

# CURRENT TRENDS IN LATIN AMERICAN REFERENCE BOOKS

*Mark L. Grover*  
*Brigham Young University*

- SOUTH AMERICA, CENTRAL AMERICA, AND THE CARIBBEAN: 1988.* Second edition. (London: Europa Publications, 1987. Pp. 683. \$140.00.)
- HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF CUBA.* By Jaime Suchlicki. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988. Pp. 368. \$39.50.)
- HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF CHILE.* Second edition. By Salvatore Bizzarro. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1987. Pp. 583. \$55.00.)
- BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN POLITICAL LEADERS.* Edited by Robert J. Alexander. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988. Pp. 509. \$75.00.)
- HANDBOOK OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES, VOLUME 48.* Edited by Dolores Moyano Martin. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Pp. 764. \$65.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN LABOR ORGANIZATIONS.* Edited by Gerald Michael Greenfield and Sheldon L. Maram. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987. Pp. 929. \$125.00.)
- HISTORICAL STATISTICS OF CHILE: MONEY, BANKING, AND FINANCIAL SERVICES; VOLUME 5.* Compiled by Markos J. Mamalakis. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985. Pp. 532. \$145.00.)
- BRAZIL: A HANDBOOK OF HISTORICAL STATISTICS.* Edited by Armin K. Ludwig. (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1985. Pp. 487. \$75.00.)

All fields and disciplines of Latin American studies have developed significantly over the past thirty years. This interest in Latin America on academic campuses has been reflected in the expansion of college curricula and the availability of money for research. The publication of major books and periodicals also reveals an admirable level of interest in the United States. Even the present downswing in levels of funding for research and programs has not yet significantly diminished course offerings in Latin American studies on university campuses.

One of the most visible results of this interest in Latin America has been the development of large library collections throughout the United States. In almost every region, researchers can find libraries with significant collections of Latin American monographs, serials, and important manuscript and documents collections. Active U.S. librarians have ag-

gressively assembled some of the largest collections in existence outside of Latin American national libraries.

The most significant library collections have been built at established universities with large graduate programs for studying Latin America. But the development of Latin American collections has not been limited to larger libraries. The need for information about Latin America has grown to such an extent that such materials are being collected at smaller universities, colleges, and public libraries all over the United States. A recent study I made identified more than three hundred libraries in the United States that regularly collect books published in Latin America.

With few exceptions, Latin American books are becoming part of large centralized libraries rather than of separate specialized departmental collections. Educational institutions in the United States tend to centralize collections into one large library administered by a separate bureaucratic structure. One result of this centralization is that financial and administrative control of the collections is taken away from the departmental faculty and placed under a relatively autonomous structure that usually reports to the university administration. This arrangement can result in a separation between the academic department and the library that occasionally produces library collections that may not meet the needs of the faculty and students who use the collection.

Centralization of collections also fosters the specialization of librarians along functional lines. For example, a librarian with subject specialty in Latin America who is hired as a cataloger will seldom be involved in reference or collection development. In fact, if the need arises for additional responsibility, such a person will generally be asked to catalog books not in his or her area of subject expertise rather than to perform a different library function within the area specialty. The same is true of collection development librarians, who are often given extended geographic or subject collection responsibilities rather than being assigned to cataloging Latin American books. Seldom in U.S. academic libraries does one librarian order, process, and reference the same books.

One area particularly affected by functional centralization is the library reference department. Most reference librarians provide service for several disciplines or geographic areas. Although some large libraries have bibliographers for collection development in selected subject or geographical areas who can provide backup reference, primary reference for those areas is still provided by librarians with general-subject reference responsibility. The results are that reference librarians are constantly required to provide information about disciplines in which they have little or no academic experience and the quality of reference is often lower than might be anticipated. Unable to obtain in-depth knowledge in all necessary subjects, librarians generally concentrate on learning reference sources rather than the basic works of the different disciplines. They also tend to

use reference sources that provide large amounts of information on broad topics instead of remembering specialized and probably more valuable items.

Library reference collections reflect this change in reference needs. Publications that provide basic information and general bibliographic source materials are available for most disciplines and geographical areas. A fairly recent development has been the publication of general reference series that provide similarly structured information on individual countries or subjects in several volumes. A librarian need only learn the form and nature of one volume to use the entire series. Moreover, the specialized reference librarian with in-depth knowledge on specific topics has given way to general informational specialists who focus on the "reference collection" and not on the subject discipline.

