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Lester D. Langley, Thomas Schoonover. *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. 219 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1891-8.

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The label "banana republic" has become synonymous with the nations of Central America. Some take offense at this stereotyping while others argue that it is more accurate to call most of the isthmian nations "coffee republics." For those who hope to dispel the image of the banana republic, the publication of Lester D. Langley and Thomas Schoonover's *The Banana Men* will not be a welcome addition to the historical literature on Central America. Scholars who are fascinated (and perhaps confused) by the comic opera that was Central American politics in the early twentieth century, however, will want to examine this work. The authors make sense of the complex web of events that involved Central American strong men, US foreign policy, international business interests, and mercenary adventurers by placing them all within the context of social imperialism theory.

Schoonover provides an overview of the concept of social imperialism in the first chapter. Social imperialism describes the relationship between "core" industrial nations and countries of the less developed "periphery." As core economies of countries like the United States expanded, they sought out foreign markets, investment opportunities and sources of raw materials that would benefit the core. They did this with little or no regard for the consequences to the periphery host country. Indeed, the needs of the core led it to undermine the sovereignty and development of the host in order to meet its own needs. Social imperialism affected not only the economy of the peripheral nation, but its social and political life as well. While core interests might directly use force to create a suitable environment for their needs, they often found it more expedient to operate through a "comprador" elite in the host country, an elite that the core elements often placed, and maintained, in power. Due to geographic proximity, Central America gravitated into the orbit of the United States. Schoonover blames US social imperialism for much of the chronic unrest in Central America from the nineteenth century to the present. Anyone interested in more information on social imperialism should see Schoonover's *The United States in Central America, 1860-1911: Episodes of Social Imperialism and Imperial Rivalry in the World-System* (Durham, N.C., 1991).

The following chapters, largely the work of Langley, provide a narrative history in which we see the forces of social imperialism at work. The focus of the book is more limited in its geographic and temporal scope than the title implies. Rather than an overview of events in Central America, the authors chose to examine the cases of Honduras and Nicaragua. The Honduran case revolves around the political battles in which US interests, represented by men like Samuel Zemurray and their mercenary allies, sought to place Manuel Bonilla in power. Bonilla served as the leader of the comprador elite in the relationship. In Nicaragua, Juan J. Estrada became the initial champion of US capitalists and Washington in their confrontation with the nationalist, anti-American regime of Jose Santos Zelaya and Zelaya's handpicked successor Jose Madriz. While the authors highlight later developments and draw parallels with events in the region as late at the 1980s, the material that is central to the book does not extend much beyond 1912.

Jose Santos Zelaya's determination to resist US hegemony, most notably in his efforts to entice European and Japanese canal builders to his country, brought on the wrath of the US government. Tariff increases alienated the foreign business interests on the Mosquito coast (many of them from the United States). When Zelaya's governor on the coast, Juan J Estrada, declared against the president in October, 1910, he quickly won financial support from foreign capitalists, backing from Thomas Moffat, the US consul in Bluefields, allies from among disaffect Nicaraguans, and the services of unscrupulous mercenaries from the United States. The US government aided the rebel cause through its naval muscle, declaring the rebel stronghold of Bluefields off limits to fighting. The US also warned the Nicaraguan government not to interfere with the movement of ships in and out of Bluefields. These policies in effect guaranteed eventual

victory for the rebels. Faced with these insurmountable challenges, Zelaya and then Madriz abandoned the presidency.

The situation in Honduras at roughly the same time was similar to that in Nicaragua. US business interests on the country's north coast, foremost among them railroad and banana companies, sought to enthrone a suitable Honduran leader who would rule in their interests. Manuel Bonilla was that man. Bonilla ruled the country from 1904 to 1907, but an invasion by Zelaya forced him out office. Business leaders, standing behind a mercenary rebel army led by Lee Christmas, dedicated themselves to restoring Bonilla to power. Samuel Zemurray played a key role in orchestrating the revolt, providing money, arms and his yacht the Hornet. The invasion began in July, 1910 and, despite setbacks and uncertainties, Bonilla finally took the port of La Ceiba on the north coast in January, 1911. The US finally intervened in February, 1911 to prevent continued violence and helped to install Francisco Bertrand as provisional president. The real power behind Bertrand, however, was clearly Bonilla, who soon won election as president.

