

## REFERENCING THE REGION

*Aaron Segal*

*University of Texas at El Paso*

- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 1, 1981–1982. Edited by Jack Hopkins. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983. Pp. 1000. \$250.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 2, 1982–1983. Edited by Jack Hopkins. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984. Pp. 1000. \$250.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 3, 1983–1984. Edited by Jack Hopkins. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986. Pp. 1000. \$250.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 4, 1984–1985. Edited by Jack Hopkins. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986. Pp. 1000. \$250.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 5, 1985–1986. Edited by Abraham F. Lowenthal. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988. Pp. 1076. \$300.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 6, 1986–1987. Edited by Abraham F. Lowenthal. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989. Pp. 1206. \$380.00.)
- LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY RECORD*. Volume 7, 1987–1988. Edited by James M. Malloy and Eduardo A. Gamarra. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990. Pp. 1029. \$380.00.)

Does the field of Latin American and Caribbean studies need an expensive annual reference series combining in-depth topical essays, country-by-country analyses of events and trends, and selected official documents and economic and social data? The seven volumes of the *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record (LACCR)*, covering the period from 1981 to 1988, average more than a thousand pages and three pounds each. What has been the effective contribution to scholarship and general understanding of the region of this prodigious effort?

But first, given the tightness of library budgets, one must ask the question, what is the competition? The answer is, there is none. No annual reference volume in English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, Dutch, or any other language provides comparable coverage of Latin America and

the Caribbean. The annual *South American Handbook* published in England is an in-depth cornucopia of travel and country background information based on visitors' accounts, but it lacks analysis. While it is eminently useful for finding reasonably priced hotels and restaurants in out-of-the-way places, *South American Handbook* offers little help with current politics and economics. Its recent handbook on the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico is a worthy travel guide but nothing more.

Several recent electronic data banks make it possible to survey published material by country and by subject over a wide range of sources in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. *Info-South*, available from the North-South Center at the University of Miami, is the most recent database, offering abstracts from three hundred periodicals available on-line to clients. The University of New Mexico provides a more selective abstract service of leading Latin American and U.S. newspapers via the Latin America Data Base. The *Hispanic American Periodicals Index* (HAPI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, publishes an annual volume that surveys much of the scholarly literature on the region and is now on-line. Finally, the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, prepared by the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress, includes annotated bibliographic citations by topic and is now available on-line and in print.

Although each of these reference sources serves useful research and bibliographic purposes, none is comparable with the *LACCR*. The *LACCR* alone provides a year-by-year and country-by-country review, an indispensable service to future historians, especially where local newspapers are limited or unavailable. Only the *LACCR* compiles significant national and regional documents, from the Constitution of Belize to Fidel Castro's address to the Continental Debt Conference held in Havana in 1985. Most important, only the *LACCR* contains a series of wide-ranging essays by area specialists on topics ranging from U.S.-Latin American relations to the role of the Catholic Church. Finally, the *LACCR* pulls together social and economic data from the Inter-American Development Bank, U.S. government agencies, and other sources.

The origins and rationale of the *LACCR* came out of experiences outside the region. In 1969 Colin Legum, a well-known journalist and specialist on Africa, began compiling an annual reference volume entitled *Africa Contemporary Record* (*ACR*). He initiated the format of country-by-country reviews, documents, data sets, and topical essays. During his editorship of more than twenty years, the *ACR* became an indispensable reference tool for academics, journalists, and anyone else interested in Africa. The dearth of published information on many African countries, complicated by the murkiness of current events, made the *ACR*'s country reviews a critical source consulted by analysts and historians alike. Legum single-handedly created and nurtured the *ACR*, aided by a small, London-based staff that published a series of reports on Africa. His recent

retirement and the transfer of publishing operations to the United States have presented serious problems.

The *Middle East Contemporary Survey* was launched in 1976, based on an editorial collaboration between Colin Legum and the Institute of Middle East Studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a major research center. This series adopted the same editorial format as the *ACR*, but *Middle East Contemporary Survey* is largely an in-house effort supported by a single area-studies center. Both volumes are distributed by Holmes and Meier, a reputable New York publisher of academic titles.

Thus the origins and precedents for the *LACCR* arose from successful track records by similar volumes on Africa and the Middle East. Experience has shown that these volumes need to be timely, topical, accurate, and reliable—and they require a well-constructed index for easy use. Such volumes also need to be more than a compilation of facts and events. Each one should include analysis and discussion of significant events and trends during the past year. Yet each volume should also be useful years later to readers checking on specific events in particular countries as well as overall trends. The title description as a contemporary record implies a reference volume of value to historians and social scientists—those interested in the record of what happened soon after the event.

As noted, the *LACCR* too adopted the format used effectively in the *ACR*. Each volume contains about twenty essays of fifteen to twenty pages on topical subjects that are mostly economic and political in nature. Thirty or more review essays of ten to twenty pages cover individual countries in most of Latin America and the Caribbean. These country analyses form the heart of the series for reference purposes, especially for smaller and less-known places. Where else can one go for an analysis of what happened in Paraguay or Suriname in 1983? The two hundred to three hundred pages of documents drawn from national governments and international organizations are often excerpted without introductory context or explanation. Fifty to one hundred pages of selected economic and social data focus on trade, investment, and debt. The first four volumes of the *LACCR* contain a section of one-paragraph abstracts of new books, most of them published in English. Finally, each volume has a name index and a subject index.

