READINGS ON
LATIN AMERICA
AND ITS PEOPLE

Volume 1

To 1830
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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 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 and to show how people often forged creative responses to difficult situations.

Reconstructing the everyday lives of the men, women, and children who confronted these multiple challenges is like detective work. The historian 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 data bases. 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 data bases and modern methods of cataloguing information.

Researching the more distant past presents obstacles of a different sort, beyond the simple lack of voice recordings, film, and living witnesses. Some documents and artifacts have been housed for centuries in government archives and museums, but not always under ideal conditions. Others have been stored for just as long, untended in town halls and church basements. Countless other primary sources were looted and carried off to distant lands by collectors and remain in private hands despite the best efforts of modern governments to recover the priceless national patrimony these items represent. Fires, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, wars, and civil unrest have destroyed many sources, while mildew and insects have also taken a toll, albeit in less dramatic fashion. Mere chance, rather than questions of future historical importance, usually dictated why some materials survived intact and others did not. Some documents from the early 1690s housed in Mexico’s national archives are scorched around the edges, most likely because some unnamed person rescued them after an angry mob set the viceroy’s palace on fire in protest.
against rising food prices and other hardships. Historians must work with what they have, with few ways of knowing whether or not the materials that survived are representative of what was lost.

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.

This volume presents a variety of primary sources from Latin America’s colonial period—from the arrival of the first Europeans in the late fifteenth century through the attainment of national independence for most former Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the 1820s. Primary sources are surprisingly abundant and rich in colorful detail. Spain and Portugal created elaborate bureaucracies to administer their far-flung overseas possessions, and the Catholic Church maintained an equally impressive cadre of administrators. Multiple copies of government decrees, church edicts, and official reports crossed the Atlantic and today fill shelf after shelf in the national archives of the mother countries and former colonies alike. The paper used in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries was high in rag content and thus able to withstand the passage of time in much better condition than paper produced in more recent times. Government bureaucrats and churchmen often used elegant penmanship that is fairly easy to read once the historian learns to decipher the abbreviations and legal formulas that often appear in these documents. Colonial Latin Americans were litigious people who left behind thousands upon thousands of pages of court proceedings. Here historians can find testimony presented in criminal trials, detailed wills and lists of personal property contained in probate records, and legal battles contesting the ownership of everything from huge landed estates to the minuscule inventories of a petty merchants.

Despite this wealth of sources, the study of colonial Latin America poses serious challenges for the historian. To begin with, the numbers of sources for the earliest decades of colonial rule are extremely lopsided in favor of the incoming Europeans. Indigenous peoples used pictorial scripts and other devices to store and transmit information, but the first Europeans on the scene destroyed many of these sources in the process of conquest or in an effort to wipe out traces of what they believed to be the work of the devil. The preconquest sources that did survive require highly specialized training to decipher, but years of painstaking labor by archaeologists and anthropologists have yielded important insights on native societies in the early colonial period. As the decades passed, some indigenous peoples, especially in Mexico, began writing documents and chronicles in their own languages using the European alphabet, and these sources have yielded a wealth of information.
Still, the historian of colonial Latin America is always left wishing for more in the way of primary source material, especially on the everyday lives of “ordinary” people. Literacy was even more restricted there than in many other societies. Many women, even from the privileged classes, and most Indians, blacks, and people of mixed ancestry never learned to read and write. Even documents penned by literate people are not as abundant as we might like. Only a handful of the most important cities possessed printing presses, limiting the number of available copies of most materials. Lack of resources has often prevented governments and institutions in Latin America from properly cataloguing and safeguarding colonial records. Records maintained by local governments have often been particularly vulnerable to the ravages of time. Often the historian wishing to study daily life in a small community must begin by sorting and organizing haphazard piles of dusty documents not touched for decades or even centuries.

