BIOGRAPHY AND LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY

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BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN: FIRST ANTHROPOLOGIST. By Miguel León-Portilla. Translated by Mauricio J. Mixco. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002. Pp. 324. $29.95 cloth.)

SOBRAL PINTO, "THE CONSCIENCE OF BRAZIL": LEADING THE ATTACK AGAINST VARGAS (1930–1945). By John W. F. Dulles. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002. Pp. 413. $60.00 cloth.)

PORFIRIO DÍAZ. By Paul Garner. (Edinburgh Gate, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2001. Pp. 269. $13.95 paper.)

ANDRÉS BELLO: SCHOLARSHIP AND NATION-BUILDING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICA. By Iván Jaksić. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. $55.00 cloth.)

FRANCISCO DE MIRANDA: A TRANSATLANTIC LIFE IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION. By Karen Racine. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003. Pp. 336. $65.00 cloth, $19.95 paper.)

Biography is one of the most popular historical genres, and it says something about the perversity of Latin American historians, including myself, that we do so little of it.[1] Aside from being academically unfashionable, it presents numerous difficulties in research and composition and does not lend itself to social science modeling. There have been various theories of development and underdevelopment, of cultural identity and nationalism, of religious belief and gender, but there is no body of theory aside from psychology that attempts to probe the development of a person. Twenty years ago there was still an academic interest in psychohistory (the application of psychoanalysis to biography), but it has been marginalized. Forty years ago, historians as distinguished as H. Stuart Hughes (1964) argued that psychoanalysis might reveal the layers of motive that mere facts could not convey, and in

1. The most distinguished recent exceptions to this generalization are Katz (1998) and Krauze (1991, 1997).

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1979, Miles F. Shore could cite an extensive body of work that had been shaped by psychological insights and ask

> How can the biographer prepare for the task of sophisticated manipulation of psychological concepts and data? To what extent will formal training in psychodynamic psychology be necessary? How important is personal psychoanalysis? (Shore 1979, 165)[2]

Now, no historian talks this way. Although Freud remains of deep interest to literary biographers (see Bowie 2003, 191–92), the application of psychological insights to historical figures has almost disappeared. Yet it is almost impossible to escape the use of biography in most historical narratives and in the classroom. It is still the means to "make history personal"(Oates 1991, 7).

The five books under review do not advance any particular methodology but draw their methods and theories from Latin American history writ large. They seem removed from current concerns. They do not discuss gender at any length, although all of them are about men. They are not part of any "cultural turn"—any application of anthropological or literary methods to historical subjects. Although three of them are about men of ideas, they are not preoccupied with "discourse." They describe educated and relatively privileged people without mentioning any subalterns. Collectively, they cover Latin America's development from the conquest until the 1950s.

A central danger of biography is a tendency toward hagiography and a substitution of the great man's motives and behavior for historical explanation. Two of the books under review fall into this pattern. Miguel León-Portilla considers Bernardino de Sahagún "the first anthropologist of the New World" who attributed a "deep moral wisdom" to the Indians that he had studied for sixty years (266). John W. F. Dulles, calls Heráclito Fontoura Sobral Pinto "the conscience of Brazil." Karen Racine, Iván Jaksić, and Paul Garner are more measured in evaluating their subjects. The fact that these are nineteenth-century political figures—Francisco de Miranda, Andrés Bello, and Porfirio Díaz—allows them some reflections on issues of nationalism and development. I will discuss first the "heroic" biographies and then the others.