The specific role and attitude of the US government toward Bonilla's invasion is not entirely clear from the narrative. Langley notes that Honduran scholars argue that the US declaration of a neutral zone in La Ceiba was a deliberate effort on the part of the US to favor Bonilla's chances of victory (p. 136). It is an intriguing charge, but it goes unanswered. Langley seems to counter the accusation by noting that Christmas felt hampered by the declaration of a neutral zone (it limited his freedom to fire at will), yet shortly thereafter, Langley explains that in the final battle, the retreat of government forces from the field into the neutral zone led US and British soldiers to disarm them, thus ending the conflict and securing victory for the rebels. There is evidence that Washington sought the removal of President Miguel Davila as a means of securing a loan treaty, but other evidence indicates that US officials tried to discourage the Bonilla invasion. US customs agents in New Orleans (where the conspirators plotted the invasion) monitored Christmas and others in an effort to ensure compliance with US neutrality laws. An effort to evaluate the US position would have been helpful. The colorful lives of the mercenaries, whom the authors refer to as "private filibusters," is one of the most entertaining aspects of the book. Guy "Machine-gun" Malony, "Jew Sam" Dreben, Tracy Richardson, Major Edward A. Burke (a Confederate veteran), and a host of other mercenary adventurers appear throughout the pages of *The Banana Men*. These were men who, in the words of the authors, combined "nineteenth-century bravado with the deadly weaponry of the modern age" (p. 138). The most famous (or infamous) of these guns-for-hire was Lee Christmas. Christmas began his career in tropical soldiering after rebels seized his locomotive (he was a railroad engineer) during an 1897 revolt against the Honduran government; rather than face a firing squad, Christmas joined the rebels. The revolt failed, but a long career in stagging rebellions and serving dictators in Honduras and Guatemala followed, full of amazing exploits. Christmas' courage and audacity became legend. A typical example of Christmas' courage was his response to the Nicaraguan and Honduran troops who had captured him during the overthrow of Bonilla in 1907. Christmas, facing certain execution, asked that his foes not bury him after his death. When the Nicaraguan officer inquired why Christmas made such an unusual request, the soldier of fortune replied: "Because I want the buzzards to eat me, and fly over you afterwards, and scatter white droppings on your god-damned black faces" (p. 68). Christmas so impressed his captors that they spared his life.

The other leading figure in Langley and Schoonover's account is Sam "the Banana Man" Zemurray. While Zemurray was no soldier, he was a significant actor in the events of the Honduran revolution of 1910-11. He bankrolled the operation, making arms, supplies and ships available to the rebel army. While the soldiers reaped a share of the spoils, the real benefits went to men like Zemurray who established or expanded their business ventures in the host countries. After Bonilla's victory in 1911, Zemurray received a concession of 10,000 hectares on the north coast and the right to import, duty-free, materials needed for the operation of his Cuyamel Fruit Company. Zemurray became a very wealthy man and eventually assumed control of the giant United Fruit Company.

Once the capitalist interests had won concessions and protection and Central American governments accepted US hegemony, the demand for mercenaries ended. The final chapter, "A Different World," makes it clear that the adventurers' days in the sun were over after the conflicts of 1910-11. Entrepreneurs who once employed the soldiers of fortune were now able to work through the comprador elite in Managua and Tegucigalpa. When serious threats to order and profit emerged, businessmen turned to the US military for protection. Some of the adventurers found new opportunities in the Mexican Revolution; others enlisted to fight in World War I. "Machine-gun" Malony later became police superintendent of New Orleans. Christmas drifted from one government post to another. He often times faced economic hardship. He

eventually returned to the United States, where he died in 1924. Langley and Schoonover do point out, however, that the exile army that invaded Guatemala in 1954 and the contras armed by the US in an effort to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua operated in the spirit of the earlier mercenaries.

The authors availed themselves of a sizeable pool of primary sources in producing their study. The narrative is constructed from materials collected from the Hermann Deutsch papers (Deutsch was a journalist and personal acquaintance of Christmas and wrote a biography of the adventurer entitled The Incredible Yanqui, published in 1931), recorded oral accounts, US State Department and military records, Central American documentary publications, newspapers (both US and Central American-based), and memoirs and biographies of participants in the events of the era.

Langley and Schoonover recognize the value of scholarly team work and encourage other historians to carry out joint projects. Team work has its rewards, but it also presents special challenges. In the case of *The Banana Men*, Schoonover handled the analytical discussion of social imperialism, while Langley tackled the narrative. Unfortunately, the authors did not integrate their work. Interpretation is confined to the first chapter, "The World of the Banana Men," and the epilogue, while the main body of the book is strictly narrative. A synthesis of their separate efforts would have produced a clearer and more convincing case for social imperialism in Central America.

The Banana Men makes important contributions to a growing body of literature about the history of Central America's Caribbean coast, the isthmus in general, and US involvement in the region. The story of the Estrada rebellion in already well-known, but Langley and Schoonover have put together a detailed account that might benefit even the veteran Central Americanist. The story of the Honduran events has not received as much attention as those of Nicaragua, so this aspect of *The Banana Men* is especially welcome. In general, the work improves our understanding of a chaotic period in Central American political and diplomatic affairs. The work may be too intricate and complex for use in undergraduate courses, but it is certainly a book that historians of Central American and United States-Latin American relations will want to add to their collections.

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