

CARIBBEAN BIOGRAPHY: Nineteenth-Century Personalities

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PHILIPPE BUNAU-VARILLA: THE MAN BEHIND THE PANAMA CANAL. By GUSTAVE ANGUIZOLA. (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1980. Pp. 472. \$25.95.)

AGENTS OF MANIFEST DESTINY: THE LIVES AND TIMES OF THE FILIBUSTERS. By CHARLES H. BROWN. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980. Pp. 525. \$25.00.)

RENATO BELUCHE: SMUGGLER, PRIVATEER, AND PATRIOT, 1780–1860. By JANE LUCAS DE GRUMMOND. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983. Pp. 300. \$27.50.)

DEFENDER OF THE RACE: JAMES THEODORE HOLLY, BLACK NATIONALIST BISHOP. By DAVID M. DEAN. (Boston: Lambeth Press, 1979. Pp. 150. \$14.95.)

JOSE MARTI: MENTOR OF THE CUBAN NATION. By JOHN M. KIRK. (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1983. Pp. 201. \$17.95.)

CUBA'S FREEDOM FIGHTER, ANTONIO MACEO: 1845–1896. By MAGDALEN M. PANDO. (Gainesville: Felicity Press, 1980. Pp. 144. \$9.95.)

Biography is a useful device for historians, but it requires skill, sensitivity, and a thick skin. Although constructing a biography enables one to depict an age and integrate numerous events and themes, it can distort history if one gives too much weight to personal achievement and overlooks institutions and social forces. In attempting to attain the proper balance, one has to contend with the keepers of the flame—persons, organizations, and nations with an interest in preserving a heroic image or in using a biography to promote certain beliefs and values. Individually, biographies are subject to the same critical tests as any work of scholarship. Collectively, biographies can provide insight into the nature and experience of a nation or region. These concepts apply to the works listed above, which are examples of nineteenth-century Caribbean Basin biography.

It may be affirmed that biographies have been written about most of the national heroes and caudillos of the nineteenth-century Caribbean and that North American scholars have been more critical

than local historians, whose works so far tend to be hagiographic. Apart from the national heroes, the personalities most frequently treated are aliens, that is, adventurers, invaders, and schemers who intruded upon the region to build or destroy. When these studies are taken together, certain generalizations emerge. Almost all deal with men, and most of these are men of action rather than men of letters. Because the subjects were violent persons, the split between hero and villain is fairly equal, with final judgment depending upon ends rather than means. It would appear that during the last century the Caribbean was a rough sea and that success or notoriety rested with aggressive behavior. The six new studies above (treating seven personalities) tend to confirm these conclusions, with important exceptions, and they also offer indications of new directions.

Jane de Grummond's *Renato Beluche* conforms to the generalizations made, with the reservation that Beluche was a figure of lesser light and clearly no shaper of events. The study of Beluche indicates that scholars may be moving beyond the prominent personalities to look at the lives of ordinary people, thus rendering a fresh view of Caribbean affairs. De Grummond uses Beluche's active life as a sea captain and privateer to sweep the Caribbean from one end to the other, but she does not place him in the center of the stage. She uses Beluche's presence to relate the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812 and the Battle of Lake Maracaibo during the Venezuelan war of independence. She enriches what is known about these events with accounts from Beluche's letters and logs, but she does not try to make him any bigger than he was.

Renato Beluche, although buried in the Venezuelan Pantheon, was an outsider. He was born in New Orleans while Louisiana was Spanish, but he was of French heritage and became a U.S. citizen when the United States purchased the territory. Almost one-half of the book deals with Beluche's adventures as a privateer and smuggler operating out of New Orleans and Grand Terre (Smugglers' Anchorage), the hide-out of the Laffite brothers. De Grummond taps the records of prize courts as sources, and it appears that the profit motive was as strong a drive as any for Beluche's activities. Even his later action on behalf of Venezuelan independence—when he earned the title of patriot—cannot discount his seizing Spanish ships for personal gain. We learn little about Beluche himself in the biography, except that he did not treat his wives well, but we do acquire an appreciation for the breadth of Caribbean history, as perhaps only the life of a sea captain can provide.

Just as wide-ranging, but breaking no new ground, is Charles H. Brown's *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters*, focusing specifically upon Narciso López and William Walker. Much has been written about these two personalities, which has contributed

to the stereotypical figure of the alien raider in the Caribbean. Although López was born in Venezuela and reared in Cuba, he was what Brown calls an agent of U.S. manifest destiny because his action was sponsored by the U.S. expansionistic interests that it served. One might make a case that López sought Cuban independence, but Brown would disagree, seeing annexation by the United States as the more likely outcome of López's exploits. In regard to Walker, Brown has no difficulty in casting him in the role of adventurer and expansionist. *Agents of Manifest Destiny* has more to do with U.S. diplomatic history than with Caribbean history because the Caribbean states (specifically, Cuba and Nicaragua) come into the story as prizes sought after, without much discussion about their people or problems.

