

INTRODUCING LATIN AMERICA

FROM CORTÉS TO CASTRO: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICA. By SIMON COLLIER. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1973. Pp. 429. \$12.95.)

THE LATIN AMERICANS: THEIR HERITAGE AND THEIR DESTINY. By RONALD HILTON. (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1973. Pp. 253. \$3.25.)

LATIN AMERICA: THE EMERGING LANDS. By RIORDAN ROETT. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972, Pp. 250.)

"Can you suggest a good introductory book on Latin America?" How often is this question asked? Often enough, it seems, to warrant a steady output of books from the presses. There are the one- and two-volume texts intended primarily for college survey courses; there are the "readers" and edited works too numerous to mention; and there are modern-day travel accounts and Latin American novels in translation that oftentimes seem the best introductions of all. But what concerns us here is the standard fare, the short (250–450 pp.) work suitable either for the general public or for the classroom.

The challenge in writing such works is great if for no other reason than that Latin America is itself great—great in size, in population, in diversity. Given the scope of the subject, the selection of materials is particularly important since a single volume may represent a reader's total exposure to the area. Through rigorous selection an author can develop one or two major themes and provide a coherent, if restricted, overview. On the other hand, Latin America's diversity can be stressed to give the reader a sense of breadth and complexity, if not coherency. A further challenge lies in making Latin American culture(s) comprehensible to foreign audiences. In so doing authors often pitch their accounts in comparative frames; that is, they present their subject in terms, values, and examples familiar to their audience. Hence, for United States readers, Latin America is frequently described as being more or less modern, democratic, stable, or industrialized. This is an understandable approach, but ethnocentrism often creeps in and in the end we are still left with the problem of understanding the truly unique and incomparable.

The three introductions to Latin America reviewed here illustrate various approaches to these problems. Riordan Roett would have his readers learn about Latin America because we live in an increasingly interdependent world, "and it is the responsibility of all citizens to know something about societies other than their own" (p. iii). These concerns reflect Roett's own interests in international relations, and in this text he is presumably speaking primarily to secondary school students whose teachers have adopted his book for Latin American units in their world civilization courses. Modernization is his major theme, and it is recommended both because the process reveals "many similarities" with our own past and because the results "will have an impact on our own development" (p. iii). The author works hard for clear and simple exposi-

tion. The text is well organized, there are pictures and maps, and each chapter concludes with identification and review questions and selected readings. In addition, phonetic spellings of foreign words are supplied. Hence, we read about Fernandez de Oviedo ("fer NAHN dehs day oh VYEH doh"), Gilberto Freyre ("jeel BEHR toh FRAY ruh"), and Batlle y Ordenez ("BAHT lyay ee ohr DOH nyays"). This is a good and helpful concept, although one wonders how a high school class of thirty might sound punching out Rio de Janeiro ("HEE oo day zhuh NEH hoo").

Simon Collier and Ronald Hilton address audiences of college age or older. Both are snappy, readable accounts, Collier's clearly a work of history and Hilton's pointedly one bridging many disciplines. Collier employs an innovative approach in offering a 74-page introductory chapter on men and events "from Cortés to Castro." The idea seems clearly designed to provide readers with an historical overview so that they may better appreciate the interpretive chapters that follow. I am not sure how well this works: for the uninitiated there is too much material to assimilate in the overview for it to be recalled effectively thereafter. For the author, however, the introduction is definitely liberating, for having unburdened himself of the basic facts and chronology he gains greater freedom in the remaining chapters.

Ronald Hilton feels no such obligation to detail. His opening line runs as follows: "A small book on Latin America must leave a lot unsaid" (p. ix). And his chapter on "History and Great Men" begins: "The study of Latin American history is complex and can easily become boring if one gets lost in a mass of details" (p. 50). Thus relieved, Hilton moves in sprightly fashion through his material. We stay with him easily through the first seven chapters but flag somewhat in the last three where world relations, languages, and the arts are handled in increasingly segmented and perfunctory fashion. More so than the other two authors, Hilton makes international and Cold War issues central to his interpretation.

What makes Hilton stimulating to read is his irreverence for scholarly jargon and his willingness, even delight, in voicing strong opinions on sensitive topics. How different this is from Collier whose reverence for historical objectivity is such that he is at pains to avoid opinions. Collier's style is mannered and dispassionate, and in the preface he allows the English poet, Donald Davie, to summarize his approach: "Holding the middle ground is harder/ And asks more judgment, no less ardor,/ Than to espouse exclusive themes/ And fly to one of two extremes" (p. ix). Writing from England, about Latin America, and primarily for North Americans in the United States, Collier can perhaps afford a certain detachment. Whatever the case, we find considerable diversity in these three books on Latin America.

