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John Lynch. *SimÃ³n BolÃvar: A Life.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 368 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11062-3; $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-12604-4.

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Spanish America in the Age of Revolution

John Lynch's latest book is a long-awaited and highly welcome biography of Simón Bolívar, "the Liberator" of South America. Half a century after Gerhard Masur's *Simón Bolívar* (1948) and Salvador de Madariaga's *Life of Bolívar* (1952), the English-speaking world will appreciate this thoroughly researched, ably balanced, and gracefully written history of the Venezuelan hero. The book deals with Bolívar's private and public life and his fight for independence of the Spanish colonies, as well as with the military, political, economic, and social situation in Spanish America before and during the revolutions of 1808-26.

The author starts by asking why he is writing a new biography of Bolívar. The purpose of the book, Lynch answers, is to integrate the history of Bolívar's life into new research on Spanish American revolutions. Political ideas, social change, loyalist and patriot warfare, early nationalism, and the Spanish counterrevolution are all subjects that have been studied closely in recent times. Thus, the Liberator's life and legacy become more intelligible when incorporated into the longer, more comprehensively analyzed period of transition in which the Spanish colonies became American nations. Lynch's major challenge is to give coherence to a life of complexity and paradox. Bolívar expressed a lifelong and unflinching desire for liberty and equality. He believed strongly that freedom from colonial power was "the only object worth the sacrifice of a man's life" (p. 284). He was also deeply convinced that administration of justice and rule of law would protect the rights of the individual and correct the inequalities of a heterogeneous society. And, he devoted his life to seeking to achieve these ends.

Lynch relies on the large collection of Bolivarian primary sources and the latest specialist studies to revisit the story of Bolívar's life from childhood in his native Caracas to death near Santa Marta, Colombia, in 1830. Born in 1783 into the white creole elite, Bolívar grew up in a society acutely conscious of race and class divisions. *Blancos de orilla* (poor whites), *pardos* (free coloreds), black slaves, and Indians lived uneasily together under the domination of wealthy white creoles who controlled the bureaucracy, law, church, land, and wholesale trade in colonial Venezuela. The creoles lived in fear of a race war *à l'haïtienne* that violently could tear the colony apart. Lynch explains that the the threat of *pardocracia* (the rule of the *pardos*) haunted Bolívar all his life as he knew it would not disappear easily. Lynch, thus, presents Bolívar as an individual and the product of an elite social group seeking change but concerned about the consequences of such change on the privileges of the creoles.

The book follows Bolívar's political and intellectual career, starting with his youth in Europe where he read Enlightenment thinkers including Locke, Hobbes, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire. Although exposed to their ideas early in life, the adult Liberator, Lynch continues, developed an idiosyncratic concept of government and free institutions based on the reality and needs of the American continent. Lynch shows the Venezuelan's pragmatic and evolving political ideas in his analysis of the Liberator's principal texts and speeches, including the "Cartagena Manifesto" (1812), Jamaica Letter (1815), address to the Congress of Angostura (1819), and the Bolivian Constitution of 1826. In the manifesto, Bolívar claimed that the Venezuelan republic's failure lay partly in adopting a constitution ill adapted to its people, that is, one wrongly inspired by Enlightenment ideas. From his exile in Jamaica, in 1815, Bolívar called for a strong, central authority, as representative institutions did not suit a heterogeneous American society in need of a firm hand. In his 1819 address to the Congress of Angostura, Bolívar discouraged his fellow countrymen from imitating the French or North American political system. Instead, he recommended the British model, although he fell short of suggesting a monarchy. Finally, the 1826 Bolivian Constitution realized the Liberator's

determination to find a balance between tyranny and anarchy. It set up a system of government in which the legislature would appoint the president for life; he would, in turn, name his successor, hence avoiding elections–"the greatest scourge of republics" (p. 202). The Liberator never understood liberals' opposition to his idea of life-presidency. He sadly concluded that Spanish America was ungovernable and that it would inevitably fall into "the hands of petty tyrants, of all colors and races" (p. 276).

One advantage of this comprehensive biography is that Lynch traces Bolivar's projects beyond the formation of individual nations. Paradoxically, as much as Bolívar was against federalism within a nation, he was enthusiastically for continental federalism. The Panama Congress of 1826 was the Venezuelan's brainchild. The governments of the American nations were invited to create a supranational legislature, which would regulate their international relations and guarantee collective security for the continent. The congress did not achieve the objectives the Liberator had set and hence has come down in history as a failure. Yet, the mere fact that the new independent American nations should have come together to discuss American foreign policy so shortly after their bloody struggle for freedom had ended was an accomplishment in itself. Lynch, however, does not point out that Bolívar should be credited with having planted the seeds of future pan-Americanism.

Another advantage is that, after his book *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826* (1986), Lynch has for the first time put a face–indeed a controversial one–to the history of Spanish America's revolutions. For some, Bolívar was a tireless revolutionary, a remarkable intellectual, and a brilliant general. For others, he represents an unrepentant dictator, a shameless traitor, or the leader of a bourgeois revolution. Clearly in sympathy with the South American, Lynch does justice to Bolívar by critically recasting him as a major protagonist of Spanish American independence. Yet, when doing so, the author steers clear from hagiography and psychobiography, and works not to force his telling of Bolívar's life "into a structure determined in advance of its actual course" (p. 281). Lynch also tries not to analyze the Liberator through a preconceived conceptual framework. Instead, he broaches his subject by narrating the life of Bolívar and interspersing it with analysis and interpretation based on recent scholarship, and by providing a final appraisal of the Venezuelan's legacy. This is, indeed, a worthwhile undertaking at a time when President Hugo Chávez calls himself a "revolutionary Bolivarian' and his fellow Venezuelans live in 'the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela." The timing of the publication of this book is by no means insignificant.

In sum, *Simón Bolívar* offers the history of a man whose life encompassed revolution, independence, and state building. Lynch subtly intertwines the private and the public, the particular and the general, and the incidental and the significant aspects of the Liberator's life. Moreover, he deftly leads the reader back and forth between the life of Bolívar and the age of revolutions in Spanish America and the Atlantic world. In other words, Lynch cleverly juxtaposes and weaves together biography and history. As a result, this book about the South American hero, who has often been compared to George Washington, will certainly be instructive reading for scholars and students of not only Latin American but also North American history.

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