One of the attractions of biography is voyeuristic; we get to peep into another's life and learn something about the past at the same time. For this to happen there has to be a "person" in front of us. León-Portilla's second biography of Bernardino de Sahagún (the first having appeared in Madrid in 1987) is intended to update the scholarship and to "describe in greater detail the settings in which Bernardino's life unfolded in Spain

2. The best study of the complexities of applying psychoanalysis to history is Cocks (1986).

and Mexico"(23), but it presents only hints of Sahagún's personality and its evolution. Was he or was he not born into a Jewish family that had been forcibly converted to Christianity? What was his original last name? What did he learn at the University of Salamanca? Rather than answer these questions, León-Portilla strings together conjectures. He tells us about the subjects taught at the university and the influence of the Italian Renaissance on higher education but says nothing about Sahagún as a student or why he joined the Franciscan order. He tells us of the uprising against Charles V in 1520 and the uprising's repression the following year and says that it must have influenced Sahagún. "It is to be supposed that, as a student at Salamanca, Bernardino remained mindful of events in Spain and had occasion to keep informed about what was happening in more remote environments"(41). Sahagún arrived in Mexico in 1529; León-Portilla has to substitute a discussion of what Mexico must have been like for any account of the arrival itself. To cover the years 1529 to 1540 in Mexico, he gives us a highly abbreviated account of the conquest, the plagues that decimated the native population, and the role of the Franciscans in early colonial politics.

Bernardino de Sahagún was a missionary who spread the use of Nahuatl written in the Roman alphabet and preserved a large body of information relating to native life. These were monumental achievements, although it is not clear in this work in what sense they were anthropological. He came to Mexico with other Franciscans to evangelize the natives (usually called Aztecs) and so impressed his superiors that he took part in the development of the College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, helping to spread literacy and turn Nahuatl into the *lingua franca* of central Mexico. When he was in his forties, he was directed by his Franciscan superiors to compile an account of native life, customs, and history. Here, León-Portilla can put aside conjecture and relate facts—but alas, few of them show Sahagún aside from his obsession with his work. The result of his efforts, the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Editor's note: the *LARR* cover art, this issue, depicts one of the images from this volume), is a work of twelve "books" in three volumes and a central document about the native population; its most famous copy is the Florentine Codex. The most interesting elements in León-Portilla's study are not about Sahagún at all but about this work, the sixteenth-century controversies among the Franciscans about its existence, and Sahagún's struggles to preserve and amend it.

It is hard to find any originality or much new research in this biography. There are very few citations in English and, amazingly, no mention of James Lockhart, who published a new understanding of the Nahuas (as they called themselves) over a decade ago. Lockhart argues that, in teaching the Nahuas to write their language with a Roman alphabet, the Franciscan missionaries provided the means for the natives

to preserve their own way of thinking, which, of course, evolved over the next few centuries (1992, 6).[3] The Nahuas' political and social organization that Sahagún so admired was governed by a religion that he wanted to destroy, and an anthropologist does not set out to destroy the culture he is studying. Familiarity with Lockhart's scholarship would have provided the biographer with a different framework for understanding Sahagún's achievement.

The work of John W. F. Dulles presents a very different problem. Where León-Portilla lacks basic information, Dulles is awash in it. After publishing a basic work on postrevolutionary Mexico in 1961, Dulles went on to do numerous studies of Brazil, including biographies of Getulio Vargas, Carlos Lacerda and Humberto de Alencar Castello Branco, as well as a study of legal opposition to Vargas (Dulles 1961, 1967, 1978, 1980, 1986, 1991–97). Heráclito Fontoura Sobral Pinto was born in 1893 in Minas Gerais but spent most of his long life in Rio de Janeiro, and for Dulles, his life could not have posed any new problems of historical understanding. Dulles gained access to Sobral Pinto's archive and, unfortunately, seems to have decided to present almost everything he found in it. The work is a chronicle rather than a history or biography. The first chapter tells of Sobral Pinto's birth, early education, and youthful exposure to Catholic social thought and describes his meteoric rise to attorney general by 1926 and service under two presidents before turning permanently to private practice.[4] By the second chapter we are plunged into our hero's quest for truth and justice and his opposition to Getúlio Vargas.

