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Spanish Colonial Era: Spanish Colonial Administration, 1782-1810 and Latin American History

Review Author: Nicholas P. Cushner

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SPANISH COLONIAL ERA

SPANISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION, 1782-1810. The Intendant System in the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. By John Lynch. University of London. The Athlone Press. 1958. Pp. xi, 335. 42s.

LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY. A guide to the literature in English. Edited by R. A. Humphreys. Oxford University Press. London. 1958. Pp. xiii, 197. 25s.

Doctor Lynch has provided students of Spanish colonial administration with a valuable work which will considerably broaden our views of the Empire in the late Bourbon period. He has constructed, primarily from Spanish archives, a study of the intendant system as it functioned in the Río de la Plata region. It was exactly thirty years ago that Fisher's work on the intendancies appeared, so an up-to-date full-scale study has certainly been due.

The reform of the vast empire of Charles III took place principally in the economic and organizational spheres. In the former a period of free commerce was inaugurated as well as an attempt to block the sieve of contraband trade. The latter witnessed the introduction into the South American vicerealties of the intendants who were to work with the viceroys in the supervision of colonial affairs. They were to encourage agriculture, supervise mining and the collection of taxes, as well as protect the Indians, thus superseding, to a great extent, the work of the *corregidores*. Intendants and intendancies were new to South America but their origins go back as far as sixteenth-century France, to Royal Commissioners for the Provinces. However, they did not make their appearance as intendants until the time of Richelieu. Under Louis XIV the *intendants de justice, police et finance* held almost illimitable powers in these spheres of government.

Because of the financial advantages enjoyed by Castile with the assistance of the intendants, and their smooth provisioning of its armies, the king decided to establish the system in Cuba. This *instrucción* was dated 31 October 1764. The visitation of New Spain by José de Gálvez in 1767 marked another stage in the spread of the intendency system, since the visitor was concerned with its application there. Thence it spread southward. The function of the intendant was to improve the financial and economic condition of his district, and the task was formidable.

"Financial administration in the colonies had reached its nadir. An incredibly primitive method of accounting, loose organization, unskilled officials—each defect alone was sufficiently grave to cause decay. The royal mints, especially that of Potosí, were long-standing models of wastage and ignorance. But above all, the fundamental cause

of distress was the dishonesty of underpaid exchequer officials, an inheritance of the practice of sale of offices." (p. 117)

In general, the intendants were successful in increasing the royal revenues but since the increase came from the pockets of the citizens, the new officials were never over-popular. The author is inclined to believe that the new policy of free trade rather than the vigilance and superintendence of the intendants was responsible for the increase in customs revenue, a capital source for the royal treasury. Numerous cases are reported in detail of the actual workings of the intendants and their relationship with the viceroy, exchequer, Indians, cabildo, and audiencia. Public administration, the creation of new towns and the improvement of old ones, also fell within the scope of the intendant and the improvements effected in this regard were considerable.

Whatever may have been its success in finance and economics, the system of intendants was certainly a retrogressive step with regard to municipal self-government. Its highly centralized authority alienated the cabildos, the one institution which could have become the means for the introduction of a more popular form of government. From this point of view, it hastened the revolution. As Dr. Lynch points out, the intendants were staunchly royalist, in opposition to the *juntas* and *creoles*. As such they were fulfilling their roles of asserting further royal control over the Spanish Empire.

A fine bibliography, two maps and a good index round out this significant contribution to the study of Spanish Colonial administration.

Professor Robin Humphreys, in his *Latin American History*, has sought to "unlock the doors to the great body of writings on Latin American history in the English language." He has assiduously compiled over 2,200 entries for this latest bibliographical work. It surveys the field from pre-conquest times to the present. The institutions erected by Spain in the Americas differed only accidentally but nonetheless considerably from those of the Philippines. For that reason, the volume can find wide use in the hands of Philippine historians.

We are first of all introduced to general reference works, then other bibliographies and guides, periodicals, general histories and significant anthropological studies. A periodic view of writings on the Empire under the Hapsburgs, Bourbons and the republics precede a well developed section on the modern period. The entries, many of which are annotated, range from administrative organization to international rivalries. Dr. Humphreys has given us another well-worked bibliographical tool which can be profitably used by the researcher, student, or interested general reader.