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Review/Reseña

Christopher Heaney, *Cradle of Gold: The Story of Hiram Bingham, a Real-Life Indiana Jones, and the Search for Machu Picchu*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Unpacking Bingham's Crates

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Christopher Heaney tells the Hiram Bingham story with a beauty and meticulousness that would have flattered the explorer's Andes-sized ego—that is, had Bingham looked beyond the sharp critique that drives this narrative. Popular and scholarly literature on Cuzco and Machu Picchu has not ignored the North American explorer, whose 6-foot-4 frame and even bigger myth have cast an imposing shadow over debates about “cultural patrimony.” Indeed, the man “raised to believe himself the hero of his life” (233) contributed a number of works to the Bingham genre. Until now,

however, no one has unpacked all the narrative shards, bones, swatches, and artifacts from the Bingham crates or read them in light of the recent debate between Peru and Yale University over who owns a chunk of the Andean past. Latin Americanists with a special sensitivity to the United States' often appalling footprint in the region have long viewed Bingham as a symbol of North American paternalism and neo-colonial condescension. Maybe there is a reason the *Essential Hiram Bingham* did not exist: Didn't we already know all we cared to about the man whose fame, at least in part, rested on unshared credit and plundered antiquities? For all his ubiquitousness, Bingham seemed just well enough and just poorly enough understood to serve as the perfect screen on which to project our anti-imperialist sentiment.

The 285-page *Cradle of Gold* delivers the goods and context to rethink Bingham's legacy. Is it possible that it is even worse than we imagined? Like Bingham's expeditions, Heaney leaves no stones unturned or skeletons undisturbed. The book narrates Bingham's 1875 birth to missionaries in Hawaii, fortuitous career as an adventuring historian, 1911 "discovery" of the Inca site Machu Picchu, disregard for Quechua-speaking Indians, naked attempts to smuggle artifacts out of Peru in the name of science and Yale, and efforts to burnish his reputation after leaving the Andean country in disgrace. For *dependendistas* looking for the open veins through which the first world bleeds the "periphery" dry, the smoking gun is there, there, there, and there. Others will foreground the historical agency of Peruvians who mobilized, fought for their cultural heritage, and set the conditions that, quite recently, have obliged Yale to agree to return its Peruvian collection. As Heaney asserts, "It was a halt, however minor, in the outward flow of pre-Columbian art and culture that had started with the Spanish conquest" (155).

Heaney, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, brings finesse and restraint to this polemical and personal book. He largely resists the temptation to bludgeon Bingham with his own legacy. Yet despite occasional first-name familiarity with "Hiram," neither does the author show signs of Stockholm Syndrome as a Bingham biographer or Yale graduate—most notably in a biting epilogue that spares neither the

explorer nor the university in the on-going debate about ownership of the past. The chronological and narrative dictates of popular history give the author cover: instead of tipping his hand in a potentially explosive introduction, Heaney allows a rich array of English and Spanish archival material—everything from Bingham’s personal letters to his final exams as a Yale professor makes you wonder what part of this man’s life was not documented—to build up to “The Trial of Hiram Bingham.” In this late chapter, Bingham defends his work and reputation before Cuzco’s prefect and other officials with the facts and artifacts literally in crates before him. In this way, Heaney ignites a slow fuse and allows Peruvians such as *indigenista* intellectual Luis Valcárcel, the founder of the Historical Institute of Cuzco and later Peru’s education minister, to level charges before the author delivers his own verdict in the epilogue. The fact that Bingham glimpses Machu Picchu relatively early (page 89) suggests that the real story is less about the discovery than the battle over the right to possess and write history.

The book characterizes Bingham as a man comfortably ensconced in his own worldview. Along with his gear, he also carried American exceptionalism, supreme confidence in scientific authority, racial superiority, and capitalist enterprise. Bingham’s Yale lectures were “one part history, one part geography, and one part jingoism” (37). He considered Quechua-speaking Indians a “backward race” and saw *mestizos* as untrustworthy “half-castes” (40, 92). Peruvian expedition members slipped silver dollars into the palms of potential porters, a form of debt peonage and advance payment that obligated Indians to work. Bingham wrote, “It seemed very hard, but this was the only way in which it was possible to secure carriers” (108-109). Most telling, Bingham decided to continue an expedition after a young Indian equipment carrier drowned in the Urubamba River. Heaney argues that:

perhaps Bingham later realized exactly what his expedition had lost in that moment, however mawkish it may seem: its innocence. In the days to come, he would find the ruins that would make him famous. But as he would later learn, that meant nothing to the Indians he relied upon. They already knew where the ruins were. To them, his was no holy quest; his expedition had seen a boy die, then just rode away. (86)

It was small wonder that some viewed Bingham “as an agent of U.S. exploitation, not exploration” (96).

