

TWO HISTORICAL DICTIONARIES ON THE CARIBBEAN

Sidney W. Mintz

The Johns Hopkins University

HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF THE FRENCH AND NETHERLANDS ANTILLES.

By ALBERT GASTMANN. (Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1978. Pp. 162.)

RACE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, AN HISTORICAL DICTIONARY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY. By ROBERT M. LEVINE. (Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1980. Pp. 252.)

These two short books pose problems for the reviewer because as reference works, their potential usefulness is difficult to determine. Each professes to be an "historical dictionary"; Albert Gastmann's volume is labeled "Latin American Historical Dictionaries, Number 18," making it one of a series of this kind. But neither book provides the reader with any means for judging completeness, for attributing particular items or definitions, or—perhaps most important—for pursuing a given term or definition in other sources. At some educational level, where definitions or the briefest of descriptions may suffice, such reference works may be useful. But this reader wonders whether any research need, no matter how modest, could be satisfied, for example, by Gastmann's entry for "East Indians": "Some Indians from India came as laborers to the French Antilles in the first few years after 1848, the year slavery was abolished. Many of their descendents live in Matouba in Gaudeloupe [sic]."

In some ways, Robert Levine's volume is even more open to criticism because it purports to cover a subject that is more than just geographically specifiable, that of race and ethnic relations. Here are two definitions from page 8 for Arawakan: "The largest indigenous linguistic group in South America, stretching from Florida through the Caribbean into Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia." Aruaks are defined as: "The original inhabitants of the West Indies, supplanted by Carib Indians, their traditional enemies. The Caribs killed the Aruak men but kept their wives as concubines. After the conquest, the Caribs themselves disappeared from the larger islands but survived on smaller ones such as St. Lucia and St. Vincent." This reviewer cannot imagine any student ending up the

wiser for having read these definitions; moreover, both contain inaccurate or debatable "facts."

A good deal of the material in these dictionaries also seems irrelevant or, at best, only tangentially useful to the user. Why should Levine include Freyre's phrase *moura encantadora* in his dictionary? It is true that Freyre was seeking to explain Luso-Iberian mating patterns in the New World when invoking the term, but this is stretching things too far. Why the entries on Motecuhzoma (Moctezuma) and Atahualpa? Even more puzzling, why the following entry on "atl"? "The Nahuatl word for water and a root word of the Nahuatl language. Meyer notes the universal importance of water from a pantheistic and a pragmatic standpoint in Nahuatl culture." It would be wasteful to engage in more serious definitional matters (see, for instance, Levine's handling of *mak-ara* and *backra*) because so much extraneous material already lards his pages.

Works of this sort doubtless serve some purpose. It is difficult for libraries not to buy them; their compilers add items to their bibliographies and are perhaps otherwise recompensed. What scholarly or educational purposes they serve, however, remain obscure.