

IN MEMORIAM: JUDITH EWELL (1943–2019)

Judith Ewell, renowned historian of Venezuela and of modern Latin America, and editor of *The Americas* from 1998–2003, died on July 29, 2019, at her home in Williamsburg, Virginia. A native of Virginia’s Eastern Shore, Judy, as friends and colleagues knew her, was a superior scholar and teacher, and for many a role model and mentor at the College of William & Mary, where she taught for 33 years before retiring in 2004. One of the first women on the history faculty at William & Mary, Ewell held the title of Newton Family Professor of History, Emerita.

A nimble researcher and lucid writer, Ewell was first known for her work in political and legal history. *The Indictment of a Dictator: The Extradition and Trial of Marcos Pérez Jiménez* (1981), based on her own 1972 PhD dissertation at the University of New Mexico, is at once a painstaking examination of a mid twentieth-century Latin American dictatorship and a clear-eyed analysis of the legal entanglements that dogged a high-profile and at the time highly unusual extradition. In Ewell’s telling, the predicament of Marcos Pérez Jiménez was mirrored by that of his victorious rival, Rómulo Betancourt, whose methods could also be ruthless and whose seemingly unstoppable party, Acción Democrática, is much reduced today.

The Indictment of a Dictator remains a highly relevant book, as Ewell grappled in it not only with transnational legal issues that continue to vex world politics and international tribunals but also with the recurring yet nebulous problem of corruption. Perhaps also because she spent considerable time in Washington, D.C., where she kept an apartment, Ewell remained a lifelong “corruption skeptic.” She never denied its existence, but always called for cautious use of the term and careful examination of the accusers and their motives.

Concerned that the history of Venezuela was being ignored in favor of the histories of more populous or proximate countries like Mexico, Brazil, Cuba, or Argentina, Ewell composed two studies of Venezuela for broader audiences, intended also to reach US diplomats. *Venezuela: A Century of Change* (1984) was the standard English-language history of the country up to the eve of the Chávez years, and

Venezuela and the United States: From Monroe's Hemisphere to Petroleum's Empire (1996) remains essential reading for anyone interested in US-Latin American relations, not just relations with Venezuela, which were significant even in the era of Bolívar. As Ewell showed, Venezuelan leaders proved remarkably adept at playing a weak hand against the United States, which may still be true.

In both of these broadly gauged books, Ewell managed to round out the big political and economic trends with samples of art, music, and literature, and she typically let Venezuela's own critics have the last word. The Venezuela she knew and loved was much more than dour politics and crass oil, and her work was well received in translation. Ewell continued to keep tabs on Venezuelan history after Chávez—and after her retirement—but she often spoke of the difficulty of keeping up with the pace of change and of sorting good from bad reporting. She remained to the end remarkably neutral and unfazed by Venezuela's trajectory. The revolution from the barrios was startling only to us 'young-'uns,' as she liked to call junior colleagues.

Ewell was also drawn to cultural history, and it was in this field that she reached a much wider reading audience, including several generations of undergraduate students. In the multivolume essay collection *The Human Tradition in Latin America*, which first appeared in 1987, Ewell and Mexicanist William H. Beezley offered up a feast of biographical sketches by top scholars that instantly brought Latin American history to life. I remember being enthralled by Judy's chapter, "Ligia Parra Jahn: The Blonde with the Revolver," as an undergraduate at the University of Colorado. After a freshman seminar called "Marxist Thought and Labor in Latin America," Ligia Parra Jahn was a breath of fresh (if homicidal) air.

Ewell's interest in cultural studies led her to pursue projects on the broader history of crime, not only in Venezuela but throughout Latin America. This interest took her to Ecuador in the early 1990s. Having won a Fulbright Senior Scholar Exchange Fellowship (she had already won another to teach in Venezuela in 1979–80), Ewell uncovered and brought to light cases of banditry in Ecuador's National Archive while teaching advanced courses at the newly formed campus of the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito. Colleagues there remarked on how much they gained from Ewell's penetrating intellect and deep historiographical knowledge, which in the case of banditry ranged far beyond the work of Eric Hobsbawm. Judy was never shy about expressing her opinions of hallowed figures or cherished theories. As department chair at William & Mary, she could be bracingly frank.

Although Ewell did not direct doctoral dissertations at William & Mary, whose only history doctorate during her tenure was one in US History, she advised

and influenced numerous William & Mary students, several of whom went on to become university professors, among them Ann Farnsworth-Alvear of the University of Pennsylvania and Michael Guasco of Davidson College. Judy liked to remind us “young-’uns” that publishing ought to be easy with a 3-2 teaching load. When she began at William & Mary in the early 1970s, it was a 4-4 with classes on Saturdays. In addition to the colonial and modern surveys, Judy regularly taught the histories of Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, the Andes, and the Caribbean, her classes consistently full. Always engaged with new scholarship from and about all areas of Latin America, her library was full of monographs with bold annotations in ballpoint pen. Even famous writers were lucky to get a “Hmm . . .” More common were “*What??*” and “Oh, *please . . .*” and “Bullshit!!”

Ewell never stopped teaching. After retirement, she lectured on many subjects on cruise vessels, infrequently emailing from places like Port of Spain, Ushuaia, and Valparaíso. In traveling, Judy developed her considerable talents as a photographer. Her work, which includes many indelible images from beloved haunts like San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, is now on display. Her collection of Latin American folk art, fruit of another lifelong hobby, will be housed in the College of William & Mary’s Muscarelle Museum of Art.

A huge fan of Latin American literature, Judy liked to compare herself to Machado de Assis’s fictional character Brás Cubas, a “small winner” who passed on without fanfare, his accounts with life settled. But Judith Ewell was in every respect a *big* winner, a highly productive and decorated scholar, a dedicated editor, a generous teacher, and a fiercely independent critic. She has left all of us who love Latin America deeply in her debt.

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