Although the filibusters do not elicit much sympathy, one reluctantly admires their ability to endure hardship and to endure it repeatedly. Why they did so has been explained in various ways, but if they were persons seeking a life of leisure, they did it the hard way. Brown has few illusions about the filibusters, especially Walker and his followers, describing them as "loafers, ruffians, and criminals lured by . . . the opportunity for pillage" (p. 361). Horace Greeley, a contemporary who observed Walker's welcome as a hero in New York in 1857 (after ravaging Lower California and Nicaragua) wrote, "every great criminal . . . draws a crowd" (p. 411). When Walker was executed in Honduras in 1860, *Harper's Weekly* described him as "a mischievous man, better out of the world than in it" (p. 456). Brown, then, does not change previous opinions about the filibusters, but he tells their story extremely well.

In sharp contrast to the lives of the filibusters is that of James Theodore Holly. In *Defenders of the Race*, David M. Dean presents a kind of man almost totally unrepresented in Caribbean biography. Although Holly was an alien, having been born in Washington, D.C., he emigrated to Haiti not to conquer but to belong. It is true that he was a Protestant missionary under the authority of the Episcopal church in the United States, but the fact that he was a black man seeking to escape North American institutions, not to transplant them, sets him apart from other strangers. Holly was a leader of the black emigration movement in the United States before and after the Civil War, but he preferred the Caribbean to Africa as a place to settle. When Holly's colony in Haiti did not succeed, he remained there and devoted his life to his church.

Dean relates the story of a good man and at the same time informs his readers about nineteenth-century Haiti. Holly persevered amidst conditions of poverty and political turmoil. He had to rebuild his church numerous times after it was repeatedly destroyed by the frequent fires that consumed Port-au-Prince. Holly received more moral

than material support from his sponsors in the United States, but perhaps that was just as well because he was an independent person and he sought to establish a national church. Even as the first Afro-American bishop in the Episcopal church, he continued his trade as a shoemaker in order to survive. Although his church was never large and disease claimed several members of his family, Holly found a freedom in Haiti that fulfilled his needs. In 1871, after an absence of nine years, Holly returned to the United States to attend the general convention of the Protestant Episcopal church. In Philadelphia he was denied service in a bank, and in Baltimore, he had to wait in line at a train station "for the one car in seven labelled 'colored persons admitted to this car'" (p. 62). Yet Holly sent a number of his sons to the United States to be educated, for as Dean remarks, Holly "did not hate white people. He loved black people more" (p. 98).

According to Dean, one of Holly's "major contributions" to Haiti was his own procreation. "Ten of fifteen children born to him between 1853 and 1878 survived into adulthood" (p. 95). Holly married twice, losing his first wife to fever in Haiti in 1861. The children became teachers, clergymen, doctors, and engineers. Seven younger sons studied abroad, and six received advanced degrees. Holly bequeathed to Haiti "a dynasty of well-educated professional men" (p. 97). It should be noted that his only grown daughter became a teacher of French at Tuskegee Institute and published widely about Haitian life. As a bishop, Holly had an advantage in educating his children, but it was still not easy because he relied on the benefaction of others. In 1909, after fifty-four years in the ministry, Holly was "literally penniless" (p. 104). His church also was impoverished and had only two thousand members in all Haiti at the time of his death in 1911. In sum, James Theodore Holly's life transcended material considerations, and one is grateful to David Dean for writing about it.

The remaining personalities are more familiar, which is understandable because they were figures in the two major events in Caribbean history at the *fin del siglo*, the Cuban and Panamanian independence movements. Magdalen Pando's treatment of Antonio Maceo is well documented, if a bit unpolished. *Cuba's Freedom Fighter, Antonio Maceo: 1845–1896*, is essentially a military biography, although she does trace Maceo's exile years, when he undertook various civil ventures in Jamaica, Honduras, and Costa Rica. Pando is aware of the problems in writing about a national hero and of the extent to which Maceo has been glorified; yet she consistently takes his side in describing his disputes with other Cuban leaders, including José Martí. A source of this controversy was the fact that Maceo was black and that as the "Bronze Titan," he was able to rally Cuban blacks to the cause of independence. Pando considers Maceo the ablest military commander of the Cuban

insurrection and insists that he fought “to deliver the Cuban people, black and white” from Spain (p. 110). But her own sources, the dispatches of the Spanish chieftain Valeriano Weyler, demonstrate that the Spanish regarded Maceo’s destruction as critical because he “had created a following among black Cubans” (p. 66). Pando does point out that Maceo had trouble with “white patriots,” who viewed his ascendancy as “paving the way for black domination of Cuba” (p. 67) and as hurting the chances for U.S. recognition of Cuban belligerency. Pando demonstrates that Caribbean biography can contribute a great deal to the field of Black Studies alone.

