

*El Libertador: writings of Simón Bolívar*, by Simón Bolívar; translated from the Spanish by Frederick H. Fornoff; edited with an introduction and notes by David Bushnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; pp. 288; £11.99) Hardback (ISBN-10: 0195144085 | ISBN-13: 978-0195144802)

It is hardly surprising that since its publication in 2003, *El Libertador: writings of Simón Bolívar* has found its way into the bibliographies of most Latin American studies departments in US and British universities, and has been cited in dozens of academic and non-academic publications worldwide. The figure of the Liberator General Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), the most renowned figure of the Latin American independence movement has been much in the news. In 1999 the first constitution approved by popular referendum in Venezuela officially changed the country's name from the *República de Venezuela* to the *República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela). The new designation was promoted by the current President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, who considers himself ideologically descended from the man who won independence for Bolivia, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. While interest has in general been focused on interpreting the present relevance of Bolívar's political legacy, as the bicentenary of Latin America's emancipation from Spain approaches, historians have also begun to re-evaluate the emblematic figures and events of the period. Biographies of Bolívar by English-speaking authors abound, including Gerhard Masur's classic *Simon Bolívar* (1948) and John J. Johnson's *Simón Bolívar and Spanish American Independence* (1968), yet reproductions of Bolívar's writings in English are rare. The present edition – one of twenty-three volumes in the Oxford University Press series *Library of Latin America* - adequately fills this void with forty-two texts, including essays, draft constitutions,

proclamations and other documents carefully preserved by Bolivar himself during his short life, and reproduced in printed form by his friend Pedro Biceño Méndez, his former Irish aide Daniel O’Leary and an admirer, Juan de Francisco Martín. An introductory overview of Bolivarian sources is particularly useful for researchers, although it fails to identify the items ‘never before translated in the English language’ said to be included in the present volume (p. xxi). The elegant translation of Frederick H. Fornoff, Professor of Spanish and Humanities at the University of Pittsburgh, largely succeeds in its mission of conveying ‘the stylistic spectrum of Bolivar’s writing, which ranges from genteel prodding in letters to close friends and colleagues, fierce clarity in the political texts and manifestos, to lyric effusiveness in a piece such as his delirium on Chimborazo’ (p. xxiv). The fifty-two page introduction and notes by David Bushnell, author of *Simón Bolívar: Liberation and Disappointment* (2004), and Professor Emeritus of History and Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, offer an incisive *tour d’ horizon* of the life, ideas and deeds of a complex character, a man capable of attracting admiration and loathing in equal measure. Lord Byron, one of a legion of international sympathisers, named the yacht that carried him on his last European tour ‘Bolivar’, and in his poem *The Age of Bronze* immortalised the Venezuelan leader, asserting that confronted by his persona ‘even the Spaniard’s thirst of gold and war / Forgets Pizarro to shout Bolivar’.<sup>1</sup> His surname was also called from the Parisian barricades during the Revolution of 1830 as an invocation of radical ideals. But Bolivar’s proclamation of ‘war to the death’ – two decades before the publication of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* - and his butchery of Spanish prisoners would also earn him among his enemies the epithet ‘the American Attila’.

Although Lord Byron does not rate a mention, Professor Bushnell’s introductory

chapter and notes equip the reader with the background necessary to examine these apparent contradictions. Biographical information is enhanced by descriptions of the social and economic environment of Bolivar's upbringing, as well as the cultural influences – mainly those of the French Enlightenment - which contributed to his particular vision of America as not merely the New World but, as Mona Ozouf discovered among theorists of the French Revolution,<sup>2</sup> the homeland of the 'new man': liberated inhabitants of the southern hemisphere would create a new reality, leaving behind any legacy of the period of Spanish domination.. Having included 'purity' among the formal requisites for politicians to enter government, Bolivar established in his draft 'Constitution for Bolivia' (1826) the concept of the 'Moral Power' as a body intended to keep politics free from corruption, operating alongside a legislative body of senators and tribunes, a judicial power run by censors, and an executive headed by a president-for-life empowered to appoint his successor. These constructs evoke the utopian writings of Retif de la Bretonne (1734–1806) and Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740-1814) and could almost have been inspired by the canvas of Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784). Bolivar was driven by his obsessive desire to unite the American continent through a process of cultural, political and economic homogenisation. Thus, he would exclude the North Americans from the Pan-American enterprise because they were 'too heterogeneous' ('Letter to General Francisco de Paula Santander', p. 167). Again, his approval of the Abbé de Pradt's plan to divide America into fifteen or seventeen independent states echoes the rational and geometrical re-organization of France into *départements* predicated by the Abbé Sieyes. Bolivar visited France in 1804. In Paris he met his childhood tutor, Simón Rodríguez, who had nurtured in him a taste for the writings of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. But, while most of the

*philosophes* expressed admiration for the innate abilities of the ‘savage people’ in newly discovered lands, Bolivar never entertained such illusions. He asserted from the outset that Americans needed the ‘stewardship of paternalistic governments’ (‘The Jamaica Letter’, p. 24) because they had been degraded by ‘the triple yoke of tyranny, ignorance, and vice’ (‘The Angostura Address’, p. 34).

