

Modern Latin America
by Thomas E. Skidmore
and Peter H. Smith
Oxford University Press, \$18.25

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

AMONG THE MANY challenges of academic life, one which regularly lays siege to the ivory tower and defeats its inhabitants almost without contest is the writing of textbooks. Most university professors, disenchanted with the contents of the titles comprising their reading lists, at some time in their careers consider writing a textbook of their own, one which (of course) will take into account and rectify the deficiencies of past efforts. Few academics actually advance beyond thinking about textbook writing to the undertaking itself. Even fewer succeed in publishing an innovative introduction to their declared area of expertise, for the risks and difficulties involved are considerable.

Perhaps the most crucial problem confronting the practitioner of the genre is the establishment of a meaningful equilibrium between generalization and detail. How does one synthesize without simplifying? To what extent are the case studies selected for in-depth analysis accurate representations of the larger whole? Is it possible to produce a work which not only meets student requirements or the demands of a casual browser but which also fulfills the critical expectations of specialists in the field? As with books written for the general public, undergraduate texts must be evaluated with the above considerations in mind.

Modern Latin America, by Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, is an attempt on the part of two distinguished American historians to interpret, in a little over 400 pages, the complexity of contemporary Latin America. As an introduction to the region either for an aspiring student or the interested layman, *Modern Latin America* is a good deal more satisfactory than many other available contributions. Within a modified "dependency" perspective, the book ana-

The forgotten America



from Modern Latin America

lyzes the salient economic and political developments that have shaped Latin American society over the past century. Skidmore and Smith seek to demonstrate how Latin America was made a dependent, peripheral appendage of a world capitalist system with its colonial centre in Western Europe and its neo-colonial centre in the United States.

In terms of a spatial focus, the authors concentrate on Argentina, Brazil, Central America, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru, with a thematic emphasis on economic forces, social tensions, and political confrontation. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between Latin America and the United States, with Skidmore and Smith frequently resorting to the political cartoon to illustrate a point with a pungency no words can quite convey. The book is written in an animated, at times anecdotal prose, resplendent with entertaining "one-liners." (The authors recount, for example, the Guatemalan dictator Jorge Ubico once declaring: "I have no friends, only domesticated enemies.")

While *Modern Latin America* has much to commend it, cartoons and "one-liners" are no substitute for

careful appraisal and balanced reconstruction. Somewhat predictably, Skidmore and Smith err factually in their desire, or haste, to generalize with maximum validity. Their Prologue states boldly that "Latin

America is not an easy place to understand, despite the fact that the same language, Spanish, is spoken everywhere except Brazil (Portuguese), the Andes (Quechua and other Indian languages), and the Caribbean (French, English, and Dutch)."

Everywhere? More than 20 different native languages are spoken in Guatemala alone, by some five million descendants of the ancient Maya who, to this day, comprise between 60 and 65 per cent of the Guatemalan population. Is a beleaguered indigenous majority in a country currently wracked by brutal civil strife, one which Ernesto "Che" Guevara considered the "key" to Latin America, to be overlooked completely for the sake of neat (if incorrect) generalization? This error may seem inconsequential to some, but it is symptomatic of a flaw which permeates not only the work of Skidmore and Smith but which also diminishes the con-

tribution of other dependency theorists — the inability to come effectively to grips with the colonial and neo-colonial experience of native Americans.

All too often the Indian in Latin America is portrayed either as an anomalous vestige of the pre-Columbian past or as an unresponsive victim of imperialism. The latter representation, the one championed by numerous Marxist scholars, is as inadequate and uni-dimensional as the former, the "National Geographic" view of Amerindian reality. Although, depending on the particular historical situation, the Indian may be both vestige and victim, he can perhaps most meaningfully be viewed as a subject in his own right, an active participant as much as a passive object.

Also lacking in Skidmore and Smith's approach is a disposition toward dealing with the events and circumstances of Latin American life in a concerned, humanistic way. Although the back cover of their book mentions the complementary insights of "social science theory and methodology," the advantages of employing such an abstract and clinical pedagogic assembly — in the context of the tormented realities of the region — are at best marginal.

If the cultural history of Latin America is to be interpreted in "dependency" terms, then an approach like that of Eduardo Galeano, one which argues the case with a vehement anger and an intense display of emotion, makes for more stimulating and inspiring reading. Galeano's commitment to "social science theory and methodology" may be crude or even non-existent, but at least his writing tells of the human tragedy of Latin America with a compassion and sense of outrage that Skidmore and Smith, and all North Americans, would do well to contemplate. Listen. Can't you hear? The screaming grows louder. □

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Art out of Agony:
The Holocaust Theme in Literature,
Sculpture and Film
by Stephen Lewis
Macmillan, \$9.95

Reviewed by WILLIAM C. JAMES

STEPHEN LEWIS — broadcaster, labor arbitrator, politician — in a series of 10 interviews originally broadcast on CBC-FM's Stereo Morning, grapples with the question as to how novelists, film-makers, sculptors, and others can convey the truth and meaning of the Holocaust in art.

How, that is, can an esthetic medium portray the anguish, brutality, and madness of this "most horrific episode in human history?" Is there not something itself obscene in using the Holocaust as material for a television series, a best-selling novel, or a popular movie? Does someone who is not a survivor have the right to say

Art inspired by genocide

anything at all about the experience, especially in artistic form? Is it possible, as Elie Wiesel suggests and as George Steiner for some time believed, that a kind of withdrawal into mystical silence is the most profound response to the event?

These kinds of questions appear over and over again in this collection of interviews. They are raised most insistently with reference to the television series on the Holocaust which was broadcast a few years ago — Lewis calls it "tawdry, unrepresentative, and dishonest." But the same issues are raised about the work of two individuals interviewed by Lewis: D.M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, the novel which later became a motion picture. Some of the subjects declare

emphatically that such popularization of the Holocaust which in effect packages it for consumption by a mass market is almost a blasphemy, especially when the artist is a non-Jew. Others, such as film critic Annette Insdorf, believe that even NBC's Holocaust did more good than harm and was well-intentioned.

The difficult job of editing these interviews for the translation from