

**Rafael E. Tarrago.** *The Pageant of Ibero-American Civilization: An Introduction to Its Cultural History.* Lanham, Md., and London: University Press of America, 1995. xi + 125 pp. \$34.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8191-9972-0.

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To recount and make sense of Iberian civilization's half-millennium in the Americas is not the easiest of rows for a scholar to hoe. Such a venture unavoidably entails negotiating the treacherous passage between the Scylla of a ponderous, overstuffed epic and the Charybdis of an airy, drawn vignette. Above all, that voyage must be made in only the sturdiest of literary vessels, piloted by a helmsman well versed in the historian's craft. It is a gauntlet only an intrepid few have dared to pick up.

Rafael Tarrago is one who has, and his concise yet insightful overview of Ibero-American cultural history amply demonstrates that he met the challenge with success. In a most engaging, graceful manner, Mr. Tarrago manages to fit the manifold panorama of the civilization that Spain and Portugal implanted in the Americas within the compass of seven comparatively short chapters. As his book's title advertises, he introduces the reader to the pageant of that long-lived and still-flourishing civilization; but it is a pageant in exquisite miniature.

Beyond this general purpose, the author makes plain that there are several other fish he intends to fry. Among these last are his emphasis on the distinct variants of Iberian civilization, replete with thriving nodes of high urban culture, that came of age in Spanish America by the 1600s and in Luso America about a century thereafter.

Mr. Tarrago is also at pains to underscore what he considers the *unauthentic character* (x) of the constitutional frameworks thrown up by the Spanish American republics in the aftermath of independence, as well as the *dependent character of the export economies* (x) their commercial sectors set in place. Both developments worked to the detriment of Ibero-America; and Mr. Tarrago minces no words in labeling them the root *causes for the political instability and economic dependence that have characterized most Ibero-American nations ever since their rejection of monarchy and their connection to the mother country* (xi).

Good student that he is, Mr. Tarrago first endeavors to place these themes against their proper historical backdrop, before holding forth on them in earnest. His careful labors bear fruit in a nearly perfectly symmetrical diptych, in which about half the chapters treat the Old Regime, and about half the New. Appearing to be most comfortable depicting colonial times, he begins by painting in broad strokes reminiscent of a Toynbee or a Spengler the state of the world on the eve of the Great Discoveries; from there he plunges confidently into the specifics of Portuguese and Spanish empire-building.

Separate chapters describe and analyze the foundation of Iberian civilization's Hispanic and Lusitanian accretions on the American continents. Throughout, Mr. Tarrago maintains a har-

monious balance among political, social and economic developments, while coterminously highlighting the major manifestations of literary and artistic expression which stamped indelibly the fabric of early Ibero-American civilization. What is more, he succeeds very skillfully in demonstrating how events in Europe affected Ibero-America's historical trajectory at the outset of its long existence.

It should come as no surprise that Mr. Tarrago dwells at some length on Spanish American Baroque culture. Here the reader meets such towering figures as Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Carlos Siguenza y Gongora and Pedro de Peralta and Bar-nuevo. And to his credit, he has seen fit as well to discuss architecture, music and the theater. As be-fits a discussion of the so-called *Iron Century*, the author accords matters of the spirit pride of place over those of the flesh.

In his treatment of the vertiginous eighteenth century, however, Mr. Tarrago battens on the scientific authority of Humboldt. With the globetrotting German as his guide, he analyzes, at times quite insightfully, the Burbon reforms and their impact on Spanish American civilization; but by no means neglects the consequences that their Pombaline coevals visited on Brazil. All told, the reader comes away with a broad, nuanced portrait of Ibero-America at the dawn of the Great Democratic Revolutions that heralded the arrival of a new age.

When discussing those momentous events and what they carried in their train, Mr. Tarrago's style becomes markedly tenser, more critical, almost irritated at times and less sure of itself. It is in this section that the author fleshes out his themes of economic dependence, social unrest and political treachery. He upbraids the politically active classes for their lack of patriotic feeling, concern for the less fortunate and effective leadership. Even republican arts and letters had an apocryphal air about them; for Mr. Tarrago likens Spanish American romanticism to some cheap,

imported patchouli, hardly able to disguise the piercing odor of a society in ferment. Not unexpectedly, he notes with irony that Ruben Dario,...*one of the most un-American of Spanish American authors...* (79), invented *modernismo*, and thereby ...*put Spanish American letters at the vanguard of Hispanic letters* (79).

Imperial Brazil fares no better under Mr. Tarrago's incisive analysis. There an enlightened despot, well intentioned but politically hamstrung, presided over an empire held captive by a clique of slavist planters and obscurantist clerics. Until the rude awakening of a war brought the teetering relic crashing down, Brazil was doomed to remain a dinghy towed by the sleek steamer of European progress.

In surveying the fin-de-siecle *Great Awakening* that swept across Ibero-America and obliged it to take stock of itself, Mr. Tarrago returns to the bold, confident style that informed his colonial chapters. Most appropriately, he focuses on three key events--the Mexican Revolution and Argentine *Cordobazo* of 1910, as well as the subsequent outbreak of WWI in 1914--using them as a point of departure for further discussion. Prefacing his analysis with a brief sketch of Jose Enrique Rodos uniquely Ibero-American brand of spiritualism, he then launches into a perceptive probe of each event's nature, immediate impact and long-term consequences. Herein Mr. Tarrago's splendid talent for weaving complex and seemingly disparate themes into a comprehensible, cogent synthesis stands out in bold relief.

Mr. Tarrago closes his inquiry into the civilization of Ibero-America by affirming its *coming of age* (95). In an appropriately meditative style, he reflects on major events and trends of the post-war era. The Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions, U.S. foreign policy, liberation theology, neo-liberal economic theory and the return of democratic government make up the main courses on his bill of fare. But Mr. Tarrago does not give short shrift to the arts, architecture and other cultural

themes, and thereby keeps culture on an equal footing with these other aspects of Ibero-American civilization, as he has done so superbly throughout this little book.

Although I came away from reading Mr. Tarrago's book with a generally favorable impression of it, I would be nevertheless remiss in my reviewer's duties if I neglected to mention some of its shortcomings. Mercifully, these are few and inconsequential. It seems fair to say that Mr. Tarrago is a skillful writer who revels in the well-turned phrase and the complex sentence; but he tends to do it to excess. Perhaps his editors might have encouraged him to prune his prose. In a similar vein, more attentive proofreading could have caught and rooted out the odd malapropism that rears up from time in the text, like a dandelion on an otherwise well-groomed lawn.

Turning to more substantial matters, I feel that Mr. Tarrago ought to have devoted a little more discussion to everyday life in colonial Ibero-America. The burgeoning of work in the social history of colonial times that recent years have witnessed, certainly afforded him the opportunity to do so; unhappily, he seems not to have seized it. Likewise, Mr. Tarrago's treatment of colonial political and economic history is not as current as it might be, an anomaly that becomes even more apparent upon consulting his bibliography.

Finally, I wish Mr. Tarrago had produced a larger, more comprehensive work. This exceedingly brief essay patently reveals his promise as a historian, and makes him well-deserving of the chance to realize that potential. I look forward to seeing his future scholarly endeavors in print.

To sum up, Rafael Tarrago has turned out a solid introductory overview of Ibero-American civilization. It is well written, informative and thought-provoking. Qualities such as these make this work especially appropriate for survey courses, as well as for lay readers wishing to learn about Ibero-America's rich and enduring civilization.

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