What is regrettable is that Dulles does not pull away from all the correspondence and newspaper articles to closely examine two topics that are buried in this book. The first is the practice of law. We lack any major *treatise* about twentieth-century Latin American lawyers in English and do not know much about how the criminal justice system worked for *many* Latin American nations. Two recent anthologies and the work of Pablo Piccato on Mexico City in the early twentieth century demonstrate that legal practice and criminology techniques shaped societies and popular experience (Salvatore and Aguirre 1996; Salvatore, Aguirre, and Joseph 2001; Piccato 2001).[5] Dulles's book contains surprising details about the treatment and trials of the Communists Luiz Carlos Prestes and Harry Berger who were arrested in 1935 and brutalized for years. The police

3. Lockhart's work appeared in Spanish in 1999.

4. Sobral Pinto's actual title was *procurador criminal da república*. Dulles does not translate the phrase, and some of the things Sobral Pinto did sound more like the activities of a solicitor general. Contacts with Brazilian specialists failed to provide an exact translation for his official title.

5. The law and civic life is another major topic that Dulles ignores, on that issue see Caldeira and Holston (1998).

drove poor Berger insane. Both men lost their wives, who were Jews and were shipped back to Germany. Sobral Pinto, despite being devout and detesting communism and the *tenentes* (the army lieutenants who rebelled in the 1920s and whom Prestes led), defended the two with courage and tenacity. His work on behalf of Prestes made him a kind of Clarence Darrow in Brazil. However, we are given too little context about Vargas, the legal and police systems, and the significance of the Communist Party in the 1930s to understand the actual practice of law or to appreciate Sobral Pinto's importance.

Another topic that goes undeveloped in this book is the position of the Catholic right under Vargas. Sobral Pinto came to differ with the Church hierarchy because of its acceptance of *integralismo* (Brazilian fascism). At times he seems a leader of lay Catholics in their defense of legal rights, while at others he seems completely out of the loop. Again, important contexts are missing, including the relation of the Church to the state and the politics swirling within the Church. Dulles could have used Sobral Pinto's involvement with Catholic groups to explain some of this complicated history. Sobral Pinto built his legal views around his religious ones; Dulles quotes him as arguing not so much for universal civil rights as for the truth as taught by the Church. In 1945, for example, he wrote a colleague, "At the side of the [presidential] campaign of Eduardo Gomes, we must try to form a political current based on positive Christian ideas that can serve to support tomorrow's rulers, desirous of orienting the Nation within the moral principles appropriate for Christian civilization" (244). At another point, he said, "I am not a fascist or anti-fascist lawyer, I am, and have always tried to be, a Catholic lawyer" (297). What exactly did any of this mean? Was there a distinct Catholic feeling about justice that shaped the Brazilian system, and, if so, how did it relate to the defense of civil rights? Sobral Pinto's comments pour into Dulles's text as though they were obviously true. Too much time is spent on quarrels that are of no historical interest, and we do not learn how these quarrels shaped Sobral Pinto's life. This is the first of two volumes; we are told that the second will cover Sobral Pinto's opposition to the military regime installed by the coup of 1964.

The central problem of biography is to place "the life" in relation to the significant events that make it meaningful. The other three biographies are far more successful in tackling this problem than the first two. None of their subjects were born great; all of them achieved something of importance. Porfirio Díaz led Mexico at the time it began its modernization. Andrés Bello created a basic work of Spanish grammar and codified Chile's civil law. Francisco de Miranda helped generate Spanish South America's independence movement. Bello's youth intersected with Miranda's in London. Iván Jaksić and Karen Racine, their respective biographers, seem to know each other (see Racine, ix), and each

focuses part of the narrative on London in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, Garner's study of Díaz is fundamentally political with some economic observations; Jaksić's work is primarily intellectual with some political observations. Racine's is the most interesting, but then her subject is the most colorful.

Garner's work is less a biography of Díaz than a portrait of the Porfiriato. Of the five books under review, this one will end up in the most undergraduate courses, for it treats a complicated subject in under 230 pages (with notes included). Díaz was president of Mexico from 1876 to 1880 and again from 1884 to 1911. He was born a mestizo in the largely Indian state of Oaxaca, and his home state was always central to his career. It was also the home state of Benito Juárez, and Garner argues convincingly that the fate of its indigenous population after independence, especially the preservation of native pueblos as distinct municipalities, played a key role in the kind of liberalism espoused by both men. In sharp contrast to his later reputation, Díaz began life committed to federalism and opposed to any centralizing tendencies. He sought the presidency in 1867 in an election that pitted him against Juárez and finally won it through the rebellion of Tuxtepec against President Lerdo de Tejada in 1876. He promised effective suffrage, no reelection, and municipal autonomy—the very issues at the heart of the Mexican Revolution that removed him from office in 1911.

