Farnsworth on Eastman and Jacobson, 'Rethinking Atlantic Empire: Christopher Schmidt-Nowara’s Histories of Nineteenth-Century Spain and the Antilles'

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Reviewed by Cacey Farnsworth (Brigham Young University) Published on H-LatAm (March, 2022) Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

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The present volume was conceptualized as a posthumous homage to one of the most influential scholars of the Spanish Empire, slavery, and abolition during the nineteenth century, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara. It was the collaborative result of academics from various countries and thematic specialties. The stated goal of the work is not only to remember Christopher and his scholarly impact, but also to excite interest in his innovative approaches among a new generation of researchers. The organization of the book follows suit by bringing together seasoned and junior colleagues, many of whom were his former students. Each share their own anecdotal story of encounters with Christopher in either professional or personal settings. The picture that emerges to the unfamiliar is of someone who was abnormally generous with time and talent. A man committed to lifting others through kindness and caring. One who saw potential in all, be they graduate students or established names in the field. All agree he was truly a great scholar, mentor, and friend.

Stephen Jacobson begins the first chapter by discussing Christopher’s early life and the litany of influences that informed both his groundbreaking scholarship and gregarious nature. These included a childhood in New Mexico, graduate study at the University of Michigan, and numerous travels throughout Spain and Latin America. It becomes apparent that Christopher was a man comfortable with individuals from all walks of life. The following two chapters, by Adrian Shubert and Joshua Goode respectively, address the enormous impact and legacy of Christopher’s work, beginning with his most cited (and first published) book, Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874 (1999) before analyzing his most wide-reaching monograph, The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century (2006). Both Shubert and Goode showcase Christopher’s forward-thinking approaches and the revolutionary impact he had on various historiographies through his methodical emphasis on archival research, reading sources against the grain, and engaging in transnational analysis. Dalia Antonia Caraballo Muller closes out the first section by zeroing in on the impact of Christopher’s revisionist The Conquest of History. That book continued the transnational approach for which Christopher became famous, but also delves deeper into the legacy of history, the origins and development of hispanismo, and how the past was “ransacked” by both colonials and metropolitans in the process of constructing national identities (p. 68). Muller’s chapter fits well and acts as a bridge between Christopher’s contributions to the field of history and the subsequent thematic chapters inspired by his many publications. She concludes with
a discussion of the influence of *The Conquest of History* on her own work on the construction of Cuban national identity as a result of émigrés throughout Latin America.

Emily Berquist Soule begins the next section by acknowledging the eye-opening inspiration of *Empire and Antislavery* on her thinking about slavery and abolition after reading it in a graduate seminar. She confesses that the book introduced her to a whole new world of slavery and antislavery beyond the British or North American contexts. It had such a profound effect that she eventually pursued research on the Catholic Church’s role in slavery in New Spain. The chapter centers on that topic while employing Christopher’s transnational approach. Ultimately, she argues that in order to understand the slave trade in New Spain, one must understand the development of Catholicism and antislavery movements on both sides of the Atlantic and in the deeper colonial past. The chapter expands the role of the Catholic Church and the Jesuits in both slavery and antislavery debates and continues Christopher’s deconstruction of the long-standing minimalization of the horrors of Latin American slavery vis-à-vis North America by Frank Tannenbaum and Gilberto Freyre. Elena Schneider highlights the impact of Christopher’s various works across historiographies of Spain, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and beyond. She declares that only a person of Chris’s convivial nature could have written such truly transnational works considering his comfort among individuals from all backgrounds. Ultimately, she argues that this had a direct influence on his ability to combine perspectives from both a micro- and macro-historical approach in his work. Schneider then discusses the application of this model in her own research, which seeks to “Spanish” Latin America by connecting Latin American social history with Spanish imperial politics in the development of Bourbon pro-slave trade positions and their greater effect in Cuba (p. 107). She then discusses the surplus of influences on that topic that have hitherto never been connected. Schneider’s chapter comes full circle by discussing the pushback she received for those inclusions and her gratitude for the foundation laid by Christopher that gave her courage to continue. Anne Eller outlines the innovativeness of *Empire and Antislavery* in the following chapter. She declares that this was the first scholarly work that took Spanish imperial policy of the mid-nineteenth century seriously at a time when Latin American and Spanish historiographies were hyper-focused on either the earlier independence movements or later dissolution of empire. Eller then describes the application of Christopher’s pioneering approach in her work on the failed reoccupation of the Dominican Republic by Spain in the nineteenth century. Eller expertly summarizes the influence of Spanish imperial policy on the social outcomes in the Dominican Republic, which as a result produced a rebellion that had far-reaching implications for Spanish slavery and abolition.

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara’s generosity and influence was not limited to historians, as exemplified in the chapter by literary scholar Lisa Surwillo. The piece summarizes her efforts at tracing the influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853) on Spanish abolitionism after an invitation from Christopher. Incredulous at first, Surwillo ultimately uncovered significant impacts of the novel on Spanish abolitionists. Although the various Spanish editions eliminated much of Stowe’s contextual evidence related to Protestantism and other elements, these arguments were forcefully replaced with brilliant visual images depicting the horrors of slavery. In so doing, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a powerful tool for abolition in Spain, particularly with regard to the role of visual evidence as a means of expressing historical truths. Louie Dean Valencia-García maintains the focus on US influences in Spain by demonstrating that inversion of the center-periphery model in Christopher’s work is equally fruitful when applied to postcolonial history. His work traces the effects of African American struggles and racist influences on Spanish understandings of their own
difficulties under the Francoist dictatorship.

The last two chapters deal with Christopher’s posthumous publication, A Spanish Prisoner in the Ruins of Napoleon’s Empire: The Diary of Fernando Blanco White’s Flight to Freedom (2018). That book details the unpublished diary of Spanish escapee Fernando Blanco White from a French prison during the war of independence and his travels in Europe. Joselyn M. Almeida examines the diary through a literary lens in order to more fully uncover a figure who mediated between entangled empires. Juan Luis Simal carries on and uses the diary as a springboard into the underexplored topic of prisoners of war in nineteenth-century Europe. Simal discusses the living conditions and management of prisoners and readily acknowledges his debt to Christopher, whose publication of the diary provided firsthand details of these processes and procedures. The volume ends with a touching epilogue in the form of a June 2014 interview between Christopher and Vicent Sanz Rozalén on the radio program Hablemos de Historia. The topic of the conversation that day was Christopher’s book The Conquest of History but it also touches on his other publications and is a perfect exposé of his innovative approach to slavery, abolition, race, identity, and more. It is a fitting end to the volume as it simultaneously showcases the intellectual prowess and cordial nature of an immensely influential scholar whose career was tragically cut short a year later at the age of forty-eight.

Overall, the volume is well-thought out and expertly organized. It serves its purpose as a call for all historians, regardless of field, to remember Christopher’s many influences and to recalibrate our approaches to history. Those who read this homage are left with a sense of awe and amazement at a scholar and a man who was a trailblazer in every respect. A historian who bridged communities, broke molds, and pushed boundaries but with reverence for previous effort. One who operated in a plethora of frameworks and who was not afraid to borrow from a variety of disciplines and genres. A scholar who was equally generous with graduate students and respected scholars of any field or background. Ultimately, Christopher was the best embodiment of his approach to history; we would do well to carry on his legacy in our own work and interactions as we attempt to better understand the past.


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