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Review/Reseña

Pamela S. Murray, *For Glory and Bolívar: the Remarkable Life of Manuela Sáenz 1797-1856*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Reexamining Manuela Sáenz: from Scarlet Woman to National Heroine

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The life of Manuela Sáenz, mistress of Simón Bolívar, has often been told. Most male authors have focused exclusively on the years she spent next to the famous independence hero, her life only considered interesting as she basked in the glory of her lover. These works, both historical and literary, have tended to highlight the more colorful anecdotes, and have made it a point to remind readers of her escapades, many of which were most likely invented or embellished. Female authors, on the other hand, have attempted to rescue Manuela as a feminist heroine in her own right, whilst Ecuadorean nationalists have taken her as their *Libertadora*, a home grown hero to worship. Pamela Murray's biography presents a dispassionate analysis of Manuela Sáenz. She brings the

character to life, showing most of the intricate details of her vibrant and complicated existence, while masterfully separating fact from fiction, by painstakingly reconstructing the times in which she lived, using all possible primary sources available. Murray paints a full portrait: she starts with her origins as the illegitimate child of wealthy creoles, detailing her upbringing in a Convent in Quito, her marriage to a wealthy and older British merchant, all the way to her years next to Bolívar. Murray even ventures on to the very seldom-explored life Manuela led after the death of her lover. Those years she spent as a political exile in the sleepy port of Paita in Peru. This biography chronicles her descent into poverty and political obscurity, as well as her attempts to remain in the political realm, ending with her death during a Diptheria epidemic and burial in a common grave. It also explores how Manuela has been remembered in what Murray calls her ‘after-life.’

With the bicentenary celebrations upon us, time is ripe for the reevaluation of the most prominent actors of the wars of independence, precisely when the tide has begun to turn on biography. Long considered unfashionable –Tulio Halperin Donghi even describing it as history, without its problems– it is now enjoying a renaissance in Latin American History. The process started with John Lynch’s acclaimed biographies of Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, and many are soon to follow. Biographies being written today, however, are not simply about the great men who did great deeds, but incorporate current scholarship on the period. This makes them much more about the study of a time and a place than just about an important character. The biography of Manuela Sáenz under review inserts itself squarely in this tradition by providing the social history grounding to the study of a particular experience. It also has much to contribute to the growing literature on gender and the understanding of the late colonial and early republican context from different vantage points.

Murray is blessed to have such rich and varied sources, many written by Sáenz herself. The very fact that her letters have survived and have been published is a testament to how important, on her own right, Sáenz actually was. When such material is absent Murray is good at finding complementary sources that fill the gaps and complete the picture. This

enhances our understanding of who this woman was, how she came to be this way, and how society at the time viewed her. The book also provides an extremely interesting and novel feminine angle from where to look at the late colonial period, the wars of independence, and the formation of the new republics. Murray pays homage to the heroes, but manages nevertheless to humanize them and bring them sharp into focus.

Although her illegitimate birth has always been part of Sáenz's legend, few authors have been so capable of recreating the world where Manuela came from and what exactly it meant, at the time, to be born out of wedlock. Murray explains in great length how it was a question of degree and the complexities of a system that often allowed men such as Manuela's father to incorporate the children born outside marriage to their households, and used them for matrimonial strategies by providing, in the case of girls, with dowries. We learn very much about the gendered ways in which colonial society operated, since the situation of Manuela's mother, an unwed Creole who disgraced her family, was very different to that of her father. In spite of this, Sáenz was later able to claim her maternal inheritance, and her political connections in the early republic made it possible for her to actually gain access to land (at least temporarily). The book provides interesting glimpses of convent life, women's education, and socialization as well as the options open to Manuela. The choice of husband, a much older British merchant, is also explored showing the limitations brought by her condition at birth.

It is when describing her relationship to her husband, and her new surroundings in Lima on the eve of independence that we finally become acquainted with an adult Manuela. We begin to understand how strong willed and intelligent she was, as she made the best possible use of her and her husband's assets, since under Spanish law women retained certain economic freedom. This allowed her to become a business partner to her husband and very soon had access not only to a very generous power of attorney which meant she could conduct business in his absence, but also made it possible for her to do so independently. At this time, Sáenz became embroiled in the cause for independence, and was rewarded by San Martín with a membership to the newly created Order of the Sun. Allegedly, she

was amongst those who convinced or 'seduced' the troops sent from Quito to defect to the independent cause in 1820. Although, as Murray points out, there is little evidence of her involvement, she did have a direct connection with the *Numancia* regiment, given that her half brother, to whom she was quite close, served there.

By the time she met the *Libertador* in Quito in 1822, Manuela was already a recognized patriot. Their paths crossed at a society ball, when she journeyed back home to claim her maternal inheritance. She became absolutely entranced by the dashing military hero at the peak of his glory. If anything, Murray leaves us yearning for more details from this period. She provides an extremely well documented description of the characters and events, and even includes some of the tender words the lovers exchanged in their letters, but we never come close enough to the spark that must have undoubtedly existed between them. The book remains level headed, never falling into the trap of turning the narrative into a romantic novel, into which it could easily descend. It ends up, however, rendering some of the story in a dry matter of fact tone that leaves the reader wanting more. To make up for this, Murray again provides a great backdrop by focusing on the social aspects of infidelity in late colonial society, on how society was affected by the context of war, and how these impacted the place elite women occupied in society.

