonial Huancavelica, Peru, and Potosí, in present-day Bolivia. The book presents a multifaceted and interwoven tale of what colonial exploitation of indigenous peoples and resources left in its wake. It is a socio-ecological history that explores the toxic interrelationships between mercury and silver production, urban environments, and the people who lived and worked in them. Nicholas A. Robins tells the story of how native peoples in the region were conscripted into the noxious ranks of foot soldiers of proto-globalism, and how their fate, and that of their communities, was chained to it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This book contributes in important and novel ways to the understanding of the dramatic environmental and social consequences of silver mining as carried out from mid-16th century to late 18th century in the then Spanish viceroyalty of Peru." Academia.edu
"This is interdisciplinary history at its best. A path-breaking study that... will certainly be a 'must-read' book."
David Cahill, University of New South Wales
"Robins underscores mining's devastating heritage throughout this well-substantiated work, which will appeal to historians of mining, the economy, and those interested in the effects of global capitalism on the environment."
Colonial Latin American Historical Review
"One of the many strengths of this impressive

book is Robins's use of wholly independent data sets (historical/archival and environmental studies). These intersect and make for a convincing case study. The sixty pages of endnotes, apart from a glossary and extensive bibliography, speak to Robins's thorough scholarship. This socio-environmental history, as Robins calls it, is a pathbreaking contribution to the field." *Technology and Culture* "Overall, the book should appeal to a broad audience and could be read by undergraduates.... The book is rich in evidence and anecdotes about the wretched conditions that so many indigenous peoples faced throughout the colonial period."

Environmental History "In *Mercury, Mining and Empire*, Nicholas Robins provides a superbly researched piece of interdisciplinary history that argues that the post-Conquest genocide of the indigenous population of what is now Bolivia and Peru occurred as a result of a highly exploitative system of silver and mercury mining. Thus Robins analyzes a double genocide that initially entailed the death of up to ninety percent of the indigenous peoples due to illnesses brought to the Americas by the Spanish, and continued with the subsequent genocidal destruction wrought by the toxic effects of the emerging mining industry."

Journal of Genocide Research "With meticulous research and vivid prose, Nicholas A. Robins examines silver mining's human cost in the royal mercury mines of Huancavelica, Peru, and the silver mines of Potosi." *American Historical Review* "Beyond being a well-written, coherent, thorough and compelling story, Robin's work offers us an indispensable cautionary tale."

Environmental Philosophy "The book itself is a distinguished contribution to the polemic on mining, colonialism, and socio-environmental degradation. It will make for a strong addition to undergraduate and graduate lists. Robins's synthetic skills, the descriptive richness of the historical source work, the verve of the writing, and the passion of the argument, all combine to make *Mercury, Mining, and Empire* a book [with which] to be reckoned...." *H-Environment*, August 2012 "Robin's book updates the literature on Latin American mining with ecological considerations. The academic community as well as persons interested in the ramifications and consequences of mineral extraction throughout the world would do well to read and reflect on the lessons such an analysis advances." *Enterprise & Society* "Robins draws on a wealth of primary sources and relevant secondary literature. In vigorous prose, he details the technology used in mines and refining mills and the horrific conditions that workers faced." *Business History Review* "Robins combines archival work and reading of published primary materials, air pollution modeling, and knowledge of medical research on health effects of mercury exposure in a superb treatment of Andean colonial mining." *HAHR* "Overall, this is a fantastic book that brings together environmental, labor, and colonial history, confirming the contributions of environmental

studies to understanding the past.... Highly recommended." --Choice "An astonishing history of the destruction of colonial Indian communities in Peru and Bolivia. Robins has woven deep archival research with modern science to identify and interpret the consequences of silver production and toxic exposure to mercury. This is trans-disciplinary research at its very best." --John Vandenberg, Duke University Robins (North Carolina State Univ.) reconstructs the practically unknown history of the environmental and health consequences of mining mercury in colonial Peru and Bolivia. Using a wide range of primary documents and an impressive interdisciplinary approach, the author illustrates the dramatic impact of mercury on mineworkers, mining towns, and the local ecosystem. Through the analysis of colonial sources (chronicles, letters, and archival documentation) as well as the use of scientific methods, Robins is able to estimate the mercury concentrations in the mines of Huancavelica and Potosí and the impact on workers' and residents' health, arguing that mercury was responsible for the death and poisoning of 'hundreds of thousands of people' at the time. Placing this environmental story in the larger history of Spanish colonization and colonial mining, the author shows the relationship between mercury poisoning and the exploitation of indigenous people through the mita system--the labor draft that forced Andean communities to provide labor for mining. Overall, this is a fantastic book that brings together environmental, labor, and colonial history, confirming the contributions of environmental studies to understanding the past. Summing Up: Highly recommended. Graduate students/faculty. --Choice A. Vergara, California State University, Los Angeles, March 2012

Nicholas A. Robins is a lecturer in the Department of History at North Carolina State University. He is author of *Native Insurgencies and the Genocidal Impulse in the Americas* (IUP, 2005) and editor (with Adam Jones) of *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice* (IUP, 2009), among other works.

Somewhat difficult to follow at times but excellent information. I highly recommend it to someone interested in this subject.

This is a sobering account of the cost of colonial silver mining in the Andes, This includes not only the considerable human cost of near-slavery in the mines themselves, and the toll taken by the processing of mercury for use in the mines, but the large amount of mercury pollution--a sort of gift that keeps on giving even after centuries. Robins estimates that the colonial era left behind 90,000 to 100,000 tons of mercury pollution (another estimate I have seen is 50,000 tons), still affecting

people in the Potosi and other areas. The book seems thoroughly researched. Readers should be aware that the book is strongly biased against the Spanish colonial regime. He calls the whole colonial endeavor genocidal. The information is solid, the writing is good, but this is some sobering material.

Nicholas Robins, the author of *Mercury, Mining, and Empire* is a leading historian of Colonial Latin American history. His present book, based on archival, historical, scientific, and theoretical materials, is a superb study of the Spanish domination in 17-18th century Peru and Bolivia, and of the exploitation of native peoples in the silver mines, which helped to fund Spanish imperialism in other areas of the world. Additionally, the mining process was heavily indebted to the use of mercury to separate silver from rock, and the result was disastrous to the people at the time, but the author shows, continues to afflict those in the areas of the mining even in the 21st century. A work of meticulous historical examination, but one that joins the past with the present, history with the current environment.

Very interesting.

An important and well researched book expertly presented. Dr. Robins provides economic, geopolitical, and societal insights in an historical, current, and future commercial contexts useful to anyone interested or working in the Andean region. Tom Blinten Managing Partner and CEO PanaMax Capital

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