READINGS ON
LATIN AMERICA
AND ITS PEOPLE

Volume 2

Since 1800

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PREFACE

Readings on Latin America and Its People is meant, like Latin America and Its People to emphasize the texture of everyday life for men and women, young and old, rich and poor. It is not always a pretty picture. The brutality of the European conquest of indigenous peoples, of Latin America’s nineteenth-century wars and the terror of the dictatorships during the 1970s were horrible and catastrophic. The lives and work of slaves in colonial and post-independence Brazil and Cuba were harsh and oppressive. Latin Americans always have been overwhelmingly poor. The countryside, since the beginnings of agriculture, has been a place of hardship and uncertainty. Country dwellers struggled daily against the elements to produce enough to feed their families. Men and women toiled from before dawn to well after dusk often with little to show other than half-starved children. On the large estates, known as haciendas and fazendas, workers tilled and weeded the soil, and harvested crops for scant wages. At the end of the year, they were likely to owe more to the landowners than the latter had paid them. The rich mines exploited by the Europeans were cruelly dangerous. Working underground was almost always a death sentence. Mine owners cast aside their injured or sick employees.

The ever-growing cities were hardly better. They were and remain noisy, smelly, and unhealthful. Since the Europeans arrived, the metropolises have never had sufficient water, sewers, housing, educational facilities, or medical care. Latin America, too, has always been a region of bitter contrasts, between wealthy and impoverished, between traditional and modern, between the physical beauty of the geography and architecture and the wretchedness of the slums, and between low technology and high technology. The dilemma for the authors has been (and remains) how to illustrate the various, often contradictory, aspects of Latin American life without descending into hopelessness.

Historians are like detectives reconstructing the everyday lives of men, women, and children in past times. They must diligently search out clues that reveal people at work, worship, and play; in courtrooms, schools, and markets; and coping with the commonplace demands of supporting their families and the extraordinary challenges of war, social unrest, and natural disasters. These clues can be found in what are known as primary sources, such as official documents, letters, diaries, images, and eyewitness testimonies that date from the time period they are studying. Remnants of the material culture of past societies give us further insights about the everyday lives of people—their dwellings, the tools they used, the religious symbols they revered. Historians also look to secondary sources—books and articles written by other scholars—for guidance in the interpretation of all of these primary sources, but at the same time they must be careful not to let preconceived notions close their minds to other possible interpretations.

Working with primary sources presents many challenges. Written documents have obvious biases, in that they most faithfully reflect the viewpoints of privileged groups—those able to read and write. Even when a source purports to represent the
words of the illiterate, we must remember that those words were filtered through the person who wrote them down. Of course, we should also examine all written sources critically, keeping in mind that people do not always tell the truth. Images pose problems as well. We cannot be sure whether paintings and drawings depict reality or the artist’s idealized version of that reality. Even the photographs available to historians studying the nineteenth and twentieth centuries require critical analysis. The photographer chooses which scenes to record, and we cannot know for certain whether a given image represents a staged or spontaneous event. People who appear in historical photographs may have tried to present themselves in ways that may or may not have conformed to the everyday reality of their lives.

Historians must also acknowledge the many factors that have influenced the range of primary sources that have survived down to the present. Those who study relatively recent times, since the invention of modern mass media, may be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of materials available. They have access to newspapers and magazines; the massive paper trail generated by governments, churches, educational systems, and corporations; photographs; audio and video resources; and digitized databases. These sources are often well guarded and kept in climate-controlled archives and museums staffed by professional curators and preservationists. Historians of the recent past must remember, however, that some of the most interesting material may never have reached an official repository. They need to remain on the lookout for treasures hidden in someone’s closet or attic. To obtain as complete a picture as possible, they need to seek out individuals able to share their living memories and then check these oral testimonies against other evidence. The challenge of sifting through all of these sources to identify what is truly significant can be daunting for the historian, even with all of the convenience offered by electronically searchable databases and modern methods of cataloging information.

