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### Rebecca A. Earle, Spain and the Independence of Colombia, 1810-1825

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*Spain and the Independence of Colombia, 1810-1825.* By Rebecca A. Earle. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000. ix + 254 pp. Maps, table, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. £37.50 cloth.)

This succinct book is an excellent primer for anyone working on the independence period in Latin America. It is based on extensive archival research, has exceptional balance and breadth, and is highly recommended. The author has successfully distilled the essence of a vast historiography generated by a slew of academicians from both sides of the Atlantic. So much has been written on independence that one is initially disinclined to engage the mountainous pile of works which often suffer from a myopic treatment of the underlying issues. By locating Spain at the center of her story, Rebecca Earle provides that overarching perspective missing from so many biographies of independence leaders and from the histories of the independence movement of individual Latin American countries.

How was it that Spain lost an empire that successfully withstood three hundred years of attacks and blandishments by other European powers? Was it the result of the heroic efforts of the "great" men like Simón Bolívar and other revolutionary leaders? Was it the logical outcome of an empire driven by economic and social crises? Would greater autonomy have neutralized the independence movement? Earle clearly demonstrates that it was internal conflicts, personal animosities, political incompetence, and ideological incoherence that incapacitated Spanish authority as much as any republican victory.

This is what happened in the Viceroyalty of New Granada, the subject of this case study. While Earle concentrates on the more convoluted evolution of independence in Colombia, she also explicates and integrates its denouement in Venezuela and Ecuador so that the story of independence in greater Colombia—Gran Colombia—is effectively told as well. But it is the imperial focus that gives coherence to this work and for which scholars will be indebted to Earle for its lucid framing of the larger issues of empire. In the final analysis, independence only makes sense if the story of the other side is also told.

If there is a weakness in Earle's book, it is in the author's all-too-brief discussion of local issues and how they relate to the structure and function of Spanish imperial administration. For example, the issue of local autonomy whereby every lesser ranking Colombian town fought to be free of its neighbor can only be understood in the context of how the Spanish imperial bureaucracy and financial system operated. A new parish carved out of the territorial boundaries of an older parish brought with it an increase for one and a decrease for the other in public revenues and public officials who located their administrative offices and functions in the new administrative entity. In this case, it was a question of tithe revenues and church officials,

but the example can be extended to a host of other public offices and officials, whether it was new sites for the tobacco, salt, or *aguardiente* rents or a new *corregidor*, governor, or *cabildo*. This was why the neighboring town up the road or down river was a meaningful rival and had to be kept in its place or from which escape was a worthwhile risk. Additionally, it was the reason why local elites frequently mobilized their people against other local elites rather than against the Spanish and why social and class divisions were so long in developing and were not usually the main faultlines over which war was waged. "La patria chica" was a real, not an imagined, community that gave form and substance to hundreds of *Macondos* that stretched across Colombia and made up the essence of "la patria boba."

As the imperial administration of the Spanish Empire unraveled all over Latin America, it set the stage for the struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries between Centralists and Federalists and Conservatives and Liberals. Much of this came from the bureaucratic, political, and social legacies of the Spanish Empire. Whatever the case for this or that explanation for independence, Earle's book makes for a lucid end to the colonial period and an excellent opening on the national era.

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