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Review/Reseña

Iván Jaksić, *The Hispanic World and American Intellectual Life, 1820-1880*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Centers and Peripheries of U.S. Hispanism

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara

Fordham University

In one of his most famous sketches of New York City characters, the great *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell reported that the Greenwich Village Bohemian Joe Gould was possessed of an unusual insight into the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. “[He] translates perfectly into sea gull,” he said. ‘On the whole, to tell you the truth, I think he sounds better in

sea gull than he does in English.”¹ Spanish was apparently another language into which Lowell translated well. Lowell’s great fame in the Spanish-speaking world is perhaps the most novel finding in Iván Jaksic’s exhaustively researched and lovingly written study of nineteenth-century U.S. hispanism. Many of the figures treated here—Washington Irving, George Ticknor, William Hickling Prescott—are familiar from works by Richard Kagan and Rolena Adorno. But Jaksic convincingly shows that of these august figures Longfellow had the greatest international impact in the nineteenth century. Spaniards and Latin Americans read, commented upon, and translated his poems and essays. Travelers to the United States flocked to his Cambridge home. The poet carried on a wide correspondence with those who never made it to New England. Among his admirers and interlocutors were Dom Pedro II of Brazil, Domingo Sarmiento, Rafael Pombo, and José Martí, who translated *The Song of Hiawatha* and frequently reflected on the American’s work, even on the eve of his death in battle in 1895. The Colombian Pombo said that what characterized Longfellow’s work and made it so appealing in the Hispanic world was “a cosmopolitan spirit and heart, without limitations of race, nationality, language, time, and creed” (107). Jaksic concludes that the Yankee poet and scholar had attained an exalted position by the end of his life; he was “the bard of an emerging Spanish American sense of distinct nationality” (108).

The other surprising figure in this study is Mary Peabody Mann, a New Englander who lived in Cuba from 1833 to 1835. Her residence there inspired two works published posthumously: *Cuba Journal*, a collection of letters that she and her sister Sophia penned while living on a remote coffee plantation, and *Juanita*, an abolitionist novel about Cuban slave society. Jaksic shows that her writings bore strong prejudices shared by more famous U.S. hispanists such as Prescott. She ridiculed Catholicism on the island and despised Spanish governance and what it revealed about the Spaniards: “Despotism is simply an inherent element of the Spanish character.” (112)

¹ Joseph Mitchell, “Joe Gould’s Secret,” [1964], *Up in the Old Hotel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 646.

Mann's contemporary fame came not from her own writings, but from translations of the work of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. An admirer of the educator Horace Mann, Mary's husband, Sarmiento struck up an epistolary friendship with her when he lived in the United States as the Argentine ambassador. What resulted from their friendship was Mann's translation of Sarmiento's masterpiece, *Facundo*, under the title of *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; or, Civilization and Barbarism*. Included was Mann's lengthy and laudatory biography of Sarmiento. Critics in the U.S. received the translated work warmly, in part because, as a writer in the *Atlantic Monthly* noted, "An intelligent American can hardly read the life of this Republic and its prominent representative, without seeing in it again and again the broken image of his own country, and a new illustration of the vital energy existing in Republicanism" (119).

The "broken image of his own country" is one of the central themes of Jaksic's study, one that he pursues most closely in his chapters dedicated to the more well known titans of early U.S. hispanism: Washington Irving, George Ticknor, and William Hickling Prescott. Though these three historians have received ample attention, there can be no doubt that Jaksic has provided us with the definitive study of their writings and milieu. His research is meticulous: the Boston Public Library, the Massachusetts's Historical Society, the Harvard University Archives, and the Real Academia de la Historia Española are among the collections that the author has explored with care. Jaksic emphasizes not only the writing of their major works, such as Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, but also their reception, an aspect of hispanism that has received less attention. These chapters are a joy to read for any scholar interested in the craft of history.

The two chapters dedicated to Prescott are especially fine in their treatment of how readers in Latin America and Spain responded to the influential works of their U.S. counterpart and rival. To take the example of Mexico, scholars quickly undertook two different translations of his *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, both with ample annotations. Those involved with the Mexican editions had substantial disagreements with Prescott's work and methods. The great conservative historian Lucás

Alamán, a regular Prescott correspondent, took issue with his hostile and snide attitude toward Catholicism:

Protestant writers do suffer from this defect, especially those of the United States, who still retain the persecuting zeal of their grandparents, even when it has lost its edge among European Protestants. This zealotry can be detected in their continuous chiding of writers of a different creed, never caring to cite their opinions without slapping them with some mocking or offensive epithet. (148)

The other translation contained 124 pages of commentary by José Fernando Ramírez, who struck an *indigenista* tone in his criticisms. He objected to how Prescott favored the Spanish over the Aztec and diminished the importance of indigenous historical records. Though he admired Prescott's work as whole, Ramírez felt that it was his duty to "defend the authenticity and value of the historical sources of our country, and to vindicate the memory of our Indians." (149) One major area of discrepancy concerned how to interpret Aztec hieroglyphics. Prescott believed them to be chiefly figurative and therefore an expression of a primitive civilization; Ramírez, in contrast, insisted that they were phonetic, which would significantly elevate the Aztec.

