

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Luz Elena Ramirez. *British Representations of Latin America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. x + 212 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3081-4.

Reviewed by Jesse Hingson (Department of History, Jacksonville University)  
Published on H-Albion (April, 2008)



## British Orientalism in Latin America

This welcome study investigates British literary representations of Latin American subjects between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Luz Elena Ramirez, currently an associate professor of English at California State University at San Bernardino, provides single-case analyses of five representative works within several historical contexts: Robert Schomburgk's 1848 edition of Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* (the "Elizabethan" and "Victorian" periods); Joseph Conrad's 1904 work *Nostromo* and Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 *The Lost World* (the era of "Development and Science" during the late nineteenth century); Malcolm Lowry's 1947 *Under the Volcano* (the era of British imperialist decline); and Graham Greene's "Americanist" oeuvre (the advent of a "Modern Consciousness" during the twentieth century).

Yet, this exceptional book is much more than a series of "case studies," as she calls them. In an outgrowth of her dissertation from the University of Texas, Austin, Ramirez has advanced an illuminating thesis about why British writers were interested in Latin America. These "Americanist writers," as she describes them, shared a number of fundamental characteristics: they consistently "question or condemn brutality on the part of the British Empire's rivals, particularly the Spanish and Portuguese," "justify major interventions and multiple exploitations of native peoples," and venerate "the cartographic impulse of the British Empire to claim and map land" (pp. 23-24). This work succeeds, too, because it advances our interpretative framework beyond postcolonial studies, which, as she points out, "both resist and complicate the category of imperial discourse and derail a postcolonial (usu-

ally Marxist) interpretation" (p. 3).

In Ramirez's estimation, the first "Americanist" literary piece was Walter Raleigh's 1596 travelogue *Discoverie of Guiana*, written within the context of conquest, discovery, and exploration. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly after the publication of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for example, British authors responded more frequently to Spanish conquest and colonialism. By the early nineteenth century, Great Britain had supplanted Spain as the pre-eminent commercial power in Latin America. British economic interests remained unmatched for most of the century, especially in the region's major port cities. This was largely the result of efforts by newly independent Latin American countries that often depended on British merchants for raising badly needed revenue. By the early twentieth century, however, Great Britain's influence in Latin America diminished and other actors, such as the United States, filled the void. Within this context, other writers, such as Charles Darwin, Bram Stoker, and Joseph Conrad, influenced Arthur Conan Doyle's perceptions of Latin America. As a side note not mentioned by the author, it is interesting that in their representations of Latin American countries, many British authors, like Conan Doyle, adopted a binary view of Latin Americans (in terms of "evolution" versus "backwardness") much the same way that Latin American intellectuals like Domingo Sarmiento did (in terms of "civilization" versus "barbarism").

In the twentieth century, British writers, such as

Malcolm Lowry in his work *Under the Volcano*, also looked to Latin America to “inspire their works” (p. 127). Within this context, questions about how to “develop” Latin America and the nationalization of key industries weighed heavily on the minds of British investors. In her final chapter, Ramirez describes Graham Greene’s works as typically “Americanist” whereby “protagonists do not mix easily or successfully with Creoles” and portrays Greene as the quintessential twentieth-century liberal, uneasy with socialism and neoliberalism (i.e., corporate interests) (p. 47). In fact, as Ramirez notes, Greene “refuses to glorify informal imperialism,” but at the same time, “he also rejects the romantic notion of successful twentieth-century subsistence farming” (pp. 165-166). By the twentieth century, two “contradictory impulses” grew out of these types of novels: one that sought to recreate the desire to travel, coupled with the view of Latin America as a “failed experiment” (p. 50).

