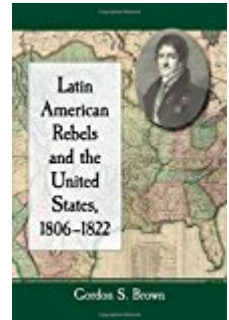


Gordon S. Brown. *Latin American Rebels and the United States, 1806-1822.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 212 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9899-4.



Reviewed by Bruce Spadaccini

Published on H-War (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Retired ambassador and career diplomat Gordon S. Brown takes Spanish American rebels, their American partners, and diplomatic hand-wringing as his subjects in a work that reexamines the tumultuous years of the revolutionary Spanish Atlantic. Brown approaches his topic from the perspective of rebellious agents from Spanish American juntas and their efforts to conduct covert operations without upsetting the balancing act of neutrality that constituted US foreign policy. He showcases the ways that these agents made the United States “another theater of the Spanish American independence struggle” (p. 13). The narrative pivots around cross-cultural dialogues, “halting and full of misunderstandings and mistakes”; filibustering expeditions (both those executed and the false starts) along the Gulf Coast; and the “war by proxy” of privateering by Spanish American insurgents, US merchants, and multinational crews (pp. 13, 77).

The book opens in 1797 with Tennessee senator William Blount’s scheme to seize Louisiana and Western Florida from the Spanish and deliver

the territories to the British, and closes with the first official recognitions of Spanish American independence in the early 1820s. A heavy focus on the critical years following the end of the Napoleonic Wars up to the signing of the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1819 grounds the work as Brown zeroes in on the height of insurgent activity in and around the United States. Brown strikes a careful balance between the high diplomacy of the Adams-Onís discussions at the latter end of the book and the more exciting, clandestine activities of Spanish American insurgents. While scholars will not necessarily find a new interpretation in *Latin American Rebels*, those interested in the range of activities proposed and executed by the agents in and around the United States or the ways in which US neutrality was debated by politicians and citizens alike, circumvented by agents of multiple locales and compromised by the actions of US citizens, will find the tangled web of revolutionary activity spelled out in ample detail and accessible prose.

Rather than redirect existing scholarship, Brown's goal is to bring together "into a single, concise, coherent narrative" a subject he has found too fragmented in previous studies (p. 3). For that purpose, he largely utilizes previously published primary source materials and secondary sources to weave together the disparate threads of the historiography to fashion his dynamic narrative. He fills his pages with intriguing characters, ranging from the ever-watchful Spanish diplomat Luis de Onís and the indefatigable agent Manuel Torres to the privateering escapades of Captain Thomas Taylor and the opportunistic Lafitte brothers. While these colorful characters make for a page-turning narrative, the work avoids conversing with the more recent debates that historians might be seeking.

While Brown's narrative strategies favor recovering the stories of these various insurgent activities, his work does inform recent scholarship, such as Rafe Blaufarb's article on the international dimensions of the independence movements and David Head's work on the Spanish American privateering activities from the United States. The conflicting interests and multiple personalities at the crossroads of the local and geopolitical, the internal and external dimensions of the Spanish American independence movements, that Brown describes present a dynamic lens into what Blaufarb has deemed "the Western Question," the international struggle over the fate of the crumbling Spanish Atlantic Empire. Scholars like Head, influenced by an Atlantic framework, have also analyzed these ventures in recent years for their border crossing character and connection building, illustrating in the process the need to broaden the temporal parameters of Atlantic history.[1]

Structurally, *Latin American Rebels* oscillates between chronological discussion of diplomatic events and insurgent activity and a more thematic approach. The first four chapters chronicle the nature of US-Spanish diplomatic relations during the 1790s (initiating a period of "awkward rela-

tionships" and "mutual exploration"), the "contested loyalties" of both interested American parties and Spanish American insurgents, the initial forays of insurgent agents into the United States seeking assistance and/or recognition, and finally the first active planning and executing of filibusters and other activities by Spanish American insurgents (pp. 181, 32). As one of several filibustering expeditions floated around during the period, for example, Blount's conspiracy exposed the hallowed nature of Washington's neutrality policy, the country's conflicted interests, and the uneasy nature of the US-Spanish relationship, themes that are central to Brown's study.

From there, the book shifts to Spanish American privateering commissioned by rebel juntas, funded by US merchants, and largely ignored (at least for a time) by federal officials. A critical period in Atlantic geopolitics following the end of the Napoleonic Wars created new opportunities for American merchants and out-of-work sailors and captains to come together in new privateering ventures against Spanish commerce. As Brown explains, while US neutrality law prohibited any such undertakings against a country at peace with the United States, a combination of legal loopholes and wit enabled hundreds to commission and fit out privateers, capture Spanish vessels, and land and sell prizes. Some of Brown's best sequences involve his recounting of such activity as well as the resulting legal squabbles as Onís sought to end the blatant neutrality violations.

Tension and uncertainty characterize many of the initiatives by Spanish American insurgents who sought to utilize the United States as both a springboard and supply depot for attacks on the Spanish, and to harness common republican aspirations to gain recognition from the US government. The official US policy of neutrality was pushed well beyond its limits, as Onís spied, reported, and attempted to thwart several rebel expeditions partnered (often illegally) with US merchants, officials, and ship captains. Within

Brown's narrative we witness this struggle and the divided interests, parties, and results as the uncertain negotiations and military campaigns played out. As Brown comments in his concluding chapter, while the debate over the impact of the insurgents' activities (many of which did not get off the ground or ended without much success) is far from settled, the material assistance provided by an open marketplace in the United States should not be discounted. Likewise, the pressure exerted politically and diplomatically by the presence and action of rebel agents helped push along negotiations between the United States and Spain, ultimately opening up the opportunity for official recognition.

In spite of not looking at new documentation or revising existing scholarship, Brown contributes to the field by producing a short work that capably lays out key narratives in this international side of the Latin American revolutions. Brown accomplishes his task skillfully and provides an accessible read for undergraduates and interested scholars alike.

Note

[1]. Rafe Blaufarb, "The Western Question: The Geopolitics of Latin American Independence," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (2007): 742–763; and David Head, "New Nations, New Connections: Spanish American Privateering from the United States and the Development of Atlantic Relations," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2013): 161–175.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Bruce Spadaccini. Review of Brown, Gordon S. *Latin American Rebels and the United States, 1806-1822*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44223>



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