Prescott paid considerable attention to these criticisms. His conclusions were not set in stone. He told his friend Fanny Calderón, shortly before his unexpected death, that he would revise the *History of the Conquest of Mexico* with the views of Alamán and Ramírez very much in mind: "it is a severe trial—which few historians have experienced—to be subjected to so severe a criticism, sentence by sentence, of two of the most eminent scholars of their country. Though they picked many holes in my finery, I cannot deny that they have done it in the best spirit and in the most courtly style." (151)

If the Mexican reception was critical, though collegial, Prescott could take greater comfort in how his compatriots responded to his study. Prescott opposed the war with Mexico in 1846, but he was delighted to learn that U.S. sailors and soldiers made his work standard reading. The Secretary of the Navy told him that every naval vessel carried a copy. His friend Caleb Cushing served in the army and read the book closely; he

reported that he was astounded by Prescott's accuracy as a guide for this new invasion:

The second Conquest affords many points of analogy with the first, which strike the observer on the spot. I am posted with five regiments at San Angel which adjoins Coyocán, and my rides of duty or recreation in the neighborhood afford me ample opportunity of noticing these analogies among others, the fact that General Scott originally advanced to the City by the causeway of San Antonio, and finally by that of Tacuba, though not certainly because Cortés had done the same. (154)

This mirroring effect was always present in the work of Prescott and his peers, Irving and Ticknor. The theme of imperial expansion and its unforeseen consequences was close to home in the nineteenth-century United States. Spain was the "broken image" of the U.S., though these writers were confident that their country could avoid the errors they dwelt upon in their studies of Spanish history. Spain was religiously intolerant, whereas the U.S. institutionalized religious freedom. The Spanish character was often bigoted and despotic, unlike the forward looking and rational Yankee. Jaksic convincingly shows that these oppositions had remarkable staying power over the decades in spite of real progress in historical research and writing: "The assumptions about the Spanish empire proved to be resilient, and remained in place despite the massive documentation that was now standard and commonplace among American historians. In the court of history, Spain was declared guilty in absentia; no mitigating evidence was acceptable." (185) This conclusion will be familiar to readers of Richard Kagan's influential article "Prescott's Paradigm," but Jaksic has taken us much further in our understanding because of the depth of his research and his careful reconstruction of the debates that U.S. hispanism aroused in the Spanish-speaking world.²

Upon finishing this outstanding work, one question nagged me: Did only Knickerbockers and New Englanders write about Spain and Spanish America from the fastness of New York and Boston? In the conclusion, Jaksic quotes Walt Whitman ruminating on the Spanish heritage of the United States and asking when it would be reckoned with. Such reflections

² Richard Kagan, "Prescott's Paradigm: American Historical Scholarship and the Decline of Spain," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996), 423-46

were indeed taking place, but far from the center of the expanding imperial power. New Mexico was one of the Mexican territories that the U.S. annexed through the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty in 1848. John Nieto-Phillips has shown that the large Hispanic and indigenous populations of the new territory fascinated Anglo administrators, scholars, and writers, such as Charles Fletcher Lummis, author of the widely read and translated *The Spanish Pioneers* (1893). But the new Anglo rulers did not craft an image of Spanish New Mexico in isolation; rather, they gleaned information from a wide variety of local interlocutors and publications. Lummis, for example, lived for years in Spanish and Indian villages in northern New Mexico, converting his neighbors' lives and stories into Americana. More to the point, Hispanic and indigenous New Mexicans forged their own understandings of their history and culture as they adapted to the new ruling power. In this peripheral U.S. territory, Anglos, Hispanics, and Indians debated and contested the meaning of the Spanish legacies on the republic, far from the universities, salons, and government offices of the Northeast. These contentious debates show that Hispanism was more than a design of empire; it was also the stuff of negotiations over the past and present at the edges of empire.³

³ John Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish-American Identity in New Mexico, 1880s-1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004). See also Phoebe Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Especially illuminating is Kropp's chapter on Helen Hunt Jackson and her novel of colonial encounters in California, *Ramona*, published in 1884. José Martí, translator of Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, published a translation of *Ramona* in 1888.