Garner provides clear explanations of the policies of Díaz's first term and the term of President Manuel González (1880–84) and shows that González, although elected with Díaz's support, was not his stooge as is usually assumed. He goes on to treat the period between 1884 and 1911 in succinct chapters that deal with the consolidation of power, international relations, economic development, and the decline and fall of the regime. He draws on the latest research for each topic; the political glossary and chronological summary are excellent.

The work presents the regime's difficulties and focuses on what Díaz accomplished. Garner argues the J-curve for the regime's rise and fall. Díaz succeeded in ending the political upheavals that preceded him and launched an era of export-oriented growth with close ties to Britain and the United States. He put the government on a sound fiscal basis and began reining in the regional bosses who ran the country by involving himself in state politics. After the 1904 election, Díaz infuriated liberal reformers, and then an international depression struck in 1907; the combination of economic hardship and Díaz's behavior in the presidential election of 1910 brought on the revolution. While this is all well done, I wish Garner had adopted a more biographical approach. For one thing, he could have recast Díaz as a military leader. Díaz was forged in the army during the War of the Reform and the struggle against the French, and we need to know how this shaped his character, his

fame, and his political support. For another, Garner presents him as cynical when he was middle aged and cynical in his eighties. Did nothing about him change? And were the continuities or changes in his character related to the regime's failures in 1910–11?

Garner rejects any demonization of Díaz and argues that he has been denied his due. "By focusing on the multiple shortcomings of the last years of the regime, both contemporary revolutionaries of the decade after 1910 and subsequent anti-Porfirista historians consistently and deliberately underestimated the achievements of the Díaz regime" (229). He argues that the old man's bones should be returned and buried "in his beloved Oaxaca." He also rejects dependency theory and the argument that the structural changes induced by foreign trade and foreign interests set Mexico on the wrong path. He notes recent studies that present a "detailed empirical analysis of internal economic conditions and resources, and on the fate of individual enterprises" (167). The *dependentistas*, he claims, were also wrong to emphasize poor terms of trade and a domestic elite of *compradors*, neither of these factors explain what happened. The Díaz regime was far more protectionist than has been assumed.

A regime that ends in revolution cannot, of course, be praised for doing so. A more instructive theme than Díaz's reputation would have been the continuities between the Porfirian era and the post-revolutionary state of the 1920s and 1930s. Díaz's efforts to professionalize the military, attract foreign capital, and institutionalize an elaborate network of patron-client politics as well as his attitudes toward the Indians—all well described in this work—prefigure what Mexican governments did after the revolution. The key argument with regard to Díaz's economic policies is not dependency theory per se but the relation of a trade-based economy to political stability. If Díaz had no choice but to attract foreign capital in order to finance his government and stimulate economic growth, then he had to find some way to restructure politics to deal with that reality. This was a complex task, and many Latin American governments failed in it. Politics and economic policies (including those with regard to foreign investment) need to be considered together. Separating them as Garner does suggests that Díaz's policies did not entail severe political risks. Perhaps Ramón Ruiz was right in saying that Díaz for many years was just plain lucky (Ruiz 1992, 269). Garner cites Friedrich Katz (1984, 153) to bolster an argument that foreign influence became pernicious only in 1910. This is misleading for Katz, in the Cambridge History, argued something far more forceful. (By the way, the argument that U.S. interests turned on Díaz in that year and so helped bring about the revolution would tend to support rather than disprove *dependista* views.) Katz (1984, 63, 67) and Jack Womack, coming at the revolution from different vantage points, both

argue that foreigners helped dig the regime's grave. Womack states it plainly, "From the beginning to the end foreign activities figured crucially in the Revolution's course" (Womack 1984, 81). Mexico had the bloodiest civil conflict growing out of a trade-based regime, but other Latin American governments also collapsed throughout the liberal era. The Brazilian empire fell in 1889, the Argentine oligarchy was shocked by a civil uprising in 1890, and Chile plunged into civil war the following year; Colombia did the same from 1899 to 1902 and Venezuela from 1901 to 1903.

