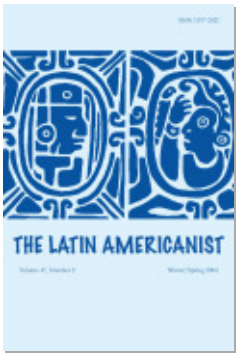
Recollections of Mexico: The Last Ten Months of Maximilian's Empire by Samuel Basch (review)



Michael R. Hall

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BOOK REVIEWS

Basch, Samuel. *Recollections of Mexico: The Last Ten Months of Maximilian's Empire*. Edited and Translated by Fred D. Ullman. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001.

Samuel Basch (1837-1905), an obscure, German-speaking medical doctor born in Prague, followed the example of many subjects of the Austrian Empire in 1866 and volunteered for service in Mexico under Maximilian von Hapsburg. Maximilian, the younger brother of Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, had been persuaded to take the throne of Mexico in 1864 as part of Napoleon III's plan to establish a Roman Catholic, French-influenced empire in Mexico as a countervailing force to the expanding United States of America. Although Basch initially served in a French field hospital in Puebla, within a few months he was selected to be the personal physician of Emperor Maximilian. Maximilian's health, plagued by malaria and intestinal problems, suffered greatly in Mexico. Basch, who was eventually knighted by Emperor Franz Joseph for his services to Maximilian, quickly became the confidant and close companion of the hapless emperor. Basch kept daily notes and astutely observed court intrigue. When Maximilian and Basch were taken prisoner by the Liberals in Querétaro, the emperor asked Basch to write down his recollections of the events so as to present Maximilian's version of the events leading to his execution. *Recollections of Mexico: The Last Ten Months of Maximilian's Empire*, written in 1868, is Basch's chronicle of the final months of Maximilian in power leading up to the defeat of his army, his capture, and execution by firing squad on 19 June 1867. Basch strove for historical objectivity, stating: "The events described herein are intended to be a new public contribution to the history of the Mexican Empire. I have seen and experienced these events during the most memorable months of my life" (p. xxi).

Basch's style is detached, yet sentimental. Maximilian is portrayed by Basch as a shrewd, yet often naive, political figure. Basch admired Maximilian's aristocratic sense of honor and dignity as well as his personal courage in the face of danger. Basch explains how Maximilian restored Chapultapec Castle, the royal residence and former palace of the viceroys of Mexico, to its former grandeur after it had been greatly damaged by the troops of Winfield Scott during the U.S. invasion of Mexico City

in 1847. Basch contends that Maximilian was betrayed by both the French and many of his Mexican Conservative allies. Faced with problems at home and on his Eastern frontier, as well as the threat of 25,000 US troops on the Mexican border providing supplies to the Liberals, Napoleon III abandoned Maximilian in 1866. Rather than return to Europe with his wife, the Belgian-born Carlota, Maximilian chose to remain in Mexico. His decision to stay continues to puzzle historians. Although his reason for staying is not resolved in Basch's memoirs, the sequence of events does facilitate the study of this important period of history. Maximilian is portrayed as an ineffectual, yet conscientious and well-meaning person. Passages dealing with the emperor's pending execution are the most sentimental and biased. According to Basch, "The way the entire trail was initiated and conducted, Emperor Max was not condemned by the legal verdict of a judge. On the contrary, he was murdered." (p. 257). Perhaps the most interesting revelation in Basch's study, however, is the assertion that there were significant numbers of Mexicans involved in the French scheme. It was not merely a case of foreign imperialism as portrayed in many Mexican history texts.

Basch's recollections of the last ten month's of Maximilian's life have been translated from the original German by Fred D. Ullman, a distant relative of Basch who is a "linguist and historian by avocation" (p. xvii). Ullman's wife, Sally, found the original document on microfilm in the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Fascinated by this historical figure, Ullman decided to translate Basch's memoirs. Ullman has augmented Basch's work with brief annotations and comments, maps, and photographs of many of the important characters named in the book. The family historian of the Hapsburgs, Archduke Michael, facilitated Ullman's editing process by providing names and background information on many of the important people who were incompletely mentioned in Basch's memoirs. An extensive table of contents allows the reader interested in a specific moment during the last ten months of the emperor's reign to immediately locate the passage.

Although the book provides the reader with a valuable historical memoir, the two-page introduction by University of Arizona History Professor William Beezley and the four-page general background introduction by the editor fail to sufficiently place this important study in historical perspective. Other historians have taken similar memoirs and provided analytical introductions that place their primary source in an historical context that creates a meaningful learning aid for students. For example,

Lawrence Clayton, the editor of *The March to Monterrey: The Diary of Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth, U.S. Army: A Narrative of Troop Movements and Observations on Daily Life with General Zachary Taylor's Army*, provides the reader with a thorough commentary about an Ohio man who fought in the Mexican-American War. This analytical commentary is missing in the book under review. Nevertheless, Ullman's translation provides the student of nineteenth century Mexican history with an important document that sheds light on one of the most controversial figures in Mexican history.

Michael R. Hall
Armstrong Atlantic State University

Voekel, Pamela. *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Pp. 336. $29.43.)

Voekel provides an intriguing argument concerning the influence of Enlightenment ideals in Mexico. Her argument is intriguing because it counters the traditional notion of Enlightenment influence in Latin America as essentially secular. Between 1790 and 1850 the Catholic Church in Mexico came under the influence of Enlightenment ideals, which the author loosely cloaks within the term "reason." What makes Voekel's argument unique is that she finds the acceptance of these ideals by the Catholic Church in Mexico as initially instrumental rather than theological.

The instrumental aspect of this transformation stems from the change in burial practices in Veracruz and Mexico City. The practice of burying the dead underneath churches and other religious buildings, in congruence with the rise of modern medicine, came into question. Doctors began to document how disease spread from the unsanitary practices involving the entombing of corpses underneath public buildings. In the early 1790s the Catholic Church began to accept the practice of burying the dead in suburban cemeteries on the basis of promoting public health. However, this movement towards burial in suburban cemeteries met opposition from wealthy citizens for whom such burial practices meant the loss of an important symbol of status. Burial under a religious building such as church, convent, or shrine, was accorded to the wealthy, the elite, and the clergy. The author notes, with numerous historical examples, the immense pomp and