

COLIN A. PALMER: *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Writing a biography is probably the most difficult task that any historian can undertake. In every historical character there are private and public dimensions and an infinite number of elements, including ideas, circumstantial actions, and secrets that can easily be overlooked or overstated and can divert the biographer from his objective. With this book Colin A. Palmer offers us a significant study of the most important period in the life of Eric Williams, whom I can only introduce – for personal reasons – as the author of *Capitalism and Slavery*, one of those books that leaves an indelible mark in any person, scholar or not, who happens to come across a copy.

As a scholar they hardly come more influential, but Williams was not only a scholar, he was also a clever, cunning politician who had a tremendous impact on the modern development of the Caribbean, especially the British Caribbean. Williams, by chance or by his own decision, became a sort of shepherd who guided his two small islands in the Eastern Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago, into a new era of independence and self-determination. Reading the pages of this book the reader will often identify with Williams' struggle and with his desire to assert that necessary, indispensable sovereignty that he and many other intellectuals in the colonial British West Indies were anxious to achieve.

From the *Massa Day Done* speech to his unalterable attention to his African past and to the Caribbean-African connection, Palmer dissects Williams' attitudes, beliefs, concerns, and actions, showing us a man engaged in a personal crusade against neo-colonialism and modern imperialism. Perhaps this is clearest in Chapter 3, "The Struggle for Chaguaramas," where Palmer is keen to depict the Trinidadian politician's abilities as a diplomat as well as his character flaws that emerged when he had to deal with the various factions within and outside his country who wanted to reach an agreement that did not conform to his idea of an honorable solution.

Palmer also follows Williams' career as an international leader: first in attempting to create a long-lasting Caribbean federation of ex-colonial nations, later while courting the neighboring Grenada, and finally during his tour of Africa. It is especially in these chapters that the human side of the intellectual comes to life. His political wrestling with the leaders of other Caribbean nations and his African correspondence are crystal clear examples that demonstrate his perception of world affairs and his commitment to creating a better future for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean in general, and Africa. Despite limitations, which Palmer believes to be indissolubly tied to the size and economic importance of Trinidad and Tobago, Williams managed to create,

with his presence and his words, a positive impression in most of the African countries he visited.

This book highlights the various assessments of transatlantic slavery and the slave trade made by Williams here and there. I suspect that many of us were not aware of these assessments. Indeed, it is one thing to be familiar with *Capitalism and Slavery*, but quite another to read about the author's opinion regarding the will of African scholars to forget about the dark days of their past and to hand over to white scholars of the developed world the task of writing their history. Williams himself expressed his opinion in a speech at the Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa, "It is almost as if Africans have been upset by their previous history and seek by the simple formula of forgetting slavery to behave as if it didn't exist at all...you cannot remain satisfied by what has been done by European scholars, or American scholars or by West Indian scholars" (p. 247).

Williams the politician, Williams the prophet, and Williams the historian are all one in this outstanding biographical study. Colin A. Palmer's analysis is remarkable for the depth of research matched only by the wide range of issues that are treated within a few hundred pages. For any scholar interested in the history of transatlantic slavery or the early postcolonial Caribbean, and for any one interested in a new take on the dependency theory—one that may win a few people over—this book is a must-read gem.

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MARCELO ROUGIER y JORGE SCHVARZER: *Las grandes empresas no mueren de pie: el (o)caso de SIAM*. Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2006.

SIAM-Di Tella, once Latin America's greatest industrial conglomerate, has long been considered by historians of Argentina to be a company whose fortunes served as a cautionary tale on the country's industrialization. The firm's size and importance were so great that it even merited consideration by an eminent American business historian and an Argentine social scientist in the 1960s, when dependency and modernization theories competed as explanatory paradigms for Latin American underdevelopment. This tension was revealed in their collaboration: Thomas C. Cochran and Rubén Reina, "Capitalism in Argentine Culture: A Study of Torcuato Di Tella and S.I.A.M." Whereas Cochran and Reina tended to celebrate SIAM-Di Tella's accomplishments while also noting its inability to stay competitive at the international level, a new book on the firm's history by Marcelo Rougier and Jorge Schvarzer stresses its failures and inexorable demise,

culminating with the company's complete liquidation in 1994 at the height of President Carlos Menem's neo-liberal restructuring program.