In this respect, the past is not past. Garner, in his introduction, quotes Enrique Krauze on the relationship between Porfirian liberalism and Mexican neoliberalism. Those who inherited the myth of the Mexican Revolution and ran the official party abandoned that myth in favor of an open economy and foreign investment in the 1990s. Suddenly, the policies of economic intervention that had ruled from the 1930s through the early 1980s became an interregnum between two liberal eras. Then as now, Mexican liberalism was part of a regional trend and linked Mexico's economy more closely to that of the United States, and then as now, its social consequences were disheartening. Civic turmoil rocked Latin America in both eras as wealth became more concentrated and an anxious majority of Mexicans felt that their government had failed them.

The remaining biographies discuss the era between late colonial Spanish America and the early republics. Bello and Miranda were men of ideas born in Caracas a generation apart. Jaksić's study discusses Bello's writings as his life unfolds and argues with justice that Bello remains famous but unknown. Bello was born in 1781 to a criollo family. The oldest son, he grew up with a strong attachment to his mother; his father died when he was nine. Jaksić does not tell us how his large family survived this blow; but Bello was educated by monks in Caracas and attended the local university, where he distinguished himself in Latin and in Spanish orthography. He went on to become a valued colonial official and worked on the city's first newspaper. Never a revolutionary, he took part in an 1810 mission with Simón Bolívar and Luis López Méndez to ask for England's help for his newly independent country and never returned to Caracas. The three men connected with Francisco de Miranda (who, as Racine makes clear, was a revolutionary), and for the next two decades Bello's existence turned on the intrigues and vicissitudes of politics in exile. Having worked for the new Venezuelan government, he was cut off from the Spanish one.

In London, he waited out the wars for independence and the instability of the early republics. For long periods of time he had no money. He nonetheless married an Irish Catholic in 1814 and became the father of five children (his youngest son and wife died in 1821). "They lived mostly in Somers Town, a poor and shabby area with a large population of

French and Irish immigrants" (37). He went from one small job to another, working on minor publications and teaching Spanish. He seems to have had no regular employment until he went to work in the Chilean Legation in 1821; he lost that job in 1825 and began working for the Legation of Gran Colombia, falling on hard times once again when Gran Colombia neglected to pay him for a year. None of this stopped his intellectual development. He had published poetry and essays back in Caracas. In the 1820s he studied Spain's national poem, *El Cantar de Mío Cid*, and served as an editor of *El Repertorio Americano*, a journal produced by Spanish-American exiles. He translated French poems into Spanish and wrote more of his own. He was obsessed with the study of language, focusing on the evolution of Spanish from Latin and the rules that should govern spelling and grammar. Jaksić believes that "the materials he studied and gathered at the library of the British Museum constitute the basis of virtually all of his philological, literary, and grammatical works" (47). He participated in exile politics as an antirepublican and a proponent of constitutional monarchy for the new nations. He had married again in 1824 and quickly had four more children. (In all he would have fifteen children with his two wives, most of whom died before he did.) Broke and desperate, in 1829 he and his family left for a post in Chile's bureaucracy.

