

**Review of Matthew Brown's  
*Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign  
Mercenaries, and the Birth of New Nations***

By Karen Racine

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Many people have tried to write this book, but Matthew Brown finally has done it properly. It is widely known that English and Irish soldiers (or mercenaries, as the title would have it), were a small but significant component of Bolívar's armies during his campaigns in northern South America. Previous historians have made sweeping references to this development, based their interpretations on the memoirs of a few standout figures, and the general assumption that a majority of the soldiers were veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. In this book, however, Brown went further than any previous attempt, and traced the actual names and service records of the recruits. It is a work of astonishing ambition and considerable labor and, through his new methodology, the author arrived at some surprising conclusions.

Matthew Brown set out to examine the personal experiences of the approximately 7,000 European adventurers who joined the armies of independence in Gran Colombia (today Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador) between 1816 and 1825. He rightly points out that the descendants of these soldiers created important links between Spanish America and Europe that significantly affected the identities, economies, and intellectual orientations of the new republics. In this way, their long-term influence is greater than numbers alone would suggest. Where previous historians focused particularly in military history or great figures (Alfred Hasbrouck, Eric Lambert), or in diplomatic and commercial relations to elucidate British informal ties in the region (Charles Webster, R. A. Humphreys), Brown is more interested in unearthing the actual human experiences of the men and their families, using their memories to shed light on the relationship between war and society in a very turbulent era. As a result, three of the book's nine chapters

are devoted to the aftermath of independence, discussing the soldiers' integration into their adopted homelands and how their contributions have been commemorated in subsequent decades.

The author assembled a database containing biographical and service records of more than 3,000 adventurers, as Brown opts to call them. One of his more surprising discoveries is that fewer of the recruits were veterans of the Napoleonic wars than was previously reported. Similarly, there were at least 150 women in the military expeditions as well. He has placed these materials on the internet for the benefit of other researchers, genealogists, and the general public. [1] Brown also convincingly argues for the emergence of a "cult of the adventurer" in the early nineteenth century, and links the recruits' enthusiasm to a renewed emphasis on military service and national identity in Britain itself during the Napoleonic wars, the influence of Romanticism and an idealized notion of liberty, and an emphasis on heroic service to the homeland (or *patria*) as an intrinsic characteristic of Atlantic masculinity. These insights reveal the author's thorough understanding of the historical experiences of his subjects as men and of contemporary cultural theory as a useful tool of analysis. Of course, in keeping with the author's intention to focus on social networks and daily struggles, it is always important to remember that the adventurousness of poor men seeking a livelihood in the armed services differs significantly from the adventurousness of the rich pursuing the same occupation. Unlike previous attempts to tell the story of the foreign adventurers, Brown skillfully gleans insight into their lives and experiences from a variety of undervalued sources: rumors,

speculations, jokes, advertisements, and squabbles.

Finally, a word about the high quality of research done for this book. Brown's work can be considered authoritative in ways that previous attempts to tell this story cannot. He vastly expanded the source base used for his history and the final result has repaid those efforts. Where previous authors generally consulted the three major English and Irish newspapers of the day, and used a handful partisan accounts and travelogues written by returning soldiers in the 1820s (both disillusioned ones and those who were still enthusiastic about the patriot cause), Brown visited twenty-two archives in six countries, utilized twenty-seven newspapers, and incorporated material from sixteen printed contemporary sources. His secondary bibliography runs over twenty-six pages and is truly impressive in its scope. It would be nitpicking to wonder if anything useful might have been gained from US-based contemporary sources, of which there were few consulted. One might also wonder how the demographics and experiences of these 7,000 soldiers compare those of the British and Irish sailors who joined with Lord Cochrane in the Chilean and Peruvian navies at the same time (a

question that understandably lies beyond the scope of Brown's goals). Nevertheless, this book is the product of extensive research, and will not likely be superseded anytime soon.

*Adventuring through Spanish Colonies* is an ambitious and successful book. The author has a keen eye for detail, a comprehensive understanding of the era's complex politics and ever-changing roster of characters, and an awareness of the topic's larger significance for the historiography of the era. As Brown wrote, the age of the great Atlantic revolutions consisted of a number of interrelated events linked by ideology, trade, geopolitics, individuals, and warfare. By presenting the historical profession with a carefully researched, engaging study that sheds light on each one of those aspects, Matthew Brown has provided a solid foundation for moving the scholarship in different directions. In short, this book is a much-needed corrective to earlier, more speculative accounts of the British and Irish recruits in Gran Colombia's independence armies.

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### Notes

[1] <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hispanic/latin/research.html>

### Author's Reply

I am very grateful to Karen Racine for her generous review of my book. Her comment about the omission of US-based sources is fair and well-made. I would have liked to have consulted the Illingworth papers in Indiana, for example, but I had to stop somewhere. US newspapers from the period also contain plenty of detail recording the passage of adventurers on their ways to or from Europe and South America, and a thorough analysis of those papers would have been very helpful I am

certain. Regarding a potential comparison with the adventurers who served under Lord Cochrane in Chile and Peru, my understanding is that they were a completely different group, with much naval experience behind them before they arrived in Chile - but careful revision of their Chilean documents, and cross-referencing with the archives in Kew, may well find this also to be a mistaken impression.

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