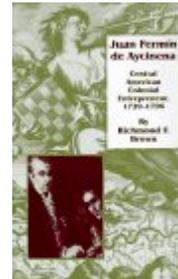


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richmond F. Brown. *Juan Fermin de Aycinena: Central American Colonial Entrepreneur 1729-1796.* Norman, Okla. and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. xvii + 298 pp. \$34.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2948-8.



Reviewed by Stephen Homick (Champlain College)

Published on H-LatAm (February, 1998)

Even in our postmodern age, when the “history of people without a history” claims pride of place in the historiographical canon, biographies of the past’s movers and shakers, of the great men and women whose lives and deeds helped put sinew on the bones of years gone by, appear with a studied regularity. That they should do so really comes as no great surprise. Only those possessed of the resources, leisure, and the downright vanity had the ability to insure that their *res gestae* were recorded for posterity. Expectedly, public repositories and private collections abound in the often as not copious, cluttered paper trails they left behind.

A contemporary Suetonius or Plutarch, skilled in his or her biographical craft, will make sense of this disparate, disorganized documentation, and weave it into an enlightening account not only of its protagonist but of the times in which he or she lived, as well. And Richmond Brown carries out these far from simple chores with both success and poise in his splendid biography of Juan Fermin de Aycinena, the Navarrese immigrant whose exploits played a signal, abiding role in shaping the trajectory of Guatemalan history.

Written in a clear, concise, pleasing style, Professor Brown’s study does not disappoint the reader in meeting the objectives its author set forth. Indeed, it exceeds them, and furnishes a nuanced, multi-dimensional portrait of late colonial Guatemala, a province of Spain’s

far-flung American dominions hitherto not extensively treated in the historical literature. Picking up the gauntlet thrown down by Mario Rodriguez and Troy Floyd years ago, Professor Brown has succeeded admirably in doing biographical justice to Aycinena, as well as in using his extraordinary career as a point of departure for understanding the dynamic social, political and economic milieu through which it ran its course.

Beyond these general goals, Professor Brown addresses a number of specific questions. He seeks, among other things, to find out how this son of northern Spain’s Basque-Navarrese “hidalgo belt” managed to “hacer America” in extraordinarily quick order, thereby amassing a fortune respectable enough to make any Croesus take note, in addition to status and political pull sufficient to raise the eyebrows of any despot, enlightened or not. And correlatively, Professor Brown endeavors to determine the uses to which Aycinena employed his wealth and influence and the measures he took to preserve them. In the last instance, those traits which made this American magnate unique and the light his life and times shed on the late colonial history of Central America round out Professor Brown’s investigative agenda.

In seeking the answers Professor Brown culled a substantial corpus of privately-held Aycinena family papers, along with a no less extensive body of notarial records, housed in Guatemala’s Archivo General de Centroamer-

ica. Complementing these documents, he also consulted several Mexican repositories, which include the Archivo General de la Nacion and the Archivo General de Notarias del Departamento del Distrito Federal in Mexico City, and the general and notarial archives of the State of Oaxaca. Additionally, Professor Brown researched the Yraeta-Yturbe Merchant Papers held by the Universidad Iberoamericana, Princeton University and the New York Public Library.

From this impressive documentary base, Professor Brown proceeds to craft an engaging, insightful biography of Juan Fermin de Aycinena, always taking care to frame his protagonist's life in the general context of eighteenth-century Guatemala. A prefatory description of the historical backdrop, due attention being given to its principal social, economic, and political features, leads into a detailed examination of Aycinena's meteoric rise to power and influence, which occupies Chapters Two and Three. Here the reader learns of his Navarrese origins, early experience in Mexico, arrival in Guatemala, and subsequent entry into the upper strata of colonial society.

The shrewd business dealings that catapulted Juan Fermin de Aycinena to the apex of the Guatemalan social pyramid are examined in fine detail throughout the fourth and fifth chapters. Professor Brown has done yeoman's service in gathering together, sorting out, and analyzing several inventories of Aycinena's estate and the fruits of his painstaking labors reward the reader with a clear insightful analysis. By diligently working within existing social constraints, Aycinena managed to make the transition from an immigrant newcomer to a pillar of society with exceptional ease and in a notably short period of time.

Chapters Six and Seven untangle the intricate web of Aycinena's felicitous relations with those indispensable instruments of Spain's American empire, the church and

the royal government. Professor Brown's findings generally are in tune with the substantial body of existing literature on the colonial elite, and afford further evidence of the harmonious intermingling of individual and government interests that underpinned the imperial regime's remarkable longevity in the Spanish Indies.

In the subsequent chapter, on the other hand, Professor Brown probes how Aycinena strove to secure his family's exalted status for succeeding generations. His analysis throws into sharp relief the collective outlook of the colonial aristocracy and the way it shaped the behavior of its individual constituents, while imparting as well a deeper, more vivid meaning to that old Spanish saw, "Muera el hombre, viva el nombre." The final chapters comment on Aycinena's legacy to Guatemalan history and furnish a succinct conclusion.

There is little in Professor Brown's well-crafted study with which this reviewer can find fault. Though he has a quibble or two, as any reviewer is bound to have, these are trifling and more the product of his personal preferences than of any flaws in the work. For one thing, a broader reading in the social and economic history of eighteenth-century Spain would have given the book greater depth and balance. For another, while Professor Brown discusses Aycinena's dealings with some of the major actors in the pivotal circum-Caribbean trade zone, his discussion piques but does not satisfy one's curiosity.

But these minor blemishes in no way dim the luster of this most welcome addition to the growing body of historical writing on the late Spanish Empire. It certainly is deserving of "two thumbs up" from this reviewer, who recommends the book to students, specialists and interested general readers.

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Citation: Stephen Homick. Review of Brown, Richmond F., *Juan Fermin de Aycinena: Central American Colonial Entrepreneur 1729-1796*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

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