As a minor quibble, one of Ramirez’s principle arguments, namely that British writers tried to “justify major interventions and multiple exploitations of native peoples,” does not, in my view, go far enough (p. 23). Ramirez notes on that by the early nineteenth century, British merchants “depended less on military coercion and more on financial clout and persuasion” (p. 6) and “considered themselves facilitators of business, not conquistadors” (p. 12), and suggests that “British imperialism in Latin America has been informal and relatively non-interventionist in nature” and that the British had more “entrepreneurial interests rather than military ones” (p. 30). All of this leaves the reader with the mistaken impression that British interests in Latin America were peaceful; moreover, this view largely ignores a litany of examples that point to British military aggression against Latin American countries, especially after the turn of the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1806, a year after Admiral Horatio Nelson defeated the Spanish Armada at Trafalgar, Sir Home Popham led an unauthorized attack on Buenos Aires while it was still a Spanish colonial port city. This defeat did not deter British forces, which then invaded Montevideo in 1807. In fact, only two years before the Buenos Aires and Montevideo expeditions, Popham himself conceded: “The idea of conquering South America is totally out of the question, but the possibility of gaining all its prominent points, alienating it from its present European Connections, fixing on some Military position, and enjoying all its Commercial advantages can be reduced to a fair calculation, if not a certain operation.”[1] Thus, while Popham recognized the folly of replacing Spain as a mother country, he articu-

lated the belief in a strong British military presence in the region. Quite interestingly, his defeat in Buenos Aires led to nascent feelings of nationalism among inhabitants of the port city, but it certainly did not stop British aggression.

Indeed, the British were very hostile in their business practices with Latin American countries during the nineteenth century. Newly formed Latin American republics sustained their currency in large part through loans from foreign lenders, especially British merchants.[2] Argentina, for example, borrowed heavily from Great Britain to finance projects and pay off war debts. Baring Brothers of London loaned 570,000 pounds sterling to the new country in exchange for a debt of 1 million pounds. As a condition of these loans, Argentine merchants were forced to buy English manufactured goods. Then, in 1825, while the Anglo-Argentine Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation officially recognized Argentine national sovereignty, this agreement forced Argentina to open its economy to British commercial interests. When Latin American countries reneged on their agreements, did not respond to British efforts to force open their economies, or could not pay back their loans, the British often resorted to military interventions. The British (along with the other major European powers) punished Latin American countries by blockading their major port cities, such as Buenos Aires during the 1840s, and Veracruz, Mexico in the 1860s. British forces left Veracruz only when Mexico agreed to resume payments.

The reason for Ramirez’s emphasis on British commercial rather than military aggression may be that she relies heavily on a seminal work by P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins titled *British Imperialism: 1688-2000* (2001) as background. Cain and Hopkins emphasize British financial and commercial interests rather than industrial sectors as the main impetus for British imperialism. These authors also argue that the British intended to bring South American nations under their influence and replace Spain once and for all. Like Ramirez, however, they ignore the effects of British military aggression in Latin America. Incorporating works by H. S. Ferns, Nicolas Shumway, and Jeremy Adelman would have shed a different light on British policies, which, interestingly, contributed to the growth and development of nationalism.[3] In all, however, these criticisms are not intended to take anything away from Ramirez’s overall impressive findings.

Detractors of Ramirez’s “case studies” approach may

argue whether or not she has chosen the right “cases,” or enough of them to support her thesis. The idea, for example, that Graham Greene, being born in 1904—the same year that both *Nostramo* and *Green Mansions* were published—“inherited a long tradition of British writing about Latin America,” may seem contrived (p. 145). Indeed, more “case studies” will be needed to see if the author’s conclusions are ultimately correct. However, I find her arguments overall to be very convincing and recommend this monograph for scholars in literature and history as well as advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Ramirez blazes new trails with this book, which will not be the last word on this subject.

## Notes

[1]. Quoted in Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 16.

[2]. Jeremy Adelman, *Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 96.

[3]. For Ferns, most notably *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Jesse Hingson. Review of Ramirez, Luz Elena, *British Representations of Latin America*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14415>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).