

**Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, Marco Palacios, and
Ana María Gómez López, editors**
The Colombia Reader: History, Culture, Politics

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017. 624 pp.
ISBN 9780822362074 (hardcover: alk. Paper)
ISBN 9780822373865 (e-book)

Jane M. Rausch / University of Massachusetts Amherst, Emerita

For the last two centuries historians and social scientists have struggled to interpret the history of Colombia that presents so many unique features when compared with other major Latin American republics. The editors of this impressive volume seek to address this challenge by assembling a collection of journalistic reports, songs, artwork, poetry, oral histories, government documents, and scholarship findings to illustrate the changing ways Colombians from all walks of life have made and understood their own history. Following a general “Introduction” that presents an overview of Colombian history, they have organized the materials into seven sections: I. Human Geography; II. Religious Pluralities: Faith, Intolerance, Politics, and Accommodation; III. City and Country; IV. Lived Inequalities; V. Violence; VI. Change and Continuity in the Colombian Economy; and VII. Transnational Colombia. Each section includes 11 to 17 short excerpts extracted from texts that span the colonial period to the present—many of which have not been previously translated into English. The editors provide context for each selection with a short introduction, and they have arranged the items chronologically to trace the evolution of the general topic over the centuries. To achieve their goal of expanding a reader’s knowledge of the country beyond its reputation for violence, they have included contrasting experiences of Colombian conflicts with the stability and significance of national cultural, intellectual, and economic life—all of which are reinforced by numerous illustrations and a useful list of books for further consultation.

The Colombia Reader is the 13th addition to Duke University’s Series of Latin American Readers, each of which focuses on an individual nation. Its editors’ arrangement of short excerpts into general categories appears to design the book primarily for use in college classrooms although graduate students, professional scholars, and the general public will gain valuable insight from the perusal of the documents. At \$29.95 the price of the paperback edition is well within the affordable range of university texts, yet it is difficult to see exactly how professors might make best use of the great wealth of information. At a time when instructors often post readings via the Internet, one might suspect that rather than assigning the entire book, they will choose to single out only the section or particular documents that

enhance their specialized courses. Despite the introduction provided by the editors, a genuine understanding of any given selection will require further historical explanation in order to discover exactly where it fits into the broader theme. Moreover, while the selection’s date can usually be found within the document, it would have been helpful for tracing the progression of ideas, if the date of each excerpt had been included after its title in the Table of Contents.

The above caveats are in no way intended to minimize the unparalleled accomplishment the editors have achieved in bringing to public awareness little known documents that help to explain key themes in Colombian history. For example, with regard to the topic of “Violence” (which has dominated conceptions of Colombia for decades), these selections trace “crime” from its appearance in the colonial era as reported by Juan Rodríguez Freile and the war of independence to focus on the 1948 assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the failure of the National Front, the emergence of the FARC and ELN rebel groups, and the impact of drug trafficking. It concludes with six iconic photos depicting events in the struggle to regain peace between the 1960s and 1990s with the explanation: “As the country rewrites its history in coming decades, the visual record scholars, journalists, and teachers draw upon will include these politicized images” (429).

The introduction to the “Lived Inequalities” section suggests that a steep hierarchy of race and economic power “have structured Colombian society for centuries” (243). Selections to support this statement included the racial policies of the Spanish Audiencia Real, documents highlighting an Amerindian nobleman and a captured maroon, the emergence of new social groups in the early twentieth century, women’s struggle for equality, the recognition of Barranquilla’s first gay carnival queen, and a rap poem exploring the plight of military service for draftees who mostly are drawn from poor families in rural areas.

Such examples of diversity characterize all the sections, but given the long-standing strength of the Catholic Church in Colombia, it is especially apparent in the section dealing with religious pluralities. Here, along with excerpts from the eighteenth century diary of Madre Castillo, T. C. Mosquera’s

mid-nineteenth century attack on mortmain property, and efforts by a priest to document examples of the twentieth century dirty war, are examples of Afro Colombian Catholicism, and testimonies by Jewish and Pentecostal women.

In conclusion, from even this short summary of the book's attributes, it should be clear that for many decades, *The Colombian Reader* will stand as an indispensable reference as well as a college text. As Hebrert Braun so aptly states in his cover blurb: "In this stunning textual and visual compilation of daily historical moments, the Colombian people come alive, so that they may finally be understood alongside their fellow Latin Americans."