



Unruly Histories

William T. Vollmann, *Imperial* (Viking, 2009. xxx + 1,306 pp. \$55.)

As a history professor, I get annoyed when student papers refer to history books as novels. **Novel = fiction; history book = non-fiction**, I scribble in the margins again and again. But my students unwittingly remind me of a larger truth: novelists and historians both invent stories, the main difference being that the rules of novel-writing are less rigid than the rules history-writing. So what happens when a novelist writes history? William T. Vollmann's epic perusal of the U.S.-Mexico border, *Imperial*, defies categorization. The author crosses various genres—fiction, memoir, journalism, history—to spawn a hydra-like book. Under the amorphous category of creative non-fiction, it may go down as a minor magnum opus. Judged solely as a history book, *Imperial* doesn't conform to scholarly norms, but that could be considered a compliment. In its unrestrained messiness, this book is more honest about the human experience than most exemplars of historical writing.

Vollmann focuses on the Imperial Valley, a little-known, little-loved corner of his home state, California. Most of the nation's winter lettuce and cantaloupes come from here—a desert basin below sea level where the brackish remains of the Colorado River discharge from canals onto stubbly green fields. The U.S.-Mexico border divides the valley in two. On the U.S. side, legal and illegal immigrants toil in the ferocious sun. Although the federal government brought water to this land to promote small farms, the U.S. side of the Imperial Valley belongs to agribusiness. Every year, hundreds of prospective workers defy the U.S. Border Patrol, and thousands more try. The odds of getting across are probably better than getting ahead. Imperial County typically has California's highest unemployment rate—up to forty percent in the peak of summer, the fieldworkers' off-season. Dreams and despair coat the dry air in Calexico, California, and

Mexicali, Mexico, the Imperial Valley's estranged twin cities. On the Mexican side, maquiladoras and water shortages threaten the future of communal farming. Downstream from the factories and farms, at the bottom of the landlocked valley, the Salton Sea shimmers and smells like a dystopian oasis. This accidental lake formed in 1905 when the Colorado burst through a dike. Sustained by agricultural and now industrial runoff, the Salton Sea grows saltier and more polluted every year, and will become a dead sea unless government agencies intervene to save what has become a critical habitat for migratory birds. Ecologically and socially, *Imperial* is a paradox. This divided binational wasteland of abundance would be the perfect setting for a major American book, even the Great American Novel.

Vollmann wanted to write that novel, or at least a stateside counterpart to his WWII mega-fiction, *Europe Central*, winner of the 2005 National Book Award. The first 180 pages of *Imperial* are a longwinded prologue explaining how Vollmann embarked on his borderlands fiction and how he floundered. Along the way, he shares his thoughts on his hero Steinbeck, Flaubert, and *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, a pulp novel from 1911 (later made into a movie) set in the Imperial Valley. Vollmann is generous about everything, especially himself: we learn that he needed to write about the valley after he won and lost the adoration of a local painter, a one-of-a-kind woman, the love of his life. He chronicles their breakup in agonizing detail, complete with footnotes. To ease his heartache and to sublimate his erotic desires, Vollmann turned to Mexico. He fell in love with the place, or at least the people there—the whores and junkies of Mexicali, the *pollos* (illegal border-crossers) and the *campesinos* (fieldworkers). Only history could do justice to their pathos, he decided. He repurposed his novelistic research; he turned it into a non-fiction book about the research itself.

When the book's historical section approaches, Vollmann loudly cautions the reader with a sign-box, "**WARNING OF IMPENDING ARIDITY.**" This warning must be flippant, you think, but Vollmann follows through:

Imperial becomes a tedious compendium of local history facts. However, the book is not boring like a standard history book based on the same sources. History professors tend to be dull in print because of their express functionality; they present contextualized facts in logical order in service of a thesis. An academic book of history must look like a "history book"—introduction, main chapters, conclusion, notes, bibliography, index. The author's feelings generally have no place, nor does the personal pronoun. By contrast, Vollmann has built a career, and inspired a cult of personality, as a self-revealing macho poet who dares to explore the extremities of the planet and the psyche. He seeks out warlords, drug dealers, and pimps for inspiration. Sex workers serve as his muses. His omnipresent voice—sarcastic yet tenderhearted, erudite yet conversational—doesn't sound like a historian. And certainly he doesn't organize his thoughts like one. *Imperial* contains over 100 pages of non-traditional endnotes yet no index despite having more than 200 chapters, many of which consist of a single paragraph or a single sentence; others go on and on with discursive paragraphs that stretch to multiple pages.