If there is a weakness in Professor Bushnell’s introduction it is the scant attention paid to the early activities of Bolivar as a revolutionary, a period which might throw some light upon a certain, important aspect of his character: the visceral, near irrational hatred of Spain, which set him apart from other Liberators such as his compatriot, Francisco de Miranda, and the Argentine hero General José de San Martín. This personal trait is a crucial consideration in any study of the emergence of nationalism in Latin America. As the scion of a leading Creole family, Bolivar participated in various conspiratorial meetings which led to the removal from power of the Spanish governor of Caracas in 1810 and the creation of a junta. The new government sent the young Bolivar to London to explain to the English government the plight of the revolutionary colony, gain recognition for the new republic and obtain arms. He failed in his official negotiations, but managed to persuade the exiled veteran of the American and French revolutions, Francisco de Miranda, who in 1806 had attempted to liberate Venezuela single-handedly, to return to Caracas and to assume command of the independence movement. In March 1811 a national congress met in Caracas to draft a constitution and on 5 July 1811 Venezuela became the first Latin American country formally to declare its independence. Bolivar entered the army of the young republic and was placed in charge of Puerto Cabello, a port vital to Venezuela. He was unable to defend it from the re-conquering Spanish forces, and Caracas was thus soon

besieged. Miranda, as commander in chief, was forced to enter into negotiations with his Spanish counterpart. An armistice signed in July 1812 left the entire country at the mercy of Spain - at least that part of Spain which at the time was ruled by a constitutional Cortes. Bolivar was among those who prevented Miranda's escape from Venezuela, in effect turning him over to the invading forces and condemning him to spend the rest of his life in Spanish dungeons. Determined to resume the struggle, Bolivar obtained a passport to leave the country and proceeded to Cartagena in New Granada (present-day Colombia). There, he published the first of his great political statements, '*El Manifiesto de Cartagena*' (p. 3), in which he attributed the fall of the First Republic to a lack of strong government and called for a united revolutionary effort to destroy the power of Spain in the Americas. Reconciliation with the old European motherland was never to be part of his plans.

A particularly positive contribution of this new compilation is the inclusion of little known texts that show Bolivar in an unexpected light, such as his decree of 1829 for the 'Protection and Wise Use of the Nation's Forest Resources' (p. 199-201) which evidences a visionary concern for ecological conservation, and the circulars of 1828 banning Jeremy Bentham's treatises from all Colombian universities (p. 214-214) and prohibiting secret societies (p. 216-217). These ordinances would seem to undermine the arguments of those who have claimed that Bolivar was influenced by British radical ideas and driven by some as yet undiscovered master plan devised by Freemasonry, in which he dabbled briefly during his visit to Paris in 1804. The decision to organize this book into sections and chapters grouping texts by artificial hierarchies and themes, rather than chronologically, is rather more questionable. To have traced a timeline in the development of Bolivar's thinking and political philosophy from early idealism through ruthless zealotry to ultimate

disillusion might have been instructive. It seems difficult to sustain, for example, the categorisation among 'Lesser Bolivarian Texts' of Bolivar's 'Oath in Rome' (1805) dedicating his life to the emancipation of America, his 'Decree of War to the Death' (1813) declaring that any Spaniard who did not join the struggle for emancipation 'will be regarded as an enemy and punished as a traitor and consequently put to death, without appeal' (p.116) and the 'Declaration of Angostura' (1818) by which he proclaimed that 'as Divine Providence has ordained, the people of Venezuela are resolved to bury themselves alive amid the ruins if Spain, or Europe, or the world seeks to subject her to the Spanish yoke' (p. 132). The publication of the explanatory notes relating to the texts as an annex, rather than as footnotes or at the end of each chapter, as is done with those of 'An Overview of the Bolivarian Sources', 'Translator's Note' and the 'Introduction', tends to make reading somewhat cumbersome. Nevertheless, *El Libertador: writings of Simón Bolívar* remains a valuable addition to the library of anyone who might require a ready reference guide or who simply seeks to form their own opinion concerning the contemporary relevance of the Bolivarian legacy. In the latter case, readers will unwittingly follow the Liberator's instructions, as stated in his 'Method to Be Employed in the Education of My Nephew Fernando Bolivar' (p. 205-206): 'history, like languages, should begin with the contemporary period and then gradually move back in time to the dark ages of fable.'

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NOTES

1. George Gordon Byron, *The works of Lord Byron: with his letters and Journals and His life* (London, 1847), stanza IV, p.276.
2. Mona Ozouf, 'Regeneration', in Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, ed., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989).