

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 12

Issue 3 *Volume 12, Issue 3 (Summer 2003)*

Article 5

6-1-2003

Aline Helg, Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835

Alan L. Karras

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Karras, Alan L.. "Aline Helg, Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 12, 3 (2003): 346. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol12/iss3/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

settlements. Frustrated, five or six of the eleven Franciscans departed within the first year.

Williams never explains convincingly why the Citará in particular proved so resistant to the teachings of the Franciscans. In fact, we learn little about the motivations, aspirations, beliefs, or concerns of the Citará themselves. Furthermore, in a region with more African slaves than Spaniards, it is curious that Williams does not mention more about the relationships between Indians and Africans. These shortcomings perhaps stem from the nature of the evidence, or lack thereof. Williams is correct to lament the paucity of documentary evidence for the Chocó. Unlike other regions of the Americas where the examination of native accounts has led to fascinating new perspectives on the colonial period, scholars who work on colonial New Granada must rely almost exclusively on Spanish records. However, it should be noted that Williams' findings are based on archival material from the AGI in Seville; she also had access at the University of Warwick to the entire microfilmed collection of the *Fondo Caciques e Indios* (seventy-eight *legajos*) from Colombia's national archives (AGNC). It is unfortunate that Williams was unable to conduct archival work in Colombia; an examination of the AGNC's general catalogue reveals hundreds of documents that focus on the Chocó and the Citará Indians, including lengthy reports on the status of the region's missions written by the Franciscans José de Córdoba (1680) and Bernardo Guarín (1726-1754). Furthermore, it is likely that much more material exists in archives in Popayán and Antioquia. How these documents will be considered in the context of Williams' findings remains to be seen, but their existence offers exciting possibilities and should encourage future scholarship.

In spite of these criticisms, Williams should be commended for this pioneering study. *Between Resistance and Adaptation* is a welcome contribution to the historiography of colonial New Granada and an important initial step to understanding a region that has received very little scholarly attention.

J. Michael Francis
Department of History
University of North Florida

Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835. By Aline Helg. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiv + 363 pp. Illustrations, maps, chart, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth, \$22.50 paper.)

Aline Helg has produced a fine work of Atlantic history. This well-researched book provides a wealth of information on one of the region's least known areas. The author has, moreover, gone to some lengths to locate her

work within several different historiographies. Though scholars of Latin America will be familiar with some of the information presented here, especially concerning the wars for independence, these scholars will also glean a great deal about how events elsewhere in the Caribbean basin affected the Caribbean provinces of New Granada (and, later, Gran Colombia). Just as importantly, regional scholars—particularly those of the British and French Atlantic—will gain access to a hitherto unknown story that will help them to reshape their own historical narratives.

Helg's six chapters can be grouped into two sections; the first provides the context for the second. The first section, consisting of three chapters, describes the colonial backwater that was Caribbean Colombia in the late eighteenth century. Each takes on the region from a slightly different perspective. Chapter One, entitled "Frontiers," details the relationship between the region's native population and its settlers. It also describes the frontier quality of settlement—geographically isolated from the rest of New Granada, peripheral to its economic activity, but not an insignificant player in the larger regional pattern of illegal trade. The following chapter, entitled "Countryside," is more or less a social history of the people who lived in this region—people of various races who found themselves trying to eke out a living in an isolated region. The third chapter, "Cities," is a discussion of urban life; it includes a clear description of the rivalries between the cities as well as explanations for these conflicts.

The second section, also consisting of three chapters, builds upon the context provided in the first half of the book. Moving the region's story forward into the nineteenth century, these chapters explore Caribbean Colombia's relationship with the emerging nationalist enterprise in northern South America. Simón Bolívar is a central character in these chapters, and nationalist rhetoric interacts with the region's divergent population groups. In these chapters, the author paints portraits of the region's leaders, especially as they interacted with the familiar figures of independence. Though these chapters are analytical in tone, they sometimes become more focused on narrative than one might prefer. For example, the rivalry between José Padilla and Mariano Montilla becomes a gripping story of a personality clash. But it was more than that, as Helg explains. It represented one of the central conflicts to emerge in the era of independence: that between those of mixed race and the Creole elites. This analytical approach could have been both strengthened and broadened into the rest of the Atlantic World.

Indeed, this is one of the two areas where the book could have been improved. The author gets so involved in presenting unfamiliar archival sources to us that she sometimes loses sight of the larger arguments she intends to make. Readers must therefore do that work themselves. Helg wants readers to see the "historical development of Caribbean Colombia within the comparative perspective of the Americas" (p. 13). In order to do this, she might more closely have integrated what took place in Caribbean Colombia with what transpired across the rest of the region. Mentioning Haiti and

Venezuela is certainly a very good start, but readers won't come away with as clear a sense of the contested application of *ideas* of independence and liberty as they would with an extended discussion of such ideas in the British and French Atlantic colonies (or, indeed, of European Enlightenment ideology). As was true elsewhere in the Americas, little changed for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Caribbean Colombia, despite their significant participation in movements designed to affect change. Though the hemispheric perspective remains underdeveloped, readers should get a sense that while Cartagena and Santa María were peripheral to Latin American independence movements, the ideas discussed there put the region at the center of a hemispheric debate over the nature of independence in a socially and economically stratified society. As a result, this book provides important information for those working in the regions throughout the Atlantic World after 1750; it deserves a wide readership for that reason alone.

Alan L. Karras
International and Area Studies
University of California, Berkeley

Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759-1789.
 By Stanley J. Stein and Barbara H. Stein. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003. ix + 464 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$52.00 cloth.)

This long, difficult, but ultimately valuable and rewarding book is divided into two parts. Part One, "Stalemate in the Metropole," examines the situation in Spain that Charles III faced when he arrived there in 1759 to ascend the throne. With considerable and successful reformist policies in Naples behind him, and a team of experienced Italian ministers to help him, the prospects had at first seemed promising. Part Two, "The Colonial Option," about twice as long as Part One, discusses colonial policy with particular reference to New Spain, *comercio libre*, and the French family alliance with its advantages and difficulties. This section, in the main, follows the first part chronologically and emphasizes the years after the fall of Esquilache, the king's chief minister.

The explicit background to this work is the enormous battle for Atlantic supremacy among Spain, France, and England. All had to renovate and be innovative in their finances, commerce, and even, to some extent, their social structures, if they were to emerge ahead of the two rivals. Much of the book describes and discusses the failure of Spain's monarchy to do so.

The authors characterize Charles III as a gradualist and compromiser, but his experiences as ruler in Naples for some twenty-five years suggested that he could also get things done. The problems he found in Spain were, however, of a different order. Spain had depended on simple bullionism for