



Stephen Bell. *A Life in Shadow: Aime Bonpland in Southern South America, 1817-1858.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5260-2.

Reviewed by Adriana Novoa (University of South Florida)

Published on H-LatAm (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo

Enlightening Science: Aimé Bonpland's Work in South America

Stephen Bell's book deals with the life of the French naturalist Aimé Bonpland (1773-1858) in South America from 1817 to his death in 1858. The six chapters tell us in chronological order how his life intertwined with the political and economic developments of the countries in which he lived. The biographical genre is probably one of the least developed in the historiography of Latin America. This is quite a pity since the dedicated study of a single life allows us to combine approaches that traditionally remain separated. Since the writing of a biography implies investigating an individual's complex web of interests it leads us to a type of narrative that transcends the territoriality of different fields. It is true that those who attempt to write such works are usually overwhelmed by the demands of their subjects' lives, but the rewards of such enterprise, if the work is well done, are quite difficult to replicate in any other approach.

In the case of Stephen Bell's book we are confronted with such evidence. His subject, Aimé Bonpland, is connected not only with science, but also with the economic, political, and social development of South America. In this sense, this book is a wonderful contribution to scholarship on science in Latin America, and also to the understanding of the relationship between science and culture during the first half of the nineteenth century. It is also a perfect illustration of how scientific thought and location work together. Since this a book that studies a European scientist in a peripheral location its author is right in claiming that "there is some potential to help redress Eurocentric biases in the historiography of exploration" (p. 16). Reading Bell it is clear that for those interested in the science produced in Latin America, this book offers a new approach. It is an advertisement for engagement with the work of those European travelers who did not publish enormously popular books such as those by Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin. Unlike these well-known figures, Bonpland belongs to another

important group of travelers whose contributions remain in the shadows even though they were extremely important to the march of European science.

Understanding how being in South America changed Bonpland and his work already justifies the writing of this book, but there are also other relevant topics that enhance the importance of the subject. For example, the life of Bonpland spans a period in which the role of French politics and French culture in the River Plate region changed, a transformation of great significance to our understanding of cultural exchanges between these two regions. Furthermore, Bonpland's studies remain relevant to the understanding of the environments he observed, and the evidence he gathered is still important and useful.

In this sense one of the most impressive characteristics of this book is the research that preceded its composition. Before *A Life in Shadow*, Bonpland's labors were known only in sketchy details, mostly those related to his participation in Alexander von Humboldt's expedition. After reading Bell, one is surprised to learn how much more his stay in Latin America meant. This is not only a study of science, but also of the world in which science took place during the early half of the nineteenth century. As Bonpland's diverse activities show, being a naturalist during this era meant being connected with a network that made politics and economic development inseparable from scientific observation. It is for this reason that the detailed account of the activities in which this French naturalist was involved reveals to us the whole sweep of scientific endeavors in a peripheral region.

Bell's work illuminates the relevance that leaving Europe had for those who sought a more complete understanding of natural environments. His compelling case about Bonpland's reasons for remaining in a region that was on occasion very hostile to him, as his imprisonment in Paraguay shows, is itself an argument for studying the

science of this period with a comprehensive perspective. After reading Bell one is left to wonder about the contacts and communications between scientists in Latin America and their colleagues in Europe. It is clear that the artificial separation of the two regions for the purpose of scholarly work is not only limiting, but also misleading. Bonpland's stay in South America was not only a personal choice, but also recognition that doing science *in situ* was extremely important. I believe that this will be one of the most important contributions of this book—making us aware that some scientific endeavors are the result of a multi-perspectival view that needs to be taken into account.

On another note, since Bell is a geographer, this study provides us with fascinating details about the physical development of regions that are today part of Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina. In various chapters we can see unfolding the importation and adaptation of new species, and what these processes entailed. For example, the development of the sheep-herding industry is in the background of some of the chapters dealing with Bonpland's ranching activities. Such details add fascinating depth to an account of his experiences with his adopted environment. The export of seeds to Algiers is another good example of the intersection between colonialism and science. Bonpland was responsible for sending these seeds, though he was dead by the time the director of the experimental garden in Algiers wrote a report "documenting the success of a large part of the material sent from South America" (p. 219). All these facts should be useful for those interested in discussing the magnitude and scope of the environmental transformation of the American continent, as well as those concerned with finding teaching materials on this subject, one that has not been exhausted by existing scholarship. After all, as Bell affirms, Bonpland's attitudes to forest resources come close "to the core of the current notion of sustainable development" (p. 228).

Bell's evidence is also extremely important in combating the image of a wasted scientific life that has often been associated with Bonpland, particularly when compared with Alexander von Humboldt. As Bell has proved through six carefully written chapters, a safe full of manuscripts in pharmacy, medicine, farming, ranching, advice to governments, species transfer, and museum development "occupied so much of Bonpland's time and energies that we are bound to wonder how he maintained his commitment to research" (p. 220). But his decision to remain in the River Plata area put him at the margins of scientific research, and some, like Avé-Lallement, unfairly depicted Bonpland at the end of his life as a man who had "gone native," far away from European society. In contradicting this type of allegation, *A Life in Shadow* connects very well with the work initiated by Mary Louise Pratt, as Bell himself acknowledges.[1]

Drawing on Bonpland's work in South America, Bell is able to connect science, politics, culture, and socio-economic transformation in a holistic way. The result is so compelling that the reader is left to wonder about Bonpland's personal life. But that is beyond the scope of the book. There are not many details about his family life, or much speculation on his subjective needs, though no one reading this book can help but be curious. In this sense, of course, this is not a traditional biography, but a biographical account of scientific production in the early nineteenth century. I am sure that after Bell's book there will be renewed interest in Bonpland, and we should expect to see his life approached in different ways. But, without a doubt, this book will be a mandatory reference for all future publications on the subject, as it will be for anybody interested in the science of this period, whether from a Latin American or European perspective.

Note

[1]. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Adriana Novoa. Review of Bell, Stephen, *A Life in Shadow: Aime Bonpland in Southern South America, 1817-1858*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31589>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.