

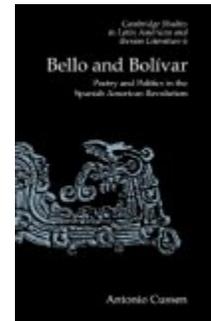
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Antonio Cussen. *Bello and Bolivar: Poetry and Politics in the Spanish American Revolution.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992. xiii + 208 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-41248-3.

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War by Words

This is a terrific book. The dramatic battles and forceful personalities of Spanish America's independence period have been well documented and their place in world military history amply secured. With this book, Antonio Cussen resurrects the intellectual and cultural milieu within which Spanish America's independence generation existed, and reminds us just how much ideas and words mattered to them.

Although Andres Bello and Simon Bolivar share equal billing in the title, the book really belongs to Bello alone, and Cussen himself notes that his main purpose was "to reconstruct Bello's version of the Spanish American Revolution during his London years [1810-29]" (p. xii). Cussen draws on Bello's letters and collected works, and the story of his ambiguous relationship with Bolivar is told from Bello's perspective. This approach is, of course, useful and interesting for several reasons. First, it provides a complex contemporary assessment of Bolivar's personality and historical role from someone who knew him well, his tutor and longtime friend. Second, Bello's attitudes toward the course and nature of the Spanish American independence movement were formed half a world away from the bloody battles themselves and therefore contain a unique perspective on events born from this distance. Indeed, one of the book's greatest values is its introduction of the Bello's ideas to an underappreciative, English-speaking audience.

Cussen's most important contribution, however, is the long overdue recognition of the importance of po-

etry and literature, and the Greek and Roman classics in particular, for the Spanish American independence generation. Following Michel Foucault, a generation of literary critics, including Cussen and Roberto Gonzalez Echeverria, has viewed "poetry as an archive" (p. ix) and has begun to decode the historical and political elements of Spanish American poetry.[1] In fact, Cussen neatly shows how literature has reinforced political values and ruling regimes in Spain and Spanish America since medieval times. Viewed in this way, Bello's most famous epic poems, composed in London and jointly known as the "Silvas Americanas," become far more than beautiful words and images written in homage to American heroes and nature; when read in their historical context, the poet's words actually provide stinging political commentary on the events, motives and ideology of the Independence movement. Though it may seem strange or unbelievable to late twentieth-century sensibilities, Bello's was a generation which venerated literature, and had read widely and deeply. They devoured the classics and patterned their own rhetoric after ancient heroic models. Miguel Jose Sanz, for example, was admired as "the Lycergus of Venezuela," and the island of Margarita off the Venezuelan coast was renamed "New Sparta" after a particularly valiant defense.[2] To the Spanish American independence generation, words mattered and the classical model would not be ignored. Cussen does the academic community a great service when he recalls this cultural predisposition.

Cussen could not have chosen a better subject to il-

lustrate his argument than Andres Bello, often credited as the author of Spanish America's intellectual declaration of independence.[3] Bello exhibited a tremendous historical sensitivity from an early age, accompanying Humboldt and Bonpland on their scientific expedition throughout northern South America in 1799-1800, earning a position as secretary to the Captain General in Caracas and serving as an early tutor to Simon Bolivar. In 1810, Juan German Roscio sent Bello to London as secretary to the Bolivar/Luis Lopez Mendez mission and he remained there for almost two decades. During his long foreign residence, Bello was the centre of the Spanish American community in London and began work on the many projects which secured his reputation after he returned to America to live in Chile in 1829, including his grammar and orthographic reforms, his study of the Poem of the Cid, his legislative and constitutional proposals, and his literary works.

