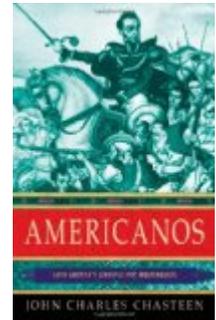


**John Charles Chasteen.** *Americanos: Latin America's Struggle for Independence.*  
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With the bicentennial of Latin American independence upon us, works examining the multifaceted elements of those long, bloody, and vitally important struggles are going to be filling bookstore shelves over the next decade or so in the form of both surveys and monographs on specific areas, groups, and developments. John Charles Chasteen provides an early entry with a concise but nevertheless detailed overview of the events that will probably serve as the introduction to this period for many previously uninformed readers.

Chasteen's book joins a long list of highly regarded and influential English-language surveys of the independence period. Prominent among the early entries was William Spence Robertson's *Rise of the Spanish American Republics, as Told in the Lives of Their Liberators*, published in 1936, which described the events via the "great man in history" route. Over three decades had passed when Richard Graham contributed his short work, *Independence in Latin America: A Comparative Approach*. First published in 1972 and then

reissued in an expanded second version in 1994, it managed to cover the events not only in Spanish America but also in Brazil. John Lynch's much-cited *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826*, published in 1973, gave a much broader picture, incorporating a wealth of social and economic material, although, like Robertson, he restricted himself to the Spanish American events. His second edition, published in 1986, updated the text and added a chapter on Central America. Jay Kinsbruner's much shorter work, *The Spanish American Independence Movement*, also appeared in 1973 and covered the same geographical focus. His 1994 update altered the title to *Independence in Spanish America: Civil Wars, Revolutions, and Underdevelopment*, reflecting his desire to tie the independence wars more closely to some of the subsequent problems faced by the region. Jaime E. Rodríguez O.'s *The Independence of Spanish America*, published in 1998, was equally geographically specific, but with special attention paid to the events in Spain, which, in his view, were central to understanding the independence

issue. Jeremy Adelman's more recent work, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic*, published in 2006, is perhaps the most analytical of the lot, placing particular economic groups and factors at the center of the events in Spanish America and Brazil in trying to explain the rise of sovereignty in the respective areas.

Chasteen has thus joined the ranks of an impressive group of historians who have taken on a daunting task in view of the extensive historiography at their disposal. In the process, he has acquitted himself well. His work is similar to those of Graham and Kinsbruner in that it is brief, containing only 188 pages of text. Yet he manages to cover most of the developments in both Spanish America and Brazil, in many cases with significant detail. He adopts Robertson's approach, but goes beyond the liberators, explaining events through the lives of the familiar as well as the less familiar, women along with men. His work is more descriptive than analytical, and seems designed as a textbook for introductory courses on either Latin American history or more specific courses on the independence period. Its breezy style, short chapter sections, and occasional references to U.S. realities point to the intended audience, but even readers with some knowledge of the events and the literature will find his book useful. In particular, his chronological rather than regional approach underlines how events were happening simultaneously throughout Latin America, feeding off one another and creating the wave that gradually gathered force until independence was secured everywhere on the mainland.

After a brief introduction that sets out his aims and explains his terminology, Chasteen begins with the Prussian scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, to introduce the region, along with its economic bases and political and social realities. Subsequent heroes of the independence struggles, notably Simón Bolívar and Father Miguel Hidalgo, make their first appearances in these pages, setting the stage for the growing problems of empire

that would explode with the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1807 and 1808. That crisis triggered the local struggles for control that quickly descended into warfare in Spanish America, despite the fact that almost all parties claimed to be operating in the name of the deposed Spanish king, Fernando VII. Fighting lasted until 1826 with a shift in America from civil conflicts to royalist dominance and eventual patriot victory; and in Spain from French dominance to constitutional monarchy, to absolutism, back to constitutional monarchy, and finally a return to absolutism. In the process, Chasteen introduces the reader to many of the prominent and familiar figures of the period. In addition to Bolívar and Hidalgo, he includes Antonio Nariño, José María Morelos, José de San Martín, Bernardo O'Higgins, Agustín de Iturbide, and many, many more, including women, such as Manuela Sáenz, and the patriot martyrs Policarpa Salavarrieta and Gertrudis Bocanegra. Chasteen discusses the less confrontational Brazilian experiences alongside the Spanish American conflicts, and explains the reasons for the differences as well as the simultaneous emergence of Brazilian support for independence. He concludes with an overview of some of the effects of the wars on the developments of the later nineteenth century.

Those acquainted with and impressed by Chasteen's previous works may have hoped for a more analytical examination. However, the aim and the length of the book virtually prevent this. The length also results in occasional generalizations that do not always capture the complexities of the events. For example, his terminology might not sit well with some, such as his use of the word "Americanos" to describe his protagonists. Critics could point to the fact that many of those who fought for the patriot side in Spanish America were born in Spain. In Brazil, it was the Portuguese-born Pedro I who declared Brazilian independence. Similarly, Chasteen's picture of a shifting loyalty marked by the *Americanos* on one

side and the "Europeos" on the other is not always supported by the evidence. At the end of the wars, royalist armies were largely composed of American-born soldiers, indicating the continuing loyalty to Spain (and Portugal) that was one of the problems that the new leaders had to address. That same problem is evident in his conclusion where he skillfully brings together some of the points touched on earlier, and argues that one can see in the wars the emergence of a commitment to popular sovereignty and liberalism that set the stage for the slow but eventual creation of unified nation-states in Latin America. Again, it is an argument that not all will support, as that commitment to popular sovereignty might be seen more as a desire to protect self-interests and the liberalism that was espoused was often introduced at the expense of the lower orders of society and was anything but progressive.

Occasional, small errors appear, perhaps almost inevitable in a succinct survey of this sort. His picture of Túpac Amaru's execution--of having been torn apart by four horses--is still frequently cited but has long been challenged by those who claim that the horses proved unequal to the task and that he eventually was dispatched by being beheaded (p. 24). And slavery came to an end in most of the new Spanish American nations in the 1850s, not the 1830s and 1840s (pp. 178-179). But such slips can easily be corrected in the book's second edition, which seems to be the normal fate of works of this sort. Finally, those looking for information on the role of foreign nations and diplomatic elements in the events will find a few references here, but will be better served by D. A. G. Waddell's essay in the *Cambridge History of Latin America* (1985).

Nevertheless, this is a useful work that is certain to appear on the syllabi of numerous undergraduate courses over the next several years. Chasteen has shown what can be accomplished in a limited format, and his work should stimulate interest in the more detailed studies that will fill

in the gaps and emphasize the complexities of this fascinating period in Latin American history and the lives of those who made it happen.

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