Within a year of his arrival, the conservatives under Diego Portales defeated the liberal administration that had hired him. Far from hurting him, this proved a godsend. Bello already had ties to Portales, and as the latter constructed his regime he turned to Bello to help write the Constitution of 1833, which eliminated any vestiges of federalism, and centralized power in the presidency. Bello eventually became Chile's most famous man of letters. His achievements from the late 1830s to his death in 1865 are too numerous to list; they are the core of Jaksić's narrative. To write it, the biographer visited archives in five countries. Bello helped found the University of Chile in 1842 and became its first rector; there he helped shape the next generation of Chilean essayists and historians. Jaksić analyzes Bello's contributions to Spanish orthography (he was on the losing side in shaping the language), the study of medieval literature, and the major intellectual debates of his time. His careful description of how Bello wrote Chile's civil code is a major contribution to the history of nineteenth-century law in Latin America. Asked by Portales to look into composing a civil code, Bello submitted a basic draft in 1852 and then took part in the meetings that ended in the adoption of a new code in 1855. As Bello put it, it stripped "custom of the force of law" (166). Drawing on Spanish colonial laws, canon law, and the French code—although its basic inspiration was Roman law—it touched on every aspect of civil life including the definition of a person and the rules governing contracts, marriage, and inheritance.

It provided for "the rights of children born outside church-sanctioned marriage" and ended entails (*mayorazgos*) thus altering the *hacendados'* dynastic calculations (169). The code became a model for other Spanish Latin American nations, particularly Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Venezuela and several states in Colombia.

Bello had a hard life, but hardship does not explain his attitudes; he seems always to have had a conservative temperament. In the colonial world and in Chile, he was comfortable in the service of autocracy. At the height of his influence he seems to have ignored the egalitarian movement that began with the writings of Francisco Bilbao but was summarily suppressed.[6] "He viewed himself as a defender of order, accepted its costs, and above all he was willing to subordinate his political opinions to the policies of the governments that he served" (xxi). Brian Loveman has persuasively argued the class basis and repressiveness of the Portalian state; Jaksić simply footnotes Loveman's work (1988, 1993; Loveman and Lira 1997) and moves on.

Along with this biography, Jaksić has edited a volume of Bello's essays and poetry translated into English (Bello 1997). Jaksić has done the field of Latin American studies an enormous favor in digesting these writings, for Bello himself was prolific and a pedant.

> Education, that exercise of early childhood which prepares human beings to play in the theater of the world the role that Fate holds in store for them, is what teaches us our duties to society as members of it, as well as our duties to ourselves if we wish to attain the highest degree of well-being of which the human condition is capable. Our aim, in forming a man's heart and spirit, is to secure good things and avoid bad ones, for the individual and others like him. (Bello 1997)

It is no wonder that Bello's thoughts are not better known. There is, however, no denying his influence or the frequency with which his name is etched on public buildings. In revealing Bello, Jaksić lays out the intellectual bases of Chile's conservative order and of its government by the few for the few. Its foundations are in minutiae rather than in principles, in Latin and medieval studies rather than in the enlightenment (for all of Bello's admiration of Jeremy Bentham), in law rather than in any concept of justice. How was it that the ideas of human emancipation with which the Spanish American liberators started were reduced to this?

There was never a good fit between liberalism and the Spanish and Portuguese empires in America. Although his categories were too broad, E. Bradford Burns was right about liberalism being imposed by governments and the rich at great social cost to the indigenous and the

6. The Sociedad de Igualdad of 1850 is not mentioned; Jaksić talks of Bilbao only in relation to the liberal figure Victorino Lastarria.

rural poor and its having taken a century to get the job done, however incompletely (Burns 1980). Before this happened, only a few Latin Americans could imagine that liberal ideas developed in France and Britain would provide a guide for ending colonialism and servitude. In tracing the life of Francisco de Miranda, Karen Racine reminds us that these few were men of the *eighteenth century* who lived in a proto-nationalist "transatlantic" world. She sees Miranda, whom Jaksić calls "the greatest and most stubborn conspirator against the Spanish" (2001, 3), as a man who could propose liberalism for Spanish America because he had no idea what it would actually involve:

> Miranda was a clever man but not a deep thinker. . . . By all accounts he was passionately devoted to the ideas of liberty and freedom. . . . Yet, although he had read widely and knew many of the era's most influential politicians and philosophers personally, Miranda did not trouble himself to think realistically about the true implications of the revolutionary doctrine of liberty, fraternity, and equality for a region as deeply divided by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status as Spanish America was on the eve of its nationhood. (xv)