The publishing industry has responded to the changed needs of reference librarians. The number of companies in the United States publishing reference materials on Latin America has collapsed into a few large commercial companies. These publishers concentrate much of their efforts on reference books for the library market. University presses occasionally produce reference works but far fewer than they did twenty years ago. Because the market for reference works is mostly made up of libraries, the size of publishing runs have decreased while prices have increased substantially. The reality is that the library market is fairly stable, and the cost of an item, if within reason, is generally not a factor.

Because a handful of publishers control much of the reference book market and depend on libraries for their livelihood, the types of reference books being published have also changed. Companies have sought to increase the number of reference tools of interest to the largest library market—the smaller, nonresearch undergraduate universities and colleges. As a result, more books that offer general information on countries or subjects are published now than unique reference sources providing previously unavailable information. As noted, series that place equivalent information on different topics or countries in identical formats have become popular. Although reference sources of unique information are still on the market, they are fewer and extremely costly.

In some ways, the centralization of reference publishing and its separation from university and general publishers parallels the separation of librarians and library resources from faculty control in the university. Reference books tend to be published more in reaction to the perceived needs of the general library market than in response to the needs of individual disciplines. The result is significant gaps in certain areas for specific reference and bibliographic publications, especially for the larger countries.

These trends become evident when examining the output of reference books on Latin America in any given year. Six of the eight books

under review are parts of series. Seven of the eight come from publishers who produce mainly library reference books, and all eight are so expensive that they would be purchased mostly by libraries or businesses. Five of the eight are oriented toward small university or college libraries rather than research library use. Only three offer unique information not readily available in other reference sources in research libraries or institutions. This group of volumes will be reviewed here to determine their value to library reference collections and their patrons rather than to individual disciplines.

The most basic type of reference work for any library is represented by the Europa publication entitled *South America, Central America, and the Caribbean: 1988*. It is one of several found in most library collections that provide current descriptive information on geographic regions and individual countries. Many of these works offer brief descriptive summaries, but a few more comprehensive works also provide analytical information.<sup>1</sup> This particular work was published by a British company as part of a series that includes volumes on the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and the Far East.

*South America, Central America, and the Caribbean: 1988* provides basic, up-to-date general statistical information on all forty-six geographic and political units of Latin America and the Caribbean. The volume also includes essays written by leading United Kingdom scholars on general areas of interest such as history, politics, and economics. Each country section features the same type of information organized in the same manner. One significant section includes information not often available in other sources, such as addresses of institutions, organizations, embassies, and other groups of interest to scholars. The volume also provides short bibliographies listing primarily English-language materials for each country.

To evaluate this volume adequately, it is important to ascertain how well it meets the informational needs of its anticipated audience. Most users of such a volume will need up-to-date general information on countries. *South America, Central America, and the Caribbean: 1988* claims to provide current information but was actually published in late 1987, and most of its information predates publication by a year or two. The work is basically oriented toward those interested in politics, government, and economics, containing only limited information on culture and the humanities and little in-depth coverage of any area. For example, the discussion of Protestant churches in Mexico lists only five denominations. The book is thus a beginning tool that provides little more than basic information, which is all it claims to offer. Most university libraries should own this volume or one similar to it and will if its cost (140 dollars) is not prohibitive.

The second group of reference items under review are two volumes

in a series that has received its share of criticism. In 1970 Scarecrow Press began publishing a series of historical dictionaries on Latin America, which now number twenty-two volumes. Historical dictionaries list alphabetically terms, names, occurrences, concepts, and geographical places of significance to the history of the country or subject and provide a general discussion of their meanings and applications. The size and scope of historical dictionaries vary significantly. When this type of book is published in Latin America, it often features a strong geographic emphasis and includes significant coverage of all aspects of a country's history written by many experts. A major Latin American example is the *Diccionario Porrúa* published in Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

The Scarecrow series has received mixed reviews since the first volumes appeared. Some criticism has reflected the reviewers' lack of understanding of the purpose of the series as much as the inadequacies of the volumes themselves. Many reviewers were not librarians but experts on the particular country who lacked clear perceptions of potential library use and therefore had difficulty finding value in the publications. Their knowledge of in-depth sources left them with little respect for these volumes. Few realized the value of such sources for smaller university libraries and often seemed to expect something akin to an encyclopedia that included larger articles than those generally found in historical dictionaries. As one typical review commented, "Works of this sort doubtless serve some purpose. It is difficult for libraries not to buy them. . . . What scholarly or educational purpose they serve, however, remains obscure."<sup>3</sup>

Reviews by librarians have been more favorable, although not too positive. A recent article reviewing Latin American reference series indicated frustrations in using the Scarecrow series. Most complaints centered on inconsistencies among the volumes. Librarians believed that the same type of information should be found in each volume. For example, some Scarecrow volumes include a historical chronology while others do not. Nor was the level of coverage the same in all volumes (the volume on Argentina has 1113 pages but that on Venezuela, only 142). Some librarians thought that the amount of information in many entries was so minimal as to render them nearly useless to most researchers. It is obvious that the general editor of the series exercised little control over what different authors decided to include in individual volumes.<sup>4</sup>

