



Ivan Molina Jimenez, Steven Palmer. *La voluntad radiante: Cultura impresa magia y medicina en Costa Rica (1897-1932)*. San Jose: Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies, 1996. 159 pp. ISBN 978-9968-31-323-0.

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Printing, Magic and Medicine in Modern Costa Rica

This slim book contains two separate long articles. Each of them uses a life story to frame aspects of the social history of Costa Rica in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Like the San Jose bookseller who in 1918 published a magazine of extracts from new books, the authors intend their articles to whet our appetite for longer works: Molina's *El que quiera divertirse: Libros y sociedad en Costa Rica (1750-1914)* (1995), on print culture, and Palmer's forthcoming *Moral Panic, Popular Medicine, and Social Policy: Costa Rica, 1900-1940*.

Ivan Molina Jimenez, "El yanqui espanol," weaves a history of Costa Rican publishing and reading into the life story of the printer Avelino Alsina. Alsina came from Spain in 1897, already skilled as a master printer. In 1903, he set himself up in business with a loan from the politician Cleto Gonzalez Viquez. By 1912, he was one of the largest industrial employers (with sixty employees) in Costa Rica, second in the printing business after the state-owned Tipografia Nacional. Alsina was the model "self-made man." Yet he sold this successful industrial firm in order to start a coffee export firm that failed miserably by 1926. He died in Spain in 1928.

Molina found few documents bearing directly on Alsina's life. Therefore, he can only touch lightly on long-standing issues in Central American historiography such as entrepreneurship and family, state and business, or industrial labor relations. He uses Alsina's career primarily as a vehicle for description of the book trade. Between 1850 and 1914, Costa Rican publishing expanded beyond devotional books and official reports to scientific works, social essays and literature. The government

played an important role in building a mass reading public by providing good schooling and, from the 1880s on, printing popular hygiene pamphlets. In progressive circles, intellectuals praised the printer Alsina as an "apostle of civilization" and his shop as a "temple" (p. 55).

Steven Palmer's, "El mago de Coney Park Circus," makes no pretense of knowing the shadowy life of the Cuban rogue Carlos Carballo Romero, "el Professor Carbell," or even unraveling all the facts of his controversial appearance in 1932 as a spiritualist and charlatan doctor. Instead, Palmer offers a plausible explanation of Carbell's popular appeal. Costa Rican patients sought healing eclectically from the medical profession, popular healers, and state public health campaigns. Carbell fascinated them because he claimed to offer both scientific medicine and a new spiritual healing through "the radiant will." He gave private consultations, wrote columns in the press, spoke on the radio, and published a book, *Hacia alla* (1932). Physicians reacted violently, threatening him and prosecuting him before the public health board. But scheming politicians such as General Jorge Voliomay protected him.

On the eve of deportation in 1932, Carbell delivered a radio prophecy of world cataclysm from which Costa Rica would emerge as the new center of world culture. Palmer speculates that Carbell intended to appeal to a Central American plebeian ideology of "patriotic socialism mixed with popular spiritualism" (p. 132). Carbell was murdered in El Salvador in 1933, possibly because the dictator Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, himself a theosophist and a charlatan, saw him as a competitor.

These life stories are less biographies than narrative devices for displaying changing mentalities in Costa Rica: new myths of the self-made man and the apostle of civilization; the spread of print literacy; the acceptance of scientific hygiene; yearning for a spiritual and political communion in the 1930s. The model life of Alsina offers few surprises, as his business career demonstrates conventional values and the linear trend of increased reading and publishing. The underworld life of Carbell, on the other hand, points to unpredictable coalitions among patients, the government, the Rockefeller Mission, physicians, pharmacists and unlicensed healers. Progressive reforms did not homogenize Costa Rican medicine. Rather, they multiplied heterogeneous authorities in popular beliefs about healing. For lack of physicians, the government had to authorize practical healers to perform autopsies; in 1920, eighty percent of the death certificates in Costa Rica were signed by lay practitioners. The successful state (1908-20) and Rockefeller Mission (1914-20) campaigns against hookworm increased the prestige of physicians; but many public-health campaign workers also set themselves up as curanderos, increasing the competition for physicians.

The common theme of these two articles is modernity. The authors do not offer a systematic analysis of this transformation. At most they argue that reforms around 1887-1894 signified a shift from a liberal state to an interventionist, public-health oriented state (pp. 111-12). And they give examples of the spectrum of multiple powers that emerged within Costa Rica's provincial, oligarchic system: immigrant entrepreneurs, the press, a mass consumer market for healing and for newspapers, new agencies of the state, new sorts of demagogic politicians, medical boards, intellectuals, labor unions. In both of these articles, the light-hearted narrative device of "life

and times" promotes exploration of such varied topics, but occasionally turns pedantic: Carbell speaks over the radio, and we get a digression about the number of radio transmitters in San Jose. Readers interested in this approach to Costa Rican social history may also enjoy two rich collections of articles on miscellaneous topics edited by Molina and Palmer: *Heroes al gusto y libros de moda: Sociedad y cambio cultural en Costa Rica (1750-1900)* (1992) and *El paso del cometa: Estado, politica social y culturas populares en Costa Rica (1800-1950)* (1994).

Historians outside the field of Costa Rican studies should find these articles valuable as stimulus more than as definitive case studies. The authors build their stories from scant documentation directly about the protagonists (court records, newspaper stories, and interviews), supplemented with good detective inference and informed speculation. But on some of the most interesting points—such as the presence of occultism in political ideologies of the 1930s—their judgments rely heavily on reasoning by analogy from published case studies set elsewhere in Latin America and Europe. They add intelligent speculation rather than solid evidence to the literature. The authors assume that their readers already know the political history of Costa Rica, and this may limit the readership to advanced Latin Americanists. Latin Americanists will certainly recognize intriguing parallels to situations in other societies, particularly in Steven Palmer's splendid survey of the transformations of Costa Rican healing and medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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