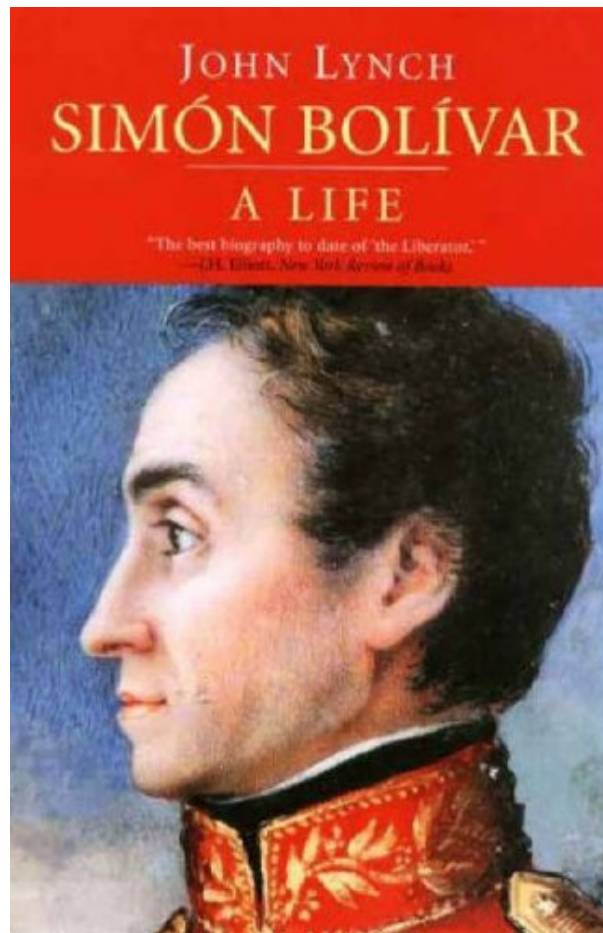


SIMON BOLIVAR: A LIFE BY JOHN LYNCH



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JOHN LYNCH
SIMÓN BOLÍVAR
A LIFE

"The best biography to date of 'the Liberator.'"
—*GLENN Feldman, New York Review of Books*



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From The New Yorker

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Review

"A readable and up-to-date life, which will be the first resort of the curious for some time to come." Economist 'Given the difficulty of separating man from myth, this soberly objective, well-researched biography is welcome. Professor Lynch has devoted much of his career as a Latin Americanist historian to the study of the independence war... It is fortunate that he has now chosen to bring it to bear on a biography

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Simón Bolívar was a revolutionary who freed six countries, an intellectual who argued the principles of national liberation, and a general who fought a cruel colonial war. His life, passions, battles, and great victories became embedded in Spanish American culture almost as soon as they happened. This is the first major English-language biography of "The Liberator" in half a century. John Lynch draws on extensive research on the man and his era to tell Bolívar's story, to understand his life in the context of his own society and times, and to explore his remarkable and enduring legacy.

The book illuminates the inner world of Bolívar, the dynamics of his leadership, his power to command, and his modes of ruling the diverse peoples of Spanish America. The key to his greatness, Lynch concludes, was supreme will power and an ability to inspire people to follow him beyond their immediate interests, in some cases through years of unremitting struggle. Encompassing Bolívar's entire life and his many accomplishments, this is the definitive account of a towering figure in the history of the Western hemisphere.

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Solid Scholarship

By colinwoodward

I am a novice regarding South American history, though Simon Bolivar has always interested me. A trip to Ecuador, where I saw one of the Liberator's swords in Quito, further spurred my curiosity about him. For those who don't know, Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) was the George Washington of South America, a general who liberated Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador from Spanish rule. The country of Bolivia, which became a test case in the 1820s for Bolivar's constitutional ideas, is named after him.

Unfortunately, books about the general (and later president) are hard to find in the States. The most popular is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel "The General in His Labyrinth," which explored Bolivar's last, frustrated days. In the novel, "El Libertador" is succumbing to consumption and curses the Revolution he had unleashed. No English biography of Bolivar has been written in 50 years. To fill the gap in Bolivar historiography, John Lynch, an Emeritus professor of Latin American history at University of London, has produced a solid work of scholarship. His likely audience for this book would be graduate students about to study for their comprehensive exams or people who are somewhat familiar with Bolivar's accomplishments.

Lynch's book is informative, but isn't as easy to read as some biographies are, such as David McCullough's "John Adams." "Simon Bolivar: A Life" doesn't begin with Bolivar's birth, but an earthquake that rocked Venezuela (place of SB's birth) in 1812. The earthquake was seen by some royalist clergymen as divine punishment for Venezuelans revolting against the Spanish. Lynch's book is relatively brief (300 pages), but dense. One will not find short, reader-friendly paragraphs in these pages. The author does not write for a popular audience, but a learned one. We are given much information, not just about Bolivar's life, but the social, political, and economic aspects of the Revolutionary period in South America (from the 1810s to the 1820s).