Before evaluating seven years of *LACCR* volumes, explanation is in order about the logistics of production. Putting together an annual volume of this kind requires an editorial and research staff larger than sales to libraries can underwrite. Colin Legum managed to assemble the *ACR* in London with a journalistic staff churning out other publications on Africa on a commercial basis. The *LACCR* has tried valiantly to combine university subsidies and use of student interns at Indiana University, the University of Southern California and the University of Pittsburgh. These efforts, however, have presented major problems in production and other areas.

Production has been already relocated three times, and a viable permanent home is still not in sight. Contributors have been forthcoming, but the daily tasks of editing, research, and verification have been a constant headache. Unlike the situation with the *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, no single Latin American studies center has been willing to take on the *LACCR* as a permanent responsibility. Rotating editorships and production hurt continuity, production schedules, and distribution. Moreover, conflicts in schedules inevitably arise when using students as staff members. In sum, putting together the *LACCR*, with its more than a thousand pages of information on more than forty countries, all on a yearly basis is far more demanding than publishing most academic journals.

All these difficulties must be taken into account in attempting to make a balanced and fair evaluation of the *LACCR*, along with several other factors. This series came on the market at a time when library budgets were being cut or falling behind inflation. Moreover, the *LACCR* has had to compete for dwindling library funds with electronic on-line sources. Forced to rely on student rather than professional help, the series has been moved three times in seven years under four different editors. Thus the seven volumes of the *LACCR*, even with their flaws, represent a remarkable achievement. They constitute a contemporary record spanning nearly a decade for the entire region, as editors, contributors, and staff produced the stuff of history. Taken together, the seven volumes add significantly to understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean during the 1980s.

To evaluate the *LACCR* section by section, one naturally begins with the book-length topical essays in each volume. The twenty or so essays are mostly written by academics living in the United States (like the fifty-five to sixty contributors), and the majority are political scientists. Nearly 40 percent of the essays deal with aspects of U.S.–Latin American relations, many of them overlapping with material found in the individual country reviews. Thus far, the *LACCR* has yet to publish essays on the environment, urban problems, the private sector, popular culture, or the arts or humanities in general. The overemphasis on political science in the essay section unfortunately limits its usefulness.

Although the essay section overdoses on U.S.–Latin American relations, several outstanding contributions have appeared. For instance, Volume 2 contains a first-rate detailed account of the operations of the Falklands War, a thorough examination of the workings of the public enterprise sector, and a thoughtful discussion of relations between church and state. Volume 3 contains five first-rate essays: an excellent survey of women and politics in Latin America, an informative review of international migration in the region, a very useful essay on relations with the European Community, an insightful analysis of federalism in Brazil, and a detailed examination of Mexican-U.S. agricultural trade.

Each essay section is a collection of individually commissioned contributions, but without any theme or even coherence. Volume 4 is the most far-reaching and stimulating in its range of topics, which include nuclear energy and proliferation, the Caribbean Basin Initiative, elite U.S. newspaper coverage of Latin America, Caribbean migration, and Israeli relations with Latin America. Each of these original topics is treated in an analytical rather than topical manner. These essays go well beyond the information contained in the country reviews to make a contribution to scholarship. Unfortunately, the other thirteen essays in Volume 4 are either weak on analysis or repeat what is found in the country chapters.

Volume 5 contains one exceptional essay, perhaps the best in the entire series, although not much else. Jane Jacqueline's original essay on the women's movements in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, based on interviews and primary sources, is rich in insights and information. This single essay demonstrates that an annual reference volume frequently bogged down in the pedestrian chronicling of events can provide a forum for important scholarship. Unfortunately, the other ten essays in Volume 5 are tedious and redundant, especially the five on U.S.–Latin American relations.

The ten essays in Volume 6 include two strong efforts: a comprehensive survey of Latin American insurgencies and a follow-up and valuable analysis of the Catholic Church. Yet one also finds five essays on U.S.–Latin American relations, all reflecting the same viewpoint hostile to the Reagan administration. One wonders at the consistent editorial overemphasis on U.S.–Latin American relations and the omission of important topics like the Protestant churches or even the changing Soviet role in Latin America. Ironically, one finds no essay on the International Monetary Fund's role in the region even though its influence in economic matters during this period arguably outweighed that of the U.S. government.

Volume 7 represents another change in editors, but the fixation on U.S.–Latin American relations continues in four of eleven essays. This essay section features one excellent analysis of the Catholic Church, although it covers much of the same ground as the country chapters, especially the one on Brazil.