The fear of black power in Cuba may have been a factor in the estrangement between Maceo and Martí, but Pando does not pursue this possibility. She insists that Maceo viewed his role in the Cuban independence movement as strictly military and that he intended to withdraw once the fighting stopped. John Kirk, in *José Martí: Mentor of the Cuban Nation*, does not agree. He maintains that the source of friction was that Martí regarded Maceo as politically ambitious and as representing the threat of military dictatorship. Kirk emphatically rejects any racial motive on Martí’s part, referring to his writings envisioning not only racial equality in independent Cuba, but a raceless society. “All that divides men,” Martí wrote, “all that categorizes them in groupings, segregates or pens them in a cage, is a sin against humanity” (quoted in Kirk, p. 112).

Kirk’s study of Martí is an analysis of his writings and ideas. It would seem difficult to write a fresh biography about Martí, about whom so much has been written already. Yet biography, probably more than any other medium, is the tool of the propagandist motivated by the desire to line up great figures on his or her side. Given the history of Cuba, it is not surprising that each generation and every political group have sought to make Martí their own. Kirk is aware of this, commenting that post-1959 studies, for example, have transformed Martí from “a mystical, apostlelike figure” to “a committed revolutionary” (p. 15). Martí biographies tend to be less “what he was like then” than “what he would be like now.”

Kirk does not entirely escape this pitfall, although he is a careful scholar and relies essentially upon the writings of Martí to interpret Martí. It is true that Kirk’s analysis seeks to emphasize the social and economic aspects of Martí’s thought, but he does not force any labels upon him. Kirk is critical of what he calls the traditionalist school, which has depicted Martí as “the Apostle” and dominated the flood of writings on the occasion of Martí’s centennial in 1953. In comparing these writings with those of the post-1959 era, however, one is dismayed to find that Kirk ignored a number of pre-Castro historians, such as Herminio Portell Vilá, who were not under Fulgencio Batista’s

thumb. Such historians wrote about Martí's nationalism and his critical opinion of the United States, particularly with reference to the economic and social conditions he observed firsthand as an exile. Despite these historiographic matters, the study fulfills its promise of being more than a personal biography and supports Kirk's conclusion that Martí was "one of the most underrated political thinkers of modern times" (p. 156).

There are many tests of the biographer's skill, but few are as challenging as that taken up by Gustave Anguizola in writing *Philippe Bunau-Varilla: The Man Behind the Panama Canal*. So many bad things have been written about Bunau-Varilla that anyone claiming to be fair is automatically condemned. Panamanians generally accuse Bunau-Varilla of selling out their interests when he negotiated the canal treaty with the United States, charging that he "mortgaged" Panama's future.

Although the Panama Revolution occurred in 1903 and Bunau-Varilla lived until 1940, the struggle for the Panama canal route and Bunau-Varilla's part in it definitely belong to nineteenth-century history. Anguizola carefully traces Bunau-Varilla's career as a young engineer for the De Lesseps company on the isthmus during the 1880s and his effort during the following decade to resurrect the failed enterprise. This background is essential for explaining how a Frenchman, Bunau-Varilla, arrived in the United States at the turn of the century as the principal lobbyist for the Panama Canal and a few years later became Panama's minister to the United States. Anguizola succeeds in extricating Bunau-Varilla from the one-dimensional mold in which he is usually cast, but swings too far in the direction of apologia. It is likely that Bunau-Varilla was not the complete villain he is made out to be, but one cannot condone his hurry-up tactics in negotiating the canal treaty, nor his badgering Panama to ratify it with the threat that the United States would withdraw its protection. In trying to determine Bunau-Varilla's motives, one finds that the evidence permits opposing conclusions: either that he sincerely believed in the Panama route and struggled "to vindicate French genius," or that he was in it for the money. Anguizola gives Bunau-Varilla the benefit of the doubt, but on the shaky premise that he was too wealthy to be influenced by the opportunity for financial reward.

The approaches of individual biography are many, as the above studies show. Taken collectively, they provide a clue about the nature of the Caribbean region and suggest that the present picture may be incomplete. These studies tend to reinforce the image of a region dominated by men of action and pillaged by invaders from the north, but they also contain a few breakthroughs, as in the lives of Beluche and Holly, the intellectual history of Martí, and the complexity of Bunau-Varilla. One thing is clear: that the lives of many worthy men and

women remain to be told and that the telling will alter the overview of Caribbean history. One hopes that the new scholars of the region will win a race against time and find the documents and sources for presenting these lives. For the past several years, the Caribe-Centro-América Studies Committee of the Conference on Latin American History has been engaged in a project to locate and identify archival sources in the region. When this reference tool is available, one may expect that Caribbean biography will be significantly enriched.