So how can such a book by such an author be tedious? Vollmann's lack of restraint is his debilitating strength. The author shows all of the enthusiasm of a top history student, tracking down primary sources in government archives and small-town newspapers, but none of the discipline of a tenured history professor. This is full immersion historical writing; you sink or swim with the author as he unleashes a flood of information. Professional historians are like dams: they capture a flood of data, and release a manageable stream. *Imperial* is like the undammed Colorado—a muddy red swirl with rocks and trees. There is method behind the debris, however. Vollmann has developed a novel way of capsulizing historical themes, a method of summarization that paradoxically requires prolixity. As he unleashes a flood of quotes (none of them in quotation marks), he calls attention to certain evocative phrases. These catchphrases or memes—his favorite being "**WATER IS HERE,**" an old newspaper headline about the

onset of irrigation—get repeated and restated in different fonts and guises throughout the text. After this long, wordy process of accretion, Vollmann can in the end compose a powerful, succinct meta-summary chapter composed of nothing but strings of these memorable phrases in various visual styles: a poetic distillation of the local past.

Vollmann plays with voice as well as form. To map one locale with words, he deliberately draws on multiple stylistic traditions. Like de Tocqueville, he looks for the essence of America on its backroads. Some of his rhetorical flourishes are decidedly Whitmanesque. On the meta-level, Vollmann resembles the American metafictional authors John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace—postmodern novelists who write the act of writing into their texts. Yet his dogged pursuit of the real-life underlife takes more after the “New Journalism” practiced by Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and especially Hunter S. Thompson, who would approve of Vollmann’s gonzo predilections—trying meth and crack, hiring prostitutes, hopping trains. At other times, however, Vollmann assumes the sober, fact-finding persona of Depression-era California muckrakers like Upton Sinclair, Carey McWilliams, and Paul Taylor. Overall, *Imperial* seems to be saying that no one style, no one method, no one perspective can capture the beautiful disarray and savage beauty of the U.S.-Mexico border; no standard history could honestly capture this messy, messed-up place.

Imperial pushes the limits of the history book, but does so at time when the future of the printed book as the leading form of learned communication is in doubt. Only a famous author with a canny agent and a cult following could convince a publisher to produce a \$55 book that weighs four pounds. Within academia, historians continue to churn out manuscripts even as presses drastically pare down their catalogues. The old academic business model—university professors write books, university presses publish them, and university libraries purchase them—is falling apart. At my university, for example, the proposed budget for monograph acquisitions this fiscal year

is \$0. For academic historians, this crisis presents an opportunity to rethink the profession. Like it or not, more of our book-length projects will have to migrate to the Internet. But they shouldn’t necessarily take form as e-books. We should look around for creative ways to repackage our histories. In this regard, Vollmann provides a great anti-inspiration. Not his book but his research would make a fantastic website—an interactive map of the border where hyperlinked geo-points lead to site-specific illustrations, sound and video clips, interview transcripts, essays, primary sources, and more. Such a website would convey the interconnectedness of the U.S.-Mexican border better than any thick tome. Unfortunately, in its printed form, *Imperial* resembles a miniature version of the entire World Wide Web: a forest of links, many of them broken; a swamp of rambling, egocentric blogs; an ocean of pseudo-scholarly encyclopedia entries; and, most of all, webpage after webpage of girls, girls, girls.

More than any other discipline, history remains wed to the monograph—a particular form of book. This form has hardly changed since the creation of the historical profession in the nineteenth century. Even though we professors have lost faith in Truth and Objectivity, even though we know about the challenge of postmodern theory to the authority of the text, we continue to write single-topic books in the omniscient third person voice. As convention dictates, we present our books as logical outcomes of research plans, not compromises between imperfect documentary sources and limited human resources. Only when you talk to historians in private do you learn about the personal, prosaic, and random reasons why histories take particular shapes. Here are some fictional examples from imaginary American professors:

I’m embarrassed to admit it, but my Spanish skills are so limited that I chose a project that permitted me to exclude Mexico from my study.

My editor was a stickler about the word limit, so I had to cut the chapter on Mexico and turn it into a journal article.

Although I'd become totally disenchanted with my project, I'd worked too long on it to abandon it, so I did a streamlined version, giving up my original intention to do research in Mexico, focusing instead on the American sources.

Sigh. I didn't get any of the fellowships I applied for so I couldn't afford to go to Mexico—not on my salary. Nor did I have the means to hire any researchers there.

My mother got sick and I had to take care of her while dealing with my own kids; but I still had to get the book out in time for tenure review, so out of necessity I dropped my plan to add a comparative chapter on Mexico. I simply didn't have the time.

The Mexican archive where I was supposed to do research shut down indefinitely because of earthquake damage, so I had to change the scope of my project.

My book would be stronger if I could spend at least six additional months doing research in Mexico City, but the smog there aggravates my asthma so much that I literally can't.

In other words, the mess of life intrudes into history. It happens all the time. However, when you read an academic history book (or fellowship application, or tenure file) you almost invariably get neat statements of success: *I have advanced the historiography, I have filled a gap in the literature, I have produced knowledge, I have recovered forgotten stories.* Job promotion in academia requires institutional validation of such progress statements. No wonder, then, that history books tend to be conservative in form. “Maybe I'll do a more creative project once I've been tenured,” assistant professors often say. Most of us never follow through. We rarely use our vaunted academic freedom to do something dangerously interesting, to risk falling on our faces.