The two volumes of the Scarecrow series under review here provide an interesting comparison of past examples and what future volumes may be. The *Historical Dictionary of Cuba* by Jaime Suchlicki is a first edition edited by Karna Wilgus (wife of the late A. Curtis Wilgus, general editor of the rest of the series). The *Historical Dictionary of Chile*, written by Salvatore Bizzarro, is a second edition that was edited by Curtis Wilgus's successor, Laurence Hallewell.

At first glance, the Suchlicki volume on Cuba seems to provide

adequate basic information on the national historical experience. The author is a well-respected historian who has written critical studies as well as a textbook on Cuban history. He has constructed well-conceived entries that offer basic information in a concise manner. The extensive bibliography includes a significant number of Spanish-language items. As a library reference tool, however, it is not as useful as the Chilean volume.

Bizzarro's volume on Chile was first published in 1972. This second edition is larger than the first (538 pages as compared with 309) and represents far more than a minor revision. New entries have been added, and the original entries have been enlarged. Other, subtle differences within the text enhance its value as a reference tool. For example, one finds under the heading of "Presidents of Chile" a complete listing of all of them. Although the Suchlicki volume identifies some Cuban leaders, it contains no comparable list. Similarly, under "Provinces" in the Bizzarro book one finds a list of the regions of Chile and all the provinces and capitals. Elsewhere major Chilean newspapers are listed. The Cuban volume contains no analogous lists. The Chilean bibliography is arranged by major subjects headings, while the Cuban bibliography is arranged only alphabetically by author. The combined effect of all these minor differences makes the volume on Chile significantly more useful as a library reference tool than the Cuban volume.

The differences between the two volumes reflect the influence of the general editor. These variations mirror an understanding that the volume is a library reference tool that will be used in a certain way. If either the editor or the author understands what kind of information library patrons request, then that kind of information will be incorporated into the volume. The best approach in preparing reference works is to focus on the potential use of the volume and not on some nebulous measurement of intellectual quality. The second editions of this series published under Laurence Hallewell's editorship should be more useful as library reference tools.

The *Bibliographical Dictionary of Latin American and Caribbean Political Leaders*, edited by Robert Alexander, suffers from many of the same limitations as the historical dictionaries. Although it will become part of most research libraries, the book would be of more use to smaller college libraries with limited Latin American collections. This biographical dictionary covers four hundred and fifty important political figures from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each alphabetical entry was written by one of fourteen country or area experts and is accompanied by a short bibliography of one to six citations indicating where further biographical data can be found. A country index is included as well as a dictionary index that allows for rapid identification of needed information.

The difficulty with this work is one that inheres in any limited dictionary. Four hundred and fifty entries barely scratch the surface of the

number of important political figures in Latin America. The problem has been compounded by the selection priority. Less important countries are often represented by as many political figures as countries of more historical significance. For example, there are twenty-three biographies each from Mexico and Costa Rica, twenty-four from Bolivia, and twenty-three from Brazil. The introduction provides no hint as to the reasons used to include or exclude certain political figures nor any other useful information. The short, nonanalytical entries provide little more than basic descriptive information. Most libraries with even limited Latin American collections will own other biographical sources offering more complete information. Consequently, the *Bibliographical Dictionary of Latin American and Caribbean Political Leaders* will be of little value except to those asking the most basic biographical questions.

The *Handbook of Latin American Studies* is probably the one source that sets reference collections on Latin American studies apart from all other geographic areas of the world. Since its inception in 1935, the *Handbook* has provided scholars interested in Latin America with a bibliographical source of a quality unavailable to scholars in most other branches of area studies. Throughout its more than fifty years of existence, the series has maintained a level of quality unusual for any annual publication of its kind. The *Handbook* continues to provide researchers with several important benefits. It brings together an excellent annotated list of monographic and periodical publications in the social sciences or humanities on Latin America. It provides an indicator of the evolution of disciplines, including the fascinating interplay between American and Latin American studies. Because the *Handbook's* compilation requires the assistance of many different scholars in all fields (a total of seventy-five for the forty-eighth volume), it has made Latin Americanists more concerned with bibliography and reference and has raised the overall level of bibliographic publications about Latin America. Yet because it is a research tool, many nonresearch libraries will not own the series. It is to be hoped that recent budget cuts at the U.S. Library of Congress will not affect the publication of this valuable reference tool.

