

THE U.S. AND LATIN AMERICA IN CARTOONS

Edward L. Shaw

POSADA'S MEXICO. Edited by RON TYLER. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1979. Pp. 316. \$16.00.)

LATIN AMERICA IN CARICATURE. By JOHN J. JOHNSON. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press. Texas Pan American Series, 1980. Pp. 233. \$19.95.)

For those who wonder how Latin America has depicted the U.S., *Posada's Mexico* gives several examples. The 9" x 12" paperbound volume, originally produced to accompany a travelling show of Posada's works, while concentrating on Mexican morals and politics, clearly shows Mexico's view of its Northern neighbor at the turn of the century. The graphic combination of a small part of the fifteen thousand engravings he is reputed to have produced, counterpoised with photos and examples of other artists' works, also gives a vivid portrait of Mexico.

The view of Posada that emerges from the five essays and reproductions of his engravings is that of a man who met his daily deadline with spirit and, at times, genius. He never became part of the Mexican art establishment, though he served as a source and inspiration for many who did, including Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. Though his art brought him a certain popularity among his contemporaries, especially those of his lower-middle class neighborhood, he never rose above the economic level of a printshop illustrator.

The one aspect of his work for which he is best known is the series of engravings related to *calaveras* (skulls), traditionally published around All Souls' Day. Jacques Lafaye, in his thought-provoking essay, says "What Posada offers us with his *calaveras* is a sort of x-ray of a collective soul" (p. 138). His discussion indicates that the Mexican has an outlook on life and death totally different from the North American. Throughout the book, similar examples can be found that demonstrate more clearly than could a written text alone the basic differences between the two peoples. The Mexican collective soul as set out by Posada is closer to that of the American Indian and the world of Castaneda's characters than that of the average tourist, who represents the American soul to his Mexican hosts. Lafaye makes a

point of Posada's mixed feelings toward technological innovations from the U.S. and Europe, indicating his fear of the threat of progress—a variety of progress alien to his Indian and Hispanic background.

Posada was a man who lived from day to day; each day his curiosity led him to a new theme to draw. Jas Reuter describes him in the double role of illustrator—one who enlightens and one who presents his thesis visually, in his case to a public that could not read (p. 64). His piquant observations of Mexico serve today to illustrate his people to the world. To an over-literate intelligentsia, Posada's direct message can sharply focus nuances scrambled by words. Many of the mysteries of our misunderstandings of countries south of the border arise from our different conceptions of the past and the future, of time as a commodity, wastable, perishable, or not. Posada alerts us to reconsider.

Johnson's concise introduction to the 131 cartoons he has selected raises as many questions about the United States as it does about Latin America. With remarkable lucidity, Johnson capsulizes important moments of our relations with Latin America and reflects upon why the individual cartoonist envisioned his subject in what was usually a derogatory way.

The chapter headings give a clear idea of Johnson's deductions. "The Hemisphere as Monolith" refers to the traditional view of Latin America as an area of sufficient similitude to be regarded as part of one unit. "Latin America as Female" follows the sexist perception of women south of the border as being docile and worthy, inferring the opposite view of men, and the woman as weak and dependent, thus characterizing whole nations as female and therefore unworthy of equal status with Uncle Sam. Two subsequent chapters are self-explanatory: "Republics as Children," and "Republics as Blacks." In "Latin American Nations as Non-Black Males," the caricatures vary according to the United States' need for Latin American cooperation at the time of a major war. The final section covers "Social Reform and Militarism." The introduction is heavily footnoted and, instead of a bibliography, there is a section of notes at the end that supplies an extensive selection of supplementary material.

Johnson's main criticism of the cartoonist's approach to his topic is the use of the negative image. The Latin American and/or his nation invariably appears as unkempt and incapable of gaining any degree of equality with the individual North American who reads the publication in which the cartoon is published. This thesis touches on two potentially explosive questions: Why is the average North American reader not better informed about the rest of the Americas? And is it not true that

some of the cartoonist's exaggerations contain more truth than it is pleasant to admit?

Johnson does point out that North American society is changing gradually. It is certainly becoming Latin Americanized, with the constant influx of legal and illegal immigrants from the South. Perhaps a Latin American-American pressure group will develop as these national clusters affirm themselves in their new homeland. Johnson cites the lack of such a pan-national caucus of resident Latin Americans as one of the possible reasons for the area's bad image at the grass roots.

Johnson has structured his work adroitly. His introduction alone, and the ponderables that are balanced therein, is worthy of a book. Skillful selection of the cartoons and their placement reinforces his views. Cartoons historically have had an important role in American politics. In the early part of the nineteenth century, cartoon posters were an integral part of election campaigns. Prior to the end of the century, the slowness of the reproduction process limited cartoons to weekly magazines or even periodicals of lesser frequency. This gave the artist more time to develop his theme and the etching itself. With the development of the zinc plate and color lithography, the daily newspapers began to devour cartoons at a prodigious pace, and top artists at times rose to being the highest paid members of the journalistic profession.

The United States was in the forefront of the cartoon movement—to such an extent that Albert Shaw was able to write in the June 1891 *Review of Reviews*: “The caricature illustrations of American papers are, upon the average, incomparably superior to those of all other countries, the English comic papers coming next, but lacking the mechanical perfection in color printing that has been attained in this country.” As Shaw pointed out in his “Cartoon History of [Theodore] Roosevelt's Career,” New York, 1910, “The cartoonist is a privileged character, who may tell the plain, homely truth as people see it and feel it, very much as the court jester in olden times was expected to take liberties with those in high places and—under the guise of quip and fling and witticism—tell the king a bit of direct and wholesome truth.”

A century of cartoons, from the classics of Thomas Nast and Charles G. Bush to the recent gems by Bill Mauldin, Patrick Oliphant, and Herblock, invariably cast a bad light on our southern neighbors. Occasionally the disapproval is benign, often disparaging, seldom cruel, and at times prescient. Taken as a whole, the impression is that of a father with a brood of children ranging from the helpless infant to raucous teenager. The attitudes swerve from tender interest to paternal rage to the resignation of a parent who sees his offspring taking what he considers to be the wrong turn.

The die seems cast. What a North American might want to adopt

from the Latin American way of life seems, in great part, to have been discarded by the Latin American himself. The grass of common ground for mutual respect has been rather trampled, and the U.S. remains stereotyped as the predator, the Latin American as his victim.

A book that might appear at first glance as a pleasant romp through Latin American relations is really a minefield of troubles past, present and future. Johnson clearly pinpoints the problems in his introduction, and the cartoon sections and their commentary intensify his conclusions. I pray he is right in his estimate that the "matrices of conflict" may dissolve "over the next quarter century." He carefully hedges his twenty-five years "as a minimum."