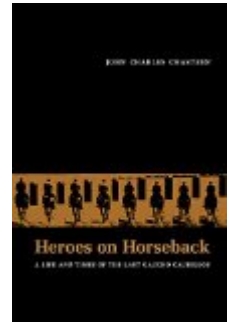


**John Charles Chasteen.** *Heroes on Horseback: A Life and Times of the Last Gaucho Caudillos (Dialogos)*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. x + 241 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8263-1598-4.



**Reviewed by** Hans Vogel

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Recently, a thread on H-LatAm has once again underscored the significance and importance of Caudillos as a theme in Latin American history. John Chasteen offers a fresh contribution to an old and traditional debate, by looking at the border region of Uruguay and Brazil during the last decades of the 19th century. The focus is on two members of the Luso-Uruguayan Saravia family: Gumercindo and Aparicio. Both led massive rebellious movements, mobilizing thousands of rural people in a sparsely populated region: Gumercindo against the Brazilian state, his brother Aparicio against the Uruguayan government at Montevideo.

Mr. Chasteen tries to unveil the causes, mechanisms and nature of charismatic leadership, Caudillo style, by presenting the histories of Gumercindo and Aparicio in a broad context. In this effort, the scope is necessarily wide, touching upon, so the cover of the book proclaims, "topics as varied as myth, gender, material life, political culture, state formation and the search for national identity." (Merely on the basis of this juxtaposition of themes, future scholars may blindly date

this monograph as having been written in the 1990s).

One has to admit that, indeed, all these themes are dealt with, though clearly not with the same depth and intensity. As postmodern as the themes themselves, so is the construction of *Heroes on Horseback*. There are seventeen chapters, rigidly alternating between chronological narrative and "social scientific" analysis: 1) Caudillos, 2) January 1893, 3) Borderlanders, 4) February 1893, 5) States and Nations, 6) March 1893, 7) Hard Times, 8) April-October 1893, 9) Strongmen, 10) January-August 1894, 11) The Will to believe, 12) October 1895, 13) The Myth of the Patriada, 14) March-December 1896, 15) A Countryman in Rebellion, 16) March 1897-September 1904 and 17) Apotheosis and Oblivion. Needless to say, the methodology used is as postmodern as the structure, with narrative and analysis neatly separated. The same goes for the presentation: artfully constructed prose replete with cultured adjectives culled from the recondite pages of weighty thesauruses and hefty dictionaries.

Chasteen introduces the non-regional specialist to a number of important themes and topics, and he does so quite proficiently. I found his explanation and analysis of the role of the *Blanco* party in Uruguay as a kind of a state within the state, right on the mark and quite illuminating. The prominent place of some Latin American traditional political movements in the hearts and minds of broad sectors of the populace just begged for the kind of insight Mr. Chasteen is offering the reader. I might add that I find the narrative analysis offered here much more satisfying and effective than any political science treatment of the topic. Other good sections include the role the border played in the daily lives of the borderlanders, and the complicated nature of their political allegiances. Indeed, such situations have to be explained to most people in the United States, since life at borders such as the one between Brazil and Uruguay is unfamiliar to them. (Not so much in Latin America, and even less in Europe). Against this backdrop, quite ably displayed, it becomes understandable why and how the Saravias (and others like them in the first half of the nineteenth century) could lead sizeable numbers of men into seemingly quixotic adventures.

The work is based on solid archival and bibliographic research supplemented with personal observations of the theatre of operations of the Saravia brothers. One cannot blame Mr. Chasteen for missing some eloquent sources written in a few continental languages that, for all practical purposes, may be considered dead with respect to Latin American history. However, I wonder why some important monographs do not appear as sources, such as Rodriguez Molas' *Historia social del gaucho*. One also misses a number of titles on the history of Rio Grande do Sul, as well as works on the Argentine provinces of Entre Rios and Corrientes. Instead, for example, one finds reverent reference to as overrated and simplistic a work as Shumway's *Invention of Argentina*. As for the literature on borders and the role they play in the shaping of "national identities", it is puzzling why

Sahlins' classic work on the Pyrenees is not mentioned. I realize it is always easy to point out missing titles in notes and bibliographies, but it is precisely the broad scope of the book and its pretensions that made me alert to what was not there.