In truth, the Menem years only finished off a firm that by then was a virtual corpse, a mere shadow of the dynamic, enterprising company founded by the Italian immigrant Torcuato Di Tella on the eve of the First World War. Aided by the availability of a welter of new primary sources, especially from the country's public banks, Argentina's two most accomplished economics historians study SIAM with unprecedented rigor and detail, providing the definitive history of the firm. Rougier and Schvarzer essentially pick up the narrative where Cochran and Reina leave off, ceding to the latter most of the rags-to-riches story and the phenomenal growth of the company under the guidance of its gifted and ambitious founder.

This new book begins chronologically in the year 1960, with Torcuato Di Tella now dead and SIAM in the hands of less able administrators but still a formidable player in the national economy. Yet liabilities were already apparent that would weigh ever more heavily on SIAM and ultimately seal its fate. The year 1960 saw the company continuing to expand into new lines of production, including automotive manufacturing. In some ways this diversification was a sign of continued vigor and entrepreneurial drive, though in other ways it indicated weakness as the firm over-expanded and financed activities beyond its profits and stock market value, resorting repeatedly to help from foreign and especially Argentine public banks. By the middle of the decade, the firm's indebtedness had already reached a critical stage. The second part of the book recounts the painful story of a once great firm left to hang, battered by macro-economic policies of the 1976-83 military government and receiving hardly any interest from its democratic successors. The book concludes with an almost nostalgic look back at SIAM's early spectacular successes and golden years through the Perón years, placed somewhat curiously at the end of the book, I assume, to highlight the dramatic subsequent decline of the company so devastatingly analyzed by the authors in the first two-thirds of their study.

Distilled in their analysis is not only the history of this one flagship firm, but that of the entire trajectory of Argentina's postwar capitalism. Well studied is the desultory role of the state, a source of much needed capital but at the price of constant meddling and the frequent subordination of business decisions to more strictly political ones. The Di Tella family had a particularly interesting and complicated relationship with Peronism, beginning with the company founder, Torcuato Di Tella, and the rise of Perón in the early 1940s through the Peronist restoration of the early 1970s, when Guido Di Tella, successor to his father as company president, publicly identified himself as a Peronist and even accompanied Perón in the airplane that returned the old *caudillo* from exile. The

company's relationship with the state, the public banks, and the government's macro economic policies were particularly intense during the years of Peronist government, but the truth is only in degree.

Rougier and Schvarzer document the history of a firm that, notwithstanding the political complexion of the government in power, increasingly relied on the state to salvage a market position and fend off threats coming from changes in the international economy and the country's extraordinarily volatile political life that were inexorably working against the company. There was no absence of entrepreneurship in this process and, indeed, SIAM demonstrated a remarkable energy in spinning off new companies and entering into licensing agreements to maintain its status as the country's premier industrial firm. There is an element of tragedy in SIAM's protracted demise. The authors certainly leave the impression that the onus for the firm's sad fate lies more heavily with the state than with SIAM. The firm responded and took advantage of opportunities presented by the country's economic policies but did not create them. The failure of the Argentine ruling class and public authorities to devise a coherent and sustainable project of industrial development, unlike the case of Brazil, explains why not just this firm but what was once Latin America's largest, most diverse and apparently most promising industrial economy lies in shambles today. Not just a book to be read by historians and scholars, it should be required reading for all those in Argentina's public life responsible for rebuilding the country and putting it on a solid economic foundation. It is a cautionary tale indeed, one that might provide some much needed careful reflection on the causes of Argentina's decline.

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JENS R. HENTSCHE (ed.): *Vargas and Brazil: New Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Getúlio Vargas dominated Brazilian politics during the middle of the twentieth century and cast his shadow on the country even after his death. After his rise to national power as a provisional ruler in 1930, he was transformed into an indirectly elected president in 1934; he ruled as a dictator from 1937 to 1945, and finally was a democratically elected populist president from 1951 until his death in 1954. In this excellent compilation, Jens R. Hentschke brings together a diverse group of scholars to shed light on some little studied aspects of the period. Supplemented by a helpful glossary of selected terms that appear throughout the book, this provocative volume invites further discussion on Vargas' role in Brazilian history.