Describing Bello as a "man of the late Enlightenment" who was "still a neoclassical poet and a monarchist" when he left Venezuela for London (pp. 25, 26), Cussen painstakingly traces the parallel evolution of Bello's poetic forms and his political ideology. As a young government secretary in the Captaincy General of Caracas, he employed the language and motifs of Virgil's *Georgics* to glorify Charles III and the Spanish monarchy in the early poem "Oda a la vacuna" (1804). By 1810, with Bello's *Resumen de la historia de Venezuela*, only Charles II is praised by name; the rest of the Spanish monarchy is treated more suspiciously (p. 23). Two years later in London and under the influence of the expatriate Spanish liberal Reverend Joseph Blanco White and the Holland House circle, Bello's poetry betrays hopes of reconciliation with Spain and a belief that Spanish America was not yet ready for independence. Until the mid-1810s, Bello was able to sustain this increasingly tenuous position, and consistently utilized a Virgilian Georgic motif (allegories, themes of nature, etc.); after the return of Ferdinand in 1814, no one could pretend that Spanish Americans were not fighting for full independence and Bello was forced to choose sides. He reluctantly chose America, and his poetry reflected that new reality; he turned to epic portrayals of battles and heroes and more direct statements typical of Virgil's *Aeneid* (p. 59).

Chapter 6, "The New Augustus," is a fascinating account of Bello and Bolivar's competition for ownership of the Augustan image. Cussen compares Bolivar's Angostura speech to that of Augustus before the Senate in 27 BC, and draws undeniable parallels between the two orations (p. 78). In fact, at the time Bolivar and Ferdi-

nand were viewed as competing Augustan types, each vying to consolidate an empire under a single person (p. 73). For his part, Bolivar subverts the adjective "august" which had previously referred to monarchs (and occasionally church rites), and attached it to his republican ideal; Bello, too, recognized the parallel but was less inclined to grant Bolivar the titular honour. As Cussen wryly states, "the new American Virgil declines to praise the new Augustus" in his 1823 poem "Alocucion a la poesia" (p. 105). Instead, Bello used the poem to praise many heroes of Independence who had opposed Bolivar (Ribas, Piar, Miranda, Castillo), and thereby turned his artistic effort into a "veiled but sharp criticism" of Bolivar's perfidy (p. 106). Apparently Bello's poetry is not as politically neutral as it might initially seem. He extended the attack upon the Bolivarian imperial persona in the second instalment of the *Silvas*, "La agricultura a la zona torrida," which appeared in the London-based journal *El Repertorio Americano* in 1826. There is an interesting and telling anecdote surrounding the power of Bello's poetics on Bolivar's ego. Apparently, in May 1828 the Liberator sat unblinking through an earthquake while reading Bello's "Alocucion" and subsequently mulled over the poet's charges with his aides-de-camp, as if to convince himself that they were unfounded (p. 140). Here the connection between the political and the poetic becomes clear.

Cussen does an admirable job of reconstructing the classical heritage and the importance of literature for the Spanish American independence generation. His work suggests that more useful historical information can be extracted from the region's poetic archive and should lead the way for other interesting studies of this type. Because the book focuses primarily on Andres Bello, it might have benefited from a fuller discussion of the intellectual and cultural environment that surrounded him in London, particularly the rebirth of classicism among the early Victorians.[4] Apparently while in London, Bello had been humbled by young John Stuart Mill's ability to read and write Greek and taught himself that language, which he believed all educated men in England knew.[5] Furthermore, Bello was a great admirer of the British classicist Alexander Pope, and later of Byron. Nevertheless, this is an excellent book which offers a fresh look at a difficult subject, and is a welcome addition to the ever expanding body of work on Spanish America's Independence period.

Notes

- [1]. Roberto Gonzalez Echeverria, *Myth and Archive:*

A Theory of Latin American Narrative (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman also note the correlation in *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

[2]. Juan Garcia del Rio, "Revista del estado anterior i actual de la instruccion publica en la America antes Espanola" in *Repertorio Americano* II (January 1827) 229-31; *Memorias del General Daniel Florencio O'Leary*, Tomo I (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1952).

[3]. Pedro Henriquez Urena, *Literary Currents in Spanish America* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1954). Rafael Caldera asserts that "conscious Spanish American letters were born with Bello" in *Andres Bello: Philosopher, Poet, Philologist, Educator, Legislator*,

Statesman (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977).

[4]. Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Frank Miller Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago, 1937); David Brading, *Classical Republicanism and Creole Patriotism: Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) and the Spanish American Revolution* (Cambridge, U.K.: Centre of Latin American Studies, 1983).

[5]. Joseph Blanco White to Andres Bello (Oxford, 8 March 1814) in *Mapocho* 5 (no. 3, 1965): 296.

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