This diversity manifests itself in various ways, and yet there is, of course, general agreement on many issues. An example of congruence is found on the subject of Iberian national character. Surprisingly, all three writers trot out the familiar stereotypes. Roett refers to the Spaniards' "excessively intense, crusading spirit" (p. 28), Collier to their "quixotism" (p. 123), and Hilton (contrasting them with the Portuguese) to their "more violent, more dramatic, and more

diffuse" temperament (p. 83). Where the three do differ is in the handling of these stereotypes. Hilton and Roett let their statements stand on their own, whereas Collier prefaces his with this qualifier: "It is both difficult and unsafe to generalize about something as elusive as 'national character'" (p. 120).

On the subject of slavery and race relations in the West there is greater divergence, although all pay homage to the works of Tannenbaum and Freyre and all acknowledge the brutality of slavery. Nevertheless, for Roett "the experience of black men in South America was less harsh and more humane than in North America" (pp. 30–31). Collier sums up the slave experience more cautiously: "There is some possibility, . . . however slight, that the system of slavery as it operated in Latin America was somewhat less harsh than in other parts of the New World" (p. 139). Hilton is much less willing to accept such notions. He finds racism almost everywhere and argues, moreover, that blacks have not acquitted themselves well as leaders in western society. He notes racial tensions in Brazil and thinks they may become exacerbated (as they did in the United States) when blacks place greater demands upon society. Hilton condemns the pathetic example of black rule in Haiti and goes on to accuse the Soviet Union and Cuba of masking their own racist practices behind propagandistic claims of racial equality. Broadening his scope still further, the author writes that even though the "science of racial studies is still in its infancy," it nevertheless "seems" that the black is physically "adapted to the wet tropics, and he is at home in the Caribbean and northeastern Brazil." That blacks have moved elsewhere, and particularly into northern United States cities "is due to economic and social reasons which are more powerful than ecology" (p. 25). Picking up on this latter theme a few pages later we are treated to the following:

The fact is that where there is a white population the countries have prospered; even in Brazil the driving force comes from the south, where the population is almost entirely European in origin. Where the masses of the population are black or Indian, development has been slow or has even been reversed. The centers of U.S. cities have deteriorated since the blacks took them over, and Haiti, which was one of the most prosperous countries in the world under French colonial domination, is now the most miserable in the continent (pp. 30–31).

This is provocative to say the least!

If race is a sensitive issue, so is Castro's Cuba. On this topic Roett spares his audience some of the bitter truths. He couches the Cuban story in terms of hemispheric relations and the arbitrating role played by international organizations such as the O.A.S. and the U.N. United States' interests are acknowledged, but this country's role is presented as having been essentially passive, as responding to developing Cuban events rather than as being actively interventionist. Hence, while the Cuban missile crisis is discussed, the Bay of Pigs is not even mentioned. Roett's emphasis on multilateral concerns no doubt explains this omission, and his hopes for greater hemispheric understanding are well taken. Nevertheless, there is more to the Cuban story.

In his longer work, Simon Collier gives more attention to revolutionary

structural reforms and social change. Although his review is critical and Castro's regime is labeled "the only unequivocally totalitarian dictatorship in Latin America" (p. 337), the overall assessment is positive: "part of the groundwork" for sustained economic progress has "undoubtedly been established in Cuba as a result of the years of revolution" (p. 265). No such balanced treatment is offered by Hilton. His dislike of Castro is passionate. Witness these few examples. On Castro: "Castro's cult of his own personality is a case of egomania almost without parallel" (p. 117). On Cuban communism: "'Direct democracy' [in Cuba] is simply a phrase to camouflage an illegal regime" (p. 131). And on revolutionary achievements: "Fidel Castro has carried out a large literacy campaign in Cuba, but we should view with skepticism the claim that illiteracy has been wiped out on the island" (p. 205). This last is the closest Hilton comes to recognizing any positive change. To be fair, however, it is not simply leftist regimes that Hilton singles out for criticism. He debunks dictatorships on the right as well and faults United States' policies past and present. Nevertheless, the overall tone of the book is one of Cold War anticommunism, and in this approach one can at least find a provocative alternative to the easy liberalism of some other writers.

Each of the three authors concludes much as he began. Roett reminds us that Latin America's quest of modernization will be accompanied by instability and asks our understanding and cooperation. Hilton requests that we cease thinking of Latin America as "our backyard" and then, somewhat abruptly, signals a need for general studies of Latin American culture (p. 236). For Collier, Latin America's future is hopeful but unpredictable, and he notes in closing "that even when utopia is finally reached, Plato's ghost will still be on hand to ask, with Yeats, 'What then?'" (p. 408). Applying the same query to the three books just reviewed—each excellent in its own way—we find the reality of Latin America still elusive, and we can therefore predict with all certainty that more introductory works will be written (and reviewed) in the future.

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