Lynch's work will help students of Latin America who must answer such questions as, "how revolutionary was the Revolution? Could Bolivar's model of government have worked?" To some extent, Bolivar's only real accomplishment was throwing off Spanish rule. Slaves in the liberated countries were not freed in the general's lifetime, and the plight of the Indians did not improve very much after the Spanish were defeated. Warlords quickly filled the political vacuum left by the royalist government. Bolivar was a creature of the Enlightenment, but he did not believe that South America could ape the American or French Revolutions.

The general sought to apply revolutionary ideas in a South American context: he knew monarchy was disliked, but also that democracy couldn't work. South America's problem was that it was too democratic, too chaotic. When the Spanish left, warlords sought to control local communities at the expense of Bolivar's desire to have a centralized republic. To use an analogy from early U.S. history, Bolivar was more Hamiltonian than Jeffersonian, more a Federalist than a Republican. He knew that the areas his Colombian army did not control were a political free-for-all.

Added to the problem of home rule in South America were racial divisions between the ruling "white" elites (of which Bolivar was one), mixed-race Americans, black slaves, and Indians (Lynch, writing from less politically correct England, never uses the term Native American). Bolivar, who hated racism, struggled with these racial and political divisions. Victory was relatively easy; the peace was what was hard. Bolivar unleashed liberation on a land that was not ready for republicanism. His political dream was a "Gran Colombia" with a strong leader, something along the lines of the British constitutional monarchy (sans the king). But the people didn't want it. As soon as the Spanish were kicked out, the liberated countries wanted to go their own way. Was Bolivar right about the need for a strong, single leader ruling the liberated countries? Or does it even matter, because his centralized republic could never have worked? Such are questions for debate.

In helping answer these historical questions, Lynch's organization of facts and subjects is impeccable. If the book has a flaw, it is that it reads at times more like a history of the Revolutionary period than a biography. As informative as it is, I still didn't quite feel that I had learned enough about Bolivar the man. Overall, Lynch's writing perhaps could use more dashes of romanticism. Still, it is a very good book. As a final note: those who don't know Spanish might want to keep a Spanish dictionary handy. Some words aren't explained or can't be figured out from their context.

20 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Valuable With Some Limitations

By R. Albin

This is the first English language biography of Bolivar in approximately 50 years. It is based on a great deal of modern scholarship and authored by a recognized expert on early 19th century Latin America. It is thoughtful and thorough. It is, unfortunately, a somewhat frustrating book. Lynch is a competent, as opposed to good, writer. The narrative tends to skip around a bit and parts are repetitive. Lynch seems also to have had his fellow scholars in mind as the target of this book. The text seems to presuppose a fair prior knowledge of 19th century Latin American history. In several respects, this book seems to be essentially a summary of modern scholarship on Bolivar rather than a full fledged interpretative biography.

Within these limitations, this is a useful book. Lynch does an excellent job of describing Bolivar's complex personality. Lynch emphasizes the continuity in Bolivar's motivations and thinking throughout his career. The product of an elite Venezuelan creole family, Bolivar grew up to espouse a complex mixture of idealistic Enlightenment rationalism and romantic nationalism leavened by a healthy dose of pragmatism. His pursuit of personal glory seems also to have a major factor in his incessant pursuit of freedom from Spain. Lynch does well also in describing the highly adverse conditions under which Bolivar pursued his aims. A major theme of the book is the frustration of Bolivar's Enlightenment reformism by the actions of the native elites he set in power and general weakness of civil society in early 19th century South America.

A useful book but one which underscores the need for a major biography.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Where Is the Soldier?

By Charles J. Edwards

Above all, Bolivar thought of himself as a soldier, which makes it very strange that Professor Lynch provides virtually no discussion of this aspect of Bolivar's life. There are some aspects of grand strategy, such as the discussion of Bolivar's decision to liberate Venezuela by moving to Columbia (New Granada) and invading from the southwest. But there is nothing about how Bolivar conducted himself in a battle, nothing about his tactics, his command of logistics. You will not find out anything about the character of his army -- what weapons? what balance of cavalry and infantry? And how about a little detail about the Bolivar's famous crossing of the Andes, memorialized in Napoleon-style paintings?

At one point, Professor Lynch disposes of a complete campaign by simply listing the names of seven battles -- nothing more!

I will echo some other reviewers by saying that Lynch does a good job of evaluating Bolivar's philosophy and exploring the political, social and economic milieu in which he operated. But the neglect of a central element of Bolivar's life means that his biography is incomplete.

I would consider this a good supplementary study after reading a comprehensive biography of the Liberator.

A note about maps: The maps are inadequate; two simple line drawings of northern South America and the continent as whole, with national boundaries, cities and major rivers -- nothing more. They illustrate nothing about the topography in which Bolivar operated. The geography of northern South America played a critical role not only in his military campaigns but also in the politics and economics of the region -- the presence of the Andes in itself doomed his project to unite New Granada (present Columbia), Venezuela and Ecuador in a grand republic of Columbia. The publisher should have invested enough to show the location of the Andes at least!

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