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Review/Reseña

Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson, eds, *The Paraguay Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Making Paraguayan History Accessible

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There are several challenges facing travelers, volunteers, and students of Paraguay. Several of these include, but are certainly not limited to, the country's absence of flights into and out of the country and the lack of quality information available in English about the country. However, it is a great joy to this Paraguayanist that in this past year alone, the isolation and scarcity of accessible information about the country in English has been overcome. American Airlines *finally* has a direct flight from Miami to Asunción and Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson have written a wonderfully engaging and useful text that addresses Paraguay's fascinating

and complicated history, replete with unique linguistics and national identity, and rich cultural heritage. The confluence of these two events will certainly make Paraguay more accessible to North Americans and other English-speaking peoples.

The lack of information about Paraguay is palpable. Hardly any scholars in North America study the region. Quite honestly, one of the reasons for this lack of studies is related to difficulties in attracting young scholars to the field. Learning about Paraguay is a challenge, as most textbooks offer only a paragraph or two about the country either in the context of its infamous dictators or its disastrous defeat in the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870). The few extant monographs on Paraguayan history, my own included, are often directed at specialists in our chosen field and/or offer dense theoretical constructs regarding Paraguay's past, the future of its indigenous peoples, or current political realities. These texts hardly set the stage for the prospect of drawing more young scholars to the study of the country. Nonetheless, Lambert and Nickson have corrected this oversight with a text that is bound to find an audience with undergraduate students, future Peace Corps volunteers (Paraguay hosts a great number of these individuals), travelers, missionaries, businesspersons, and diplomats. But, as the authors themselves report, the text is not only for the novice in Paraguayan history: "[W]e certainly learned a huge amount ourselves about the country in the process of editing this manuscript" (10). This assessment regarding learning about Paraguayan history applies to me as well; I too learned an immense amount by reading this text, as it offered sources I was unfamiliar with and interpretations that I had not previously considered. Hence, I am profoundly grateful to the editors and authors of this text.

The text is divided into seven sections that offer in-depth analyses of such important topics in Paraguayan history and society such as "The Birth of Paraguay" and "What does it mean to be Paraguayan?" These issues are not easily resolved and the text offers a wide-ranging view of the problems. The section on Paraguay's beginnings offers an important, if often overlooked source in the historiography about the powerful myth of a peaceful Spanish-Guaraní relationship. The inclusion of the mid-twentieth

century anthropologist Branislava Susnik's study, and the introduction by Nickson and Lambert about her study, gives clear evidence that the Guaraní and the conquistadors did not found a "peaceful" co-existence after the latter's arrival. Rather, Susnik narrates the numerous violent conflicts that erupted. Consequently, powerful ideas about Paraguay's foundational fictions are dismissed almost immediately in the edited volume. Also under scrutiny from the editors is the powerful myth of *la raza guaraní* in the section on Paraguayan identity. They explain that Paraguay is not an indigenous nation, as many outsiders have come to believe, but a mestizo nation—albeit one with an indigenous language. This difference is not a concept that foreigners easily comprehend. But the effort of Lambert and Nickson to unpack these tangled notions too is commendable.

While the text addresses mythology and identity in Paraguay, its strongest sections are the ones on the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), in which Paraguay was pitted against the larger and more powerful neighbors Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, and the Chaco War (1932-1935), when the country went to war with Bolivia. Using sources from the War of the Triple Alliance such as treaty documents, the narratives of survivors, and the memoirs of Eliza Lynch, Francisco Solano Lopez's mistress, the editors selected some of the most interesting primary sources to include in the volume. They also offer several interpretive analyses from the most important Paraguayan historians of the war, including Thomas Whigham and Harris Gaylord Warren. Whigham's piece, written specifically for this volume, is an accessible summary of the important details leading to war. Included are the often misunderstood reasons why Solano López thought he could stand up against the combined powers: he had hoped for the support of the governor of Entre Ríos, Justo José de Urquiza. Whigham also wisely included some cartoon images from Paraguayan newspapers of the era to demonstrate how Paraguayans viewed their enemies and themselves. The section on the Chaco War, like the one on the War of the Triple Alliance, contains a great deal of primary sources. These include the diary entries of Alfredo Seiferheld and Roberto Sienna Azvala, and war poems composed by Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá and Hérib Campos Cervera. I do question the editors' choice in not selecting poems from the more

famous and influential “Guaraní poets,” such as Emiliano R. Fernández or Darío Gómez Serrato. Even with this minor critique, the section on the Chaco War brings to life the suffering and hardships of the Paraguayan people through photographs and the account of a British journalist named Reginald Thompson.