Francisco de Miranda was born in 1749 into a family that was never accepted in the upper reaches of colonial Caracas. Trained as an officer in the Spanish army, he rose quickly in the ranks as a result of military successes. Then the jealousy of other officers, who falsely accused him of espionage for the British, forced him to flee in disgrace. He traveled to the United States with little more than his name and social station and there met most of the major figures of the American Revolution. He left America just as his poor reputation in Spain was about to catch up with him and then traveled throughout Europe and as far east as Constantinople before heading north and being rescued by the patronage of Catherine the Great. Racine seems to have tramped after him to every extant archive outside of Russia and to have read the voluminous literature on him, including an edition of his works that runs to twenty-five volumes. She devotes an entire chapter to his role in the French Revolution (he is memorialized on the Arc de Triomphe). After leaving France, he made his home in London and from there in 1798 began planning an expedition to free Venezuela with British backing. When he attempted to carry out this fantastic plan in 1807, it was a fiasco. He was back in London when independence forces gained control of Caracas in 1810, and at this point he returned to Venezuela to head the new government. Seized by the Spanish when they recaptured the area, he died in a Spanish prison.

What makes Miranda come alive is Racine's evocation of his character. Indeed, this is the only one of the five works to deal in any depth with the makeup of its subject—with "the life" as opposed to the importance of that life. In taking Miranda's measure, Racine underlines the importance of his family's humiliation in Caracas, when aristocrats

attacked his father, and the repetition of that humiliation when he was slandered by other officers. She has Miranda's diaries to help explain his sex life. She uses psychological studies of exile to account for his strong work ethic and his preference for his own fantasies over any Spanish American reality. Her conclusions, while tracing his many faults, are nonetheless empathic.

Miranda preached equality while demanding to be treated as an aristocratic officer. He extolled fraternity while sponging off anyone who called him friend. He had gracious manners but was two-faced. He moved constantly because he was just a step ahead of his creditors and ignominy. He was the architect of Spanish American liberalism and revolution. Everyone in the United States and Western Europe had heard of him, and he used his acceptance among the elites of the transatlantic world to promote his scheme of Spanish American independence. (Some of the British who listened to him apparently could not tell the difference between Venezuela and Mexico.) He loved to read and to analyze battles and, despite his penury, accumulated a fabulous library. He twice abandoned a young wife and two sons under the age of five in order to fulfill his political dreams. He was grandiose beyond all measure and a patriot and martyr to a nation that existed only in his own mind.

Racine's work reminds us that the most fascinating aspect of biography is not a man's accomplishments but the details of his life. It is these details that make accomplishments interesting and not the other way around. Those writing about biography repeatedly emphasize that it is the closest thing in historical narrative to the novel (Powers 2003, 9; Parke 1996, xv).[7] The details must reveal character and a pattern of decisions; they must get "to the person beneath" (Backsheider 1999, xvi). If we lack sufficient detail (as we do with León-Portilla's study), we cannot make out the person. An overabundance of detail, without reflection on the person, as in Dulles's book, leaves us unmoved by the life and puzzled about its significance. There is not a moment of psychological insight in Dulles; Sobral Pinto seems not so much the conscience of Brazil as a moralizing hysteric. Garner is less interested in Díaz than in his regime, leaving us to view his presidency through its policies more than through his motives. Jaksić admires his subject and therefore adopts that subject's perspective; the Chile in which Bello succeeded recedes into the background, and we never quite see him as the servant of a landowning and merchant elite, preoccupied with the preservation of servility and quick to use force to get its way. Most of these works show that the men who ruled Latin America were largely illiberal at heart and that the one among them who was a liberal revolutionary was out of touch with reality. Bello,

7. Parke notes that in many libraries, "The life writing stacks stand next to fiction." (1996, 15)

Díaz, and Sobral Pinto had to make sense of a politics that was couched in liberal terms but represented interests that were not about to support democratic republics. We live in another era in which economic liberalism is being imposed upon recalcitrant populations, and its politics are no less surreal.

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