As a prize-winning non-academic, Vollmann can be refreshingly candid about his failures. In ten years of research in Mexico he never learns Spanish! His efforts at investigative journalism go nowhere. He risks bodily health testing the claim that the New River—Mexico's wastewater discharge into the Salton Sea—is the “most polluted river in America,” but his results are inconclusive. He tries unsuccessfully to track down the stories of nameless *pollos* who die in the desert. Even with the help of genealogists, he finds next to nothing about the life of one of first white girls born in Imperial Valley—a girl he's obsessed with because her parents gave her a striking, symbolic first name: Imperial. *Imperial's* longest chapters are about even more quixotic researches. Vollmann hears rumors from Mexicans in Mexicali that there are tunnels beneath the city built long ago by Chinese immigrants (the original “illegal aliens” in America). After many failed attempts to ingratiate himself into the surviving Chinese community, Vollmann finally enters a few deteriorated subterranean chambers and even finds some letters written in Chinese, but the historical scope and use of the tunnels remains elusive. This partial exhumation of the past was achieved only after Vollmann hires some Chinese-speaking assistants from his hometown, Sacramento. *Imperial* is full of hired help: drivers, translators, river guides, street guides, lab technicians, snoops. When Vollmann hears stories about the systematic sexual harassment of female workers in the maquiladoras of Mexicali, he embarks on a quest to discover the truth. Being, as his publisher says, “one of our most important writers,” Vollmann obtains a \$20,000 advance from *Playboy*. How quickly the money evaporates! He spends a Mexican fortune on a digital spy camera; the software malfunctions, and the hardware scorches his penis. When a woman-for-hire finally gains entrance as a mole, Vollmann discovers little more than a truism of economics: outsourced factories in developing nations take advantage of cheap labor and lax regulation.

I enjoyed reading these stories of failure, and identified with them, for I know from experience that most historical research leads to dead ends.

Unlike Vollmann, academic historians just keep looking until they find enough material to fashion some credible account of some past. A history book is the end-product of an institutionalized process, whereas *Imperial* is a stream-of-consciousness record of a lay historian's idiosyncratic practice. Vollmann writes his writer's voice—his conflicted inner dialogue about his own research project—into every section of *Imperial*, a quality that makes this book more postmodern than most academic treatises about postmodernism. With unveiled honesty, the author reminds us that knowledge is a commodity that can be bought and sold. He pays crackheads to show him around; he pays prostitutes to sing him *narcocorridos*. But understanding is one thing you can't buy. After all the time and money Vollmann blows on bargirls and taxi drivers along the border, he concedes his greatest failure of all: he doesn't understand the entity he calls "Imperial," the object of his obsession, his Great White Whale. He calls "Imperial" many, many things, starting with the "continuum between Mexico and America," but finally he calls it unknowable. I found this admission—after 1,000 pages!—maddening but also refreshing. Not knowing is, after all, the essence of scholarly pursuit. We keep studying because we still haven't reached a perfect state of understanding, which will forever remain out of reach.

Is this doorstopper worth your time as a reader? If you want a passionate book that embraces the historical practice but challenges the history book genre, this is the book for you. For those primarily interested in the U.S.-Mexico border, I would recommend targeted reading. Parts of the book—especially the interviews with ordinary Mexicans—gave me a heightened, palpable awareness of how and why illegal immigrants cross the border. Vollmann has also produced a large-format companion book of photographs, also called *Imperial* (powerHouse Books, 2009), which contains gritty portraits of some of the *pollos* and prostitutes described in the book—though without commentary. It's a shame that these two overlong and overpriced books could not have been combined into one

shorter and cheaper one. As published, *Imperial* (the text) could never be assigned in the classroom, though individual chapters might make great discussion material.

Luckily, history teachers have at their disposal other examples of creative non-fiction about the American West, starting with John McPhee's books on California and Alaska. Other notable titles include Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams* (1994), which treats Indian removal at Yosemite National Park and atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site as flipsides of an American land ethic. Dan Flores's *Caprock Canyonlands* (1990) combines history and memoir to explore the past and future of wilderness in West Texas. And Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land* (1996) uses the boom-and-bust history of eastern Montana (including the tale of a town that desperately renamed itself Joe, Montana) to explain the culture of boosterism that led to the settlement of the marginal areas of the arid West. But the best book in this vein—and perhaps the best genre-bending history I've ever read—is William deBuys's *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* (1999), a study of ... the Imperial Valley. Barely acknowledged by Vollmann, this underappreciated volume covers the exact same ground with greater insight and greater humility. In 300 pages, not counting two evocative portfolios by photographer Joan Myers, *Salt Dreams* discusses Anglos, Mexicans, and Indians (something Vollmann egregiously fails to do), and takes the natural world seriously. Best of all, deBuys manages to rewrite the rules of historical writing without breaking the rules of history. *Salt Dreams* has a clear, concise, powerful thesis: "In low places consequences collect." At the bottom of the Imperial Valley, "the lowest of the low," we see the American Dream in concentrated form. William T. Vollmann sees this, too, but he's too busy writing to say it.

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