The study of pre-twentieth-century history is much like working a jigsaw puzzle, except that many of the pieces are missing and there are no clearly marked borders to help in forming an initial framework for our findings. This is particularly true when we go about examining documents and artifacts that might convey information on the daily lives of “ordinary” people. Moreover, if we are careful not to begin our inquiry with set notions of what we expect to uncover when reading the past, we are working without a picture of the finished puzzle to guide us. Without the box cover, a puzzle solver can only determine if a blue piece is sky, water, or perhaps an article of clothing by seeing how it fits with other pieces, a process that usually involves considerable trial and error, even if all the pieces are there. The historian searching for evidence on the lives of people in past societies must carefully work with the available clues and accept the reality that the resulting picture must necessarily remain incomplete.

Our first intent, therefore, is to explore the detail of daily life through various prisms.

In Chapter One, “Mexican Independence,” for example, we offer the reminiscences of Lucas Alamán, Mexico’s foremost conservative politician and intellectual, of the disturbing plunder and massacre of the wealthy whites of Guanajuato in 1810. The author’s trauma is quite evident. His memories of the incident scarred his worldview for the rest of his life. In Chapter Three “War,” we
present firsthand accounts of the terror and disorder of battle from a British mercenary, Gustave Hippisley, who was apparently neutral in his sentiments and observations, juxtaposed with the obviously and passionately self-interested Mexican general, Antonio López de Santa Anna. The reminiscences of the participants bring the Paraguayan War, perhaps the most tragic in Latin American history, into vivid focus.

A second goal is to explore the mindset of everyday people. Explaining why people acted as they did is far and away the most difficult undertaking for a historian of any place or time. In Chapter Seven, we present documents that provide us with insight into the reasons that military officers were brought to the point of committing unspeakable atrocities against their fellow citizens whom they had sworn to protect. In Chapter Ten we attempt to understand how Mexican peasants, miners, and middle class made their decisions to rise up against the seemingly invincible regime of General Porfirio Díaz in 1910.

There are three notable omissions to the chapters in Volume II. First, since the preponderance of the materials illuminate daily life, the editors often have left aside many issues of politics. For example, there is no discussion of populism, so important in mid-twentieth century South America. In Chapter 7, “The Military,” the emphasis is on the mindset of military officers and the conditions of rank and file soldiers, rather than the politics of the military. Second, the volume considers Cuba only as one country in Latin America—no more important or studied than any other. Consequently, the revolution of 1959 that we explore only in Chapter 8, “Everyday Life in the Countryside during the Twentieth Century,” is one example of land reform (and not a very successful one). Finally, the reader will note the nearly complete absence of the United States from the book. It is our belief that for courses about Latin America, our students should learn about Latin America. Latin Americans lead their own lives, determine their own histories. The United States should not be central to the analysis, as it is in so many other books about Latin America. Latin Americans have their own histories. There is not nearly enough space in the volume to present all that is worthy to know about Latin America, so discussion of the United States is hardly appropriate.

The topics covered in these chapters, and the people whose lives are documented here, represent only a small fragment of the Latin American experience. The region’s history is simply too rich to contain in any single volume. Many other stories can be found in our companion textbook, Latin America and Its People, and still others in the works of many historians who have researched this vibrant and diverse people. Still other stories remain untold, awaiting their historian. We invite our readers to sample the historian’s craft in the readings in this volume, and hope that some of you will be inspired to search out these stories in the archives of Latin America. You will have to get your hands dirty and puzzle over the meaning of widely scattered bits of evidence, but it is an exciting adventure of discovery.
Latin American literature consists of the oral and written literature of Latin America in several languages, particularly in Spanish, Portuguese, and the indigenous languages of the Americas as well as literature of the United States written in the Spanish language. It rose to particular prominence globally during the second half of the 20th century, largely due to the international success of the style known as magical realism. As such, the region's literature is often associated solely with this. There is nothing like reading a history or biography book and being so completely transported to another time and place that you find...