Bingham comes across as a passionate and curious explorer who at times read documents against the grain in attempts to unravel the mystery surrounding Machu Picchu and other Inca remains. Choquequirau, Espiritu Pampa, Vilcabamba the New, Vilcabamba the Old, Vitcos, Tampu Tocco, and other Inca sites and legends pass by in a confusing blur, but this partly underscores how Machu Picchu has eclipsed all others in the contemporary imagination. The same romantic spirit that drove Bingham also colored his judgment, particularly his speculation that Machu Picchu was both Tampu Tocco (the legendary birthplace of the Incas) *and* Vilcabamba the Old (their final resting place):

The theory was a stretch—it made little sense for Manco to establish his final refuge even closer to Cuzco than Vitcos—but it was just the kind of imaginative and literary interpretation that Bingham loved. Machu Picchu was the beautiful Dulcinea to his Don Quixote, and he was enchanted by the poetic possibility that it was both the cradle and grave of the Incas (183).

That misreading notwithstanding, Bingham and his persona provided the initial impetus that elevated Machu Picchu to its current international stature. Even if Peruvians had entered Machu Picchu before him (as 1902 graffiti on the three-windowed temple showed), “no one had yet described Machu Picchu, photographed the ruins, or tried to understand them as a historical site. And that, to Bingham, was discovery, an achievement he would later defend with a lawyer’s taste for nuance” (93).

The archival trail that made this at once an enviable and daunting historical project comes back to bite Bingham. Evidence demonstrates that he and members of his expedition hid antiquities from Peruvian censors, illicitly purchased and exported a large private collection from a “dilettante” collector named Tomás Alvistur for £1,500 (more than \$160,000 today) (173), and obfuscated, foot-dragged, and dodged the law at every turn. In the process, Bingham put priceless Inca antiquities at the risk of shipwreck even as his own reputation foundered on the shoals of his obsession to build Yale’s collection. Indeed, Bingham “loved his discoveries so much that he longed to possess them, losing himself in the moral jungle

of that decision” (233). The author concludes that he and Yale paid an even bigger price:

This was the central irony of Bingham’s and the Yale expedition’s actions in 1914, from the Alvistur collection to the Inca Churisca artifacts: Bingham and the expedition had started collecting artifacts that they could never study, write about, or display publicly, having collected them by skirting Peruvian law. By taking them from their context, they were tainted and scientifically useless. Moreover, it meant that the expedition’s men were looking over their shoulders, afraid that they might get caught building Yale’s collection. (178)

The epilogue, a wonderful synthesis of the on-going debate between Yale and the Peruvian government, holds nothing back in its indictment of the university and its Peabody Museum of Natural History. Heaney writes:

If, at their core, history and archaeology are our attempts to understand and respect the lives of the past on their own terms, then the respectful treatment of human remains is the litmus test of whether our practices are civilized or cruel. Yale’s possession of Machu Picchu’s dead not only lends an unattractive colonial tinge to the university but also shows how Yale refuses to recognize the expedition’s place in the hemisphere’s history of exploitation. (232)

Given that punch, the book’s title—*Cradle of Gold: The Story of Hiram Bingham, a Real-Life Indiana Jones, and the Search for Machu Picchu*—soft-sells a serious, argumentative, and impeccably researched text.

The personal preface (the author’s visit to the Peabody Museum as a boy, the impact of a friend’s recent death) and conclusion (hiking to Machu Picchu and Espiritu Pampa) make this a refreshing departure from the constraints of the scholarly monograph. The author follows the popular-history template (muted theory, chronological unfolding, short and quick-paced chapters) but breaks free of it in interesting ways. The first parts end with intricate colonial interludes that connect the contemporary narrative to the story of the Incas and their fight with and flight from the Spanish after contact in Cuzco in the 1530s. Even more interesting, an artist and friend of the author, Emily Davis Adams, produced images of Bingham’s expeditions in the style of Guaman Poma de Ayala’s seventeenth-century manuscript, *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*—a creative flourish and a tip of the cap to the indigenous scribe and unwittingly graphic artist for countless colonial and contemporary studies.

The book raises interesting questions about how Peru's indigenous groups then and now have interpreted and embraced Inca history. The author suggests that Indians and mestizos in Bingham's era and today had their own understanding of Inca sites (127, 247), but the text does not fully explore this for reasons most certainly related to archival dead spots. The current cottage industry of historical and anthropological research on Machu Picchu travel and tourism certainly will fill in some gaps. The text also demonstrates that intellectuals, newspapermen, and public officials in Cuzco and Lima joined the debate over pilfered artifacts, but to what extent did Peruvian society more broadly participate in the ire and outrage over Machu Picchu? And considering the historical tensions between coast and sierra, did Limeños interpret and mobilize the Bingham debate differently than Cuzqueños then and now? The Peruvian pessimism and fascination with all things foreign that I have encountered in my own research makes me suspect that some probably thought the artifacts were better off in gringo hands. Some Peruvians of that period lamented their own tendency toward *improvisación* (improvisation), a pessimistic term for what they considered a seat-of-the-pants approach that led to failure on projects big and small.

Anti-imperialists are not the only ones who have filled the gaps in the Bingham myth with their own content and meaning or used it to their own ends. One colorful passage from the book demonstrates that Bingham himself mined Machu Picchu time and again for his own purposes: "Despite his achievements—or perhaps because of his embarrassments—Hiram Bingham was sure the one thing he would be remembered for was Machu Picchu. He circled its memory like a condor, swooping down to it in moments of transition to rise again on its updraft" (211). The Bingham story—or at least, *a* Bingham story—is out there, more complete than ever and awaiting future historical questions.