The volume also pays particular attention to the plight of ethnic minorities and the environment in Paraguay. Of note is a particularly devastating piece by the German linguists Ernesto Unruh and Hannes Kalisch entitled, “How Beautiful is Your Voice: Accounts of the History of the Enlhet of Ya’ave-Saanga.” Unruh and Kalisch recount the memories of the Enlhet indigenous leaders of the Chaco. The surviving memories of these leaders tell how the community was taken to the brink of extinction by disease: “The Enlhet were almost wiped out. They died of the sickness [smallpox]. People would start feeling sick when the sun was still low in the sky, and by the time it set they’d already be dead.” But the Enlhet survived because they could run into the forest. However, according to the testimony, had this happened now, they would have all died because “now there is no forest” (224). These narratives document not only a devastating disease brought by Europeans in the 1920s, but also the dramatic environmental changes of the Chaco in the twentieth century. This is a point taken up in greater detail later in the volume in a chapter by Alberto Yanosky entitled “The Challenge of Conserving a Natural Chaco Habitat in the Face of Severe Deforestation Pressure and Human Development Needs.”

Although not as famous for receiving the large numbers of immigrants as its larger neighbors Argentina and Brazil, Paraguay nonetheless did attract a fair number of newcomers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The case studies selected by the authors demonstrate the challenges and reasons that limited European migration to Paraguay after independence. The most interesting of these cases is the challenge faced by English settlers in 1872. In a previously unpublished diary, Annie Elizabeth Kennett recounts the struggles of her family while traveling and surviving in Paraguay. With gruesome descriptions of storms, bugs, and food, the harrowing tale of survival in nineteenth

century, Paraguay is certain to make an impact on readers. These “Lincolnshire farmers,” of which Kennett was a member, are not well known or critically studied outside this new volume. But just as compelling and heartbreaking is the more familiar history of the Canadian and Russian Mennonite immigrants in the early twentieth century. “A long row of graves mark[ed] the road of these peaceful conquerors on their way into the wilderness of the wild Chaco” (171). While filled with the biases of the early Mennonite settlers about the conditions of the Chaco (i.e: “wild”) the selection of this piece is nonetheless important in recounting Paraguay’s history in the twentieth century. However, I am perplexed about the editors’ choice to exclude the struggles of Asian immigrants to Paraguay. In particular, I question the absence in this volume of the large and influential Korean population that arrived during the Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989). The success that this group has achieved in Paraguay as small merchants is notably missing from the volume.

Nonetheless, many other aspects of the Stroessner dictatorship are addressed. Notably, contained in the volume is, the testimony of human rights abuses by a political prisoner, Saturnina Alma, who suffered 13 years of imprisonment for her union activism. Also incorporated into the *Reader* is the story of the painfully effective suppression of homosexuals during and after the dictatorship. The murder of Anselmo Ramos during dictatorship was easily concealed in a *macho* society. Moreover, because the victim was a homosexual, when the Truth and Justice Commission, set up to explore horrors of the Stroessner regime, finally printed its findings it was “allegedly unwilling to publish” its own findings on the Ramos case because of the sexual orientation of the victim (305). Nonetheless, the horrors of the dictatorship have in recent years become more apparent. In a piece written by Andrew Nickson about the Archive of Terror in Asunción, he outlines the types and overwhelming quantity of documents contained in the archive. This is an invaluable tool for those who want to conduct research into the human rights abuses of the Stroessner dictatorship.

On a lighter note, toward the end of the text the authors include information about the Paraguayan beverage of choice *tereré* (cold *yerba mate*—Paraguayan green tea), *chipa guazú* (a type of Paraguayan corn

bread), and soccer. The editors' selection of these brief articles makes Paraguay come alive! As any traveler to Paraguay quickly learns, what could be more *típico* than *tereré*, *chipa* and *fútbol*.

I congratulate the editors and the publisher for not going to press without including a timely piece on the Paraguayan *golpe parlamentario* of June 2012. The article quickly summarizes the reasons behind the coup and narrates the challenges of land, politics, and the vast chasm of unequal income distribution in the country.

In the end, though no background knowledge about Paraguay is necessary to understand this text, academics with experience and knowledge of Paraguay will benefit from its extensive sources and excellent introduction of the material by the authors. This new and important work will, I hope, attract more students and scholars to consider Paraguay as an academic home and it will certainly help shed light on Paraguay's rich historical and cultural heritage for an English-speaking audience. Although bulky, I suspect that *The Paraguay Reader* will be on the laps of many on their flights from Miami to Asunción!