Taken together, the seven volumes of essays do not add up. One finds a number of important long-lasting contributions but few themes or topics explored beyond U.S.–Latin American relations and the Catholic Church. During a period of maximum economic distress, the so-called lost decade, the *LACCR* offers little by way of in-depth explanations or accounts of how ordinary Latin Americans coped. The contemporary record is there, year by year, for U.S.–Latin American relations, especially vis-à-vis Central America, but not for much else. Changes in editors probably account for the lack of coherence but not for lack of originality or the fixation on what Washington was or was not doing.

The country review section is what distinguishes the *LACCR*. There is no substitute for these annual surveys, and when they are well done, they become an invaluable source for historians, analysts, and other researchers. Although most of the contributors live in the United States and often lack a personal feeling for events and personalities, many have been following and writing about their countries for years. In countries where local newspapers and periodicals are deficient, censored, or lacking—as in Guyana, Suriname, Haiti, and Paraguay in the 1980s—the country reviews in the *LACCR* may be the best sources available. Organizing these country reviews represents one of the most difficult yet successful tasks performed by the *LACCR*.

Invariably, thirty country reviews by as many or more contributors will result in uneven quality. Nevertheless, this section of each volume generally provides a valuable summary of events and trends for each country. Overall, the *LACCR* country reviews are more comprehensive and better documented than similar summaries found in the annual issues of *Current History* on South America or Central America or in other news roundups.

The difficulties of the country review section reflect the need for editorial continuity and control. For example, in Volume 1 on Colombia, Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez is mentioned as supporting a radical political party. Volume 2 describes him as living outside the country and declining to return for fear of being arrested. He is back in Colombia in Volume 3, writing a weekly column in a Bogotá newspaper, while Volume 4 describes him as questioning a proposed amnesty for insurgents. Nowhere has an editor helped readers by providing a coherent account over time of the political and cultural role in his own country of Latin America's most distinguished writer. Examples such as this one abound. Instead of year-by-year country reviews that flow smoothly from one to the next, readers must deal with too many discontinuities, missing contexts, and omissions.

A related problem is the failure to cross-check references, an unacceptable situation in an expensive reference volume. Each volume reveals frequent discrepancies over dates and numbers (Volume 4 even miscounts coup attempts in Dominica). Although Volume 5 names nine graduate students as staff assistants, the editorial and fact-checking problems persist, mainly in the country review section, where accuracy and reliability are imperative.

The country reviews themselves tend to be better written and documented on the larger countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico as well as on the highly topical countries like Cuba and Peru. The weakest reviews are those on the Caribbean mini-states, where too much of the writing is secondhand and stale. A few reviews stand out, especially that of Jack Child, with his original sources and firsthand knowledge of

Argentina in 1983. In contrast, the essay in Volume 5 on Nicaragua by four persons is little more than a pro-Sandinista polemic.

Failure to exercise effective editorial control over contributors is also a problem. In Volume 6, a well-written and informative essay on Haiti and the fall of the Duvaliers has no footnotes. The same is true of essays on Brazil, Paraguay, Haiti, and Uruguay in Volume 4. Can the *LACCR* be consulted in the future as a reference volume if country review sources are not documented?

It is possible to use the country review section, with a few stumbles here and there, to follow events in particular countries for the period from 1981 to 1988. In fact, it is much easier and quicker to use the *LACCR* than to plod through newspapers or other sources for the period. This advantage makes the *LACCR* a good resource for student term papers, fact checks, journalistic sourcing, and even Trivial Pursuit.

Can the *LACCR* also be relied on as an accurate country-by-country "contemporary record" for this period? The answer is a qualified yes, subject to the need for an errata slip to cover factual errors and failures in cross-checking. Is it a useful source of analysis of politics and economics? Definitely, for the larger or more troubled countries. The *LACCR* should be used not as a sole source, however, but as a good baseline source.

While the country reviews justify the series, the same cannot be said for the section of documents in each volume. The criteria for selection are not clear. Many documents are reproduced in full when excerpts and a citation would have sufficed (for example, the constitution of Belize in Volume 1). Also, documents are preprinted without any introduction, leaving them without context. As a result, the documents section resembles a dumping ground for official pieces of paper rather than a tool for researchers.

The section in each volume on economic and social data contains fifty to one hundred pages drawn from published sources covering exports, imports, population, external aid, gross domestic product, and other matters. What purpose this section is intended to serve is not clear. Similar data in more comprehensive form are available in the annual *Economic and Social Progress Report* of the Inter-American Development Bank (from which much *LACCR* data is taken) and in the World Bank's annual *World Development Report*. The *LACCR* data section also lacks sophisticated computer graphics. A data section useful for research and teaching needs original graphics and subject matter if it is to compete with existing sources.

The section of book abstracts was a good idea, despite the fact that it was dropped after Volume 4. It should have been extended to include the most significant publications on the region in Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and other languages rather than being limited to books in English. Keeping up with current scholarship on Latin America and

the Caribbean outside North America is an important service, and one that is only partly filled at present by existing databases.

In the seven volumes published to date, the *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record* has demonstrated the need for an annual reference volume combining topical essays and country-by-country reviews. The economics of producing such volumes without a hefty subsidy is another matter. The pioneering efforts made thus far have been understandably flawed yet are worthy of continuation.