So, was Manuela Sáenz a woman of loose morals, a social climber thirsty for power as some of her enemies portrayed her? Or was she simply a woman in love with the most important man of the time? Murray works hard to dispel these two views of her subject and succeeds to a great degree thanks, once again, to her painstaking attention to detail. She presents Sáenz as a shrewd and intelligent woman who knew how to get ahead in the world, but who at the same time was deeply in love and saw in Bolívar her reason for living. She did not think twice about leaving her husband and facing the scandal associated with becoming his 'official' mistress. She was even prepared to accept her lover's long absences and romantic escapades. What Manuela was not prepared to do was to be written off by her lover's secretaries and associates especially once she became part of his official

entourage, as the archivist. She cherished the power this gave her and used it to dispense patronage.

Sáenz became known as the *Libertadora* during her time in Peru, a title that indicated the prominent position she had come to occupy, considering she was nothing more than a mistress, something her enemies never failed to point out. Murray shows how she remained true to Bolívar, even when circumstances were adverse and when she was briefly imprisoned and deported to Colombia. She is also very good at showing how Manuela became more powerful and influential, as Bolívar faced many enemies and endeavored to maintain the union of the federation he had created. Murray casts her squarely with the Bolivarians, the officers who backed the *Libertador* and who remained linked to each other long after his death. The book is very good at showing Manuela as an actor in her own right, and provides evidence of her participation in particular events, while dispelling with some of the most outlandish claims, such as she having been present at the battle of Ayacucho.

Her time in Colombia, at the side of Bolívar, was doubtlessly the one in which she occupied the most prominent position, as the official consort of the head of state. At this point, Murray examines how emboldened by her position Manuela became. She even describes how she fought hard against her lover's enemies in the public scene, even staging a mock execution of Francisco de Paula Santander, Bolívar's greatest political enemy. Her many transgressions during this period have often been chronicled, but this book reconstructs those events critically using the sources available aiming to present a balanced analysis. This is done to great effect when describing the time in which Sáenz saved Bolívar's life and became known as the *libertadora del libertador*. Murray also shows how with time her lover came to depend more and more on her, and how she became an important political operator, as she plotted for his return during the illness that finally took him to the grave.

As much as Manuela became an independent political actor, once her man was dead she had no future. In contrast to the male Bolivarians, she had no possibility to carve a space for herself in the absence of her lover. Murray makes this very clear when she charts Saéenz's fall from grace

after 1830, first being forced out of Colombia, and then banished from Ecuador. She was surely not the only Bolivarian who had to spend time away from home after the *Libertador's* death, but it was clear that she had no further political prospects, even as her enemies feared her so much that they preferred to keep her in exile. Illuminating this seldom discussed period in Manuela's life allows Murray not only to explore her experience in full detail, but to analyze the situation of many people who had been involved in the wars of independence and were forced to come to terms with the position they had come to occupy in the new republics. This included a sense of nationality. Sáenz could have not felt Ecuadorean before 1830, even if she always identified as a Quiteña. Her long years in exile made her ever more aware of where she came from, even if she had little prospect of returning. Her time in Peru and her continuous political involvement all the way through the 1830s and 1840s is fascinating yet little known. By including this in her book Murray has shed light on a period and an area seldom discussed in the historiography, setting the scene for new reevaluations of the relationships between the newly independent republics that move away from the extremely nationalist readings of border disputes. It also shows the way in which many elite members became ever more conservative as they aged and they became disappointed with the republics they had helped create.

Although the book aspires to present Manuela as one of many, part of a generation of women like her, it is clear from very early on that the reason she became so prominent was her relationship to such a powerful man. This complicates the feminist reading of Sáenz. The fact that she managed to have such a hold over him and to assert her position, however, is a testament to her personality and tenacity. Her ability to cultivate clients and to be a kind patron and charitable friend is very well explored, showing the importance this kind of sociability had in the late colonial and early republican world. It was indeed her ability to maintain these links that gave her a lifeline during exile, first giving her the opportunity to become an informant to Ecuador's president Juan José Flores and later by providing her with patrons who helped her stay afloat when her financial circumstances became ever more strained. Murray writes extensively about

friendship, and the importance this had for Creoles of certain class in maintaining their social position in the context of turmoil. It is no coincidence that friend is the first word Murray chooses to describe the relationship between Bolívar and Manuela.

So, was Sáenz a scarlet woman or a national heroine? Murray leads us to conclude that she was to a certain degree a little bit of both, and yet much more. She was a woman who lived in extraordinary times and who came to occupy an important position, because of her relationship to a powerful man. Sáenz was nevertheless a courageous and intelligent woman who was able to hold on this position for much longer than anyone—including Bolívar—thought possible through wit, charm, and perseverance. She also proved to be able to maintain many of her relations and patrons even as she fell from grace, once again through her personal abilities. Manuela was no doubt an extraordinary woman, and Murray has done much justice to her in this biography.