The materials reproduced in this book have been selected with an eye to helping students see how historians go about their work despite the limitations of the available evidence and the challenges of interpreting what we do have. Some of the documents have been published many times in many languages and are well known to specialists in the field, while others have only recently come to light. Some of the documents appear here in English translation for the first time. Each chapter focuses on a particular time and place, giving a sampling of the sources that might help in reconstructing the lives and thoughts of people living in that historical context.

The first three chapters present sources from the early colonial period, roughly the first two or three generations following the arrival of the Europeans. Chapter One deals with a major type of evidence used by scholars seeking to understand colonial Peruvian society in the years immediately preceding and following the conquest initiated by Francisco Pizarro in 1532. These are the quipus, the knotted cords used by the Incas and other Andean peoples to store numerical records and perhaps other types of information. Readings in this chapter show how a variety of sixteenth-century individuals interpreted these sources, and how present-day anthropologists are challenging long-held views on the kinds of information the quipus contain. The next chapter moves to a consideration of the fierce moral debate waged on both sides of the Atlantic over the treatment of native peoples by the intruding Europeans. Chapter Three captures a particularly crucial moment in the development of Spain’s colonial enterprise in the Americas. In the 1570s King Philip II, a consummate micromanager, produced an elaborate questionnaire in an effort to obtain detailed information on his colonies. He asked for data on geography, minerals, flora, fauna, and human communities past and present. Responses of local officials, Spaniards and indigenous peoples alike, appear in this chapter.

Later chapters present slices of life in some of the many environments in which colonial Latin Americans lived. Chapter Four looks at indigenous communities in central Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Paraguay; several of the documents were originally written in indigenous languages. In Chapter Five we turn to a very different colonial context, the nunneries that were home to dozens or even hundreds of women in many major cities of colonial Latin America. Convents gave
some women a privileged space in which to write their autobiographies and engage in other intellectual pursuits, and the writings of these nuns provide a rare glimpse into their lives and thoughts. Chapter Six examines the lives of slaves in colonial Brazil. Although slavery existed throughout colonial Latin America, it played an especially important role in the human and economic development of Brazil. In this chapter we will observe slaves at work in diamond mines and landed estates, and we will see the religious and community ties they formed among themselves and with free people of color. We shall also see that slaves often resisted the oppression they experienced. Indeed, many people of African descent found ways to escape bondage, and in Chapter Seven we will take a look inside some of the communities formed by runaway slaves and their descendants in Brazil, Panamá, Guatemala, and Mexico.

Chapters Eight and Nine show us how people lived in places far from the centers of colonial power, often without strict supervision from colonial authorities but also without many of the resources they needed to meet their daily needs. In Chapter Eight we examine life along the coasts of the Spanish empire, where foreign ships often landed, sometimes to plunder and terrorize the local populations, but sometimes to offer tempting bargains on contraband merchandise. The scene shifts in Chapter Nine to New Mexico on the far northern frontier of New Spain, where settlers of Spanish and mestizo descent lived side-by-side with indigenous peoples in relationships that ranged from peaceful coexistence and kinship to dreadful hostility.

Chapter Ten takes us to Mexico City, Quito, and the great silver mining town of Potosí in present-day Bolivia for a sample of how people at different times responded to earthquakes, calamities that have frequently disrupted the lives of Latin Americans from prehistoric times to the present. For much of the colonial period men and women looked to religion to explain and respond to such catastrophes, but as the final selection of this chapter shows, by the early nineteenth century some people had come to rely on more scientific explanations for these events. Chapter Eleven examines these new intellectual currents of the late colonial period in greater detail. We will see people discovering ways to immunize themselves against smallpox, sponsoring inventions that promised a bright future of economic development for their communities, and gathering in clubs and coffee houses to debate the latest philosophical ideas circulating in Europe and the Americas. Finally, Chapter Twelve looks at Mexico through the eyes of those who participated in or witnessed its struggle for independence between 1810 and 1821.

The topics covered in these chapters, and the people whose lives are documented here, represent only a small fragment of the colonial 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.
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