*Latin American Labor Organizations*, edited by Gerald Greenfield and Sheldon Maram, is a well-conceived reference tool that will provide durable information on its subject. In this collection of twenty-six essays written by area experts, each chapter focuses on one country and provides a short history, an annotated list of important labor organizations within the country, and a concise bibliography for further study. The appendix includes information on international organizations with ties to Latin America, a country-by-country chronology of events related to the development of labor unions, and glossaries of terms and selected individuals in Latin American labor movements.

Because of the way it was conceived and constructed, *Latin American*

*Labor Organizations* will be useful to research as well as small undergraduate libraries. This excellent reference tool provides introductory materials and descriptions along with research information never before published in the United States. The editors obviously began with a well-defined purpose and attempted to ensure uniformity throughout the book. Most inconsistencies reflect varying levels of maturity of the labor movements within the different countries, not editorial deficiencies. The editors and contributors are to be commended for a timely publication that will remain an important part of library reference collections for many years.

The last two volumes under review are reference tools that compile statistical information, one of the more difficult areas of reference. *Historical Statistics of Chile: Money, Banking, and Financial Services* is the fifth volume of a set that will be one of the most valuable compilations of statistics on Latin America when finished. This series is oriented toward the in-depth researcher rather than to the casual student. Each volume includes statistical information on selected topics, although no logical sequence of topics is apparent. This latest volume, a companion to the fourth volume, includes fourteen chapters on all aspects of Chilean banking, finances, and monetary policy in historical detail. The chapters do not cover the same historical periods but nevertheless include extremely valuable information. The set should also stimulate additional research on aspects that have been ignored. Markos Mamalakis is providing a service to students of Chile that will set an example for scholars of other countries to emulate.

My only complaint about this volume and the series in general is that the publishers do not seem to have provided adequate editorial direction. This volume's introduction is fair but offers little general information about the series itself and is almost hidden. Little acknowledgment is made of the earlier volumes, and there is only a limited attempt to tie the five volumes together. A series like this one should be planned in such a way that general information is published first and then succeeding volumes move into more specific detail in an organized manner. Finally, this volume is difficult to use largely because of the placement of different sections and chapters. It is the publisher's responsibility to provide adequate and firm direction to the author to ensure that the volume includes all the necessary components and that its physical layout will facilitate its use. The *Historical Statistics of Chile* volumes comprise an important set of reference tools that could have been even better with additional editorial direction.

The last book under review, *Brazil: A Handbook of Historical Statistics*, will be most valuable to medium-sized university and college libraries. A brief compilation of comparative statistical information on Brazilian history since independence, it is part of the G. K. Hall series "International Historical Statistics," which intends to provide introductory statistical volumes for geographic and thematic subjects. Each section of the Bra-



zilian volume is well introduced, and the sources of the statistics are adequately explained. It nevertheless contains little information that could not be obtained from sources found in many large research libraries, and most research projects will be required to go beyond the information it provides. The volume does fulfill its claim to provide a descriptive compilation of statistical information needed for a basic understanding of the historical evolution of Brazil. It also includes important explanatory information of the kind not found in Mamalakis's book on Chile, material that will assist the nonexpert in understanding and using the volume.

### *Conclusion*

The publication of important and useful reference volumes on Latin America has a long and distinguished history. The increasing importance of Latin American studies in the United States over the past thirty years has yielded more and more publications, a total unsurpassed by publications on most other geographical regions. It is to be expected that the centralized nature of libraries in the United States will continue to encourage the publication of good general reference tools that fill the introductory informational needs of librarians and scholars. It is to be hoped, however, that publishers' focus on smaller libraries and general collections will not diminish publication of high-quality and unique reference items. Many important areas have serious reference and bibliographical needs that have yet to be met. Publishers, granting agencies, scholars, and professors all need to work together to ensure that both types of reference books continue to be published. Market factors are important, but they should not be the only criteria for publishing reference books.

### NOTES

1. Two examples are Pierre Etienne Dostert, *Latin America 1988*, 22d annual ed. (Washington, D.C.: Skye-Post Publication, 1988); and *Latin America and Caribbean Contemporary Record*, Vol. 5, 1985-1986, edited by Abraham F. Lowenthal (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988).
2. *Diccionario Porrúa de historia, biografía y geografía de México*, 5th ed., 3 vols. (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1986).
3. Sidney W. Mintz, "Two Historical Dictionaries on the Caribbean," *LARR* 18, no. 3 (1983):267.
4. Edwin S. Gleaves, "The Most Useful Reference Sources on Latin America: Results of a Survey of Those Who Use Them Most," *The Reference Librarian* 17 (Spring 1987):221-22.