One can hardly quibble with the broad lines of *-Heroes on Horseback-*, but it is the detail that frequently misses the mark. I shall indicate a few to illustrate what I am trying to say. On pp. 65 and 66, Mr. Chasteen suggests the perceived "manishness" of female camp followers resulted from the conviction that war was a masculine pursuit, and cites a "rare 1897 description" of these women, according to which they would also smoke cigars. Such descriptions are not as rare as we are led to believe, however. In his memoirs, General Jose Maria Paz also wrote about such women in the first half of the century, calling them "mari-machas". These women would even participate in the fighting, causing much more fear among the enemy than their male companions. Garibaldi refers to them as well, and even married ones. As for the smoking of cigars, the English language secondary literature on Paraguay (Williams, Warren, etc.) repeatedly tells us that Paraguayan women smoked small cigars. Cigar smoking was thus perhaps quite common among country women of the wider Platine region. Mr. Chasteen asserts that "his" women would not take part in the actual fighting, hence we might conclude that, if anything, gaucho-women had probably become more "feminine" over the years.

On p. 48, Mr. Chasteen elaborates on the strong language used by progress-oriented state-supporters to refer to "federalists", for example "cannibals". As a matter of fact, as early as the Independence period, Buenos Aires revolutionaries liked to call Artigas all kinds of names, including "savage", "cannibal", "hottentot", etcetera. It seems to me there was a venerable tradition of name-calling which provided the opponents of the Saravias and other rural strongmen with ample verbal ammunition. It is the absence of the kind of

clarifications and nuances such as these that gives the book a kind of "unfinished" feel.

Regarding the battle scenes described by Mr. Chasteen, one must conclude that he has not taken to heart John Keegan's recommendations on how to write military history (*The Face of Battle*, NY. 1976). Indeed, Mr. Chasteen takes the traditional approach made popular by the likes of Charles Oman, but which Keegan has demonstrated to be quite misleading. Witness, for instance, this paragraph on p. 85, describing the battle of Inhandui in 1893 between 6,000 rebels and 7,000 government troops:

"This was another battle that could not be won by charging lancers, but they still charged over and over for six hours, the very first assault being led by an impatient Aparicio Saravia, who was getting a reputation for leading the Maragatos in their favorite maneuver. (...) The Federalists' successive attacks withered in a hail of bullets and artillery shells, so that only a few lancers from any given charge actually reached the Republican line, bristling with bayonets. On such occasions, the handful who managed to breach the line could do little more than lunge in the direction of a rival commander, or if possible, seize a flag and try to escape with it alive."

This is a splendid piece of writing, but it does not enlighten us a great deal about what actually happened. (Of course, Keegan has to some extent reformulated the old Rankean adage of "wie es eigentlich gewesen." Indeed, a key question for any historian, and still as valid now as when it was first enunciated in the nineteenth century.)

What then, does the above quote really tell us? What is meant by charging "over and over for six hours?" How many men were involved in each charge, how fast did the horses trot (Keegan showed us that a galloping charge is almost impossible), how often did the Maragatos change horses? What was the distance between their own positions and those of the government troops? What is meant by "a hail of bullets and artillery

shells?" What guns did the soldiers have, how many of these soldiers actually were in the front lines, doing the shooting? What kind of shells are we talking about? These are just a few of the questions Mr. Chasteen might have asked (and tried to answer) in describing the battle of Inhandui and other military engagements.

Mr. Chasteen is not a military historian. Nor may he aspire to be one, but he still deals with important fragments of military history that deserve to be treated properly. Granted, the sources may not provide answers to all questions, but then, why go into heroic detail? If the sources remain silent, they certainly do not permit the kind of military historical vignette like the one quoted above.

As for an overall judgment of *Heroes on Horseback*, I feel that in many instances it falls short, notably where technical or bibliographical details are concerned. On the other hand, it is quite valuable in transcending the borders of national history. For too long, Latin Americanists have stopped looking beyond the borders of the countries they specialize in. Argentinists stop at the Uruguayan border, Brazilianists do not look at Argentina, and so on and so forth.

Hopefully, Mr. Chasteen's work is evidence of a new tendency among Latin Americanists to look at the Rio de la Plata as a whole, beyond Argentina and Uruguay. I believe that this aspect is the most significant one of this monograph. Now it is for the scholarly community to decide where to draw the borders of the wider Platine region. Needless to say, *Heroes on Horseback* is required reading for anyone wishing to transcend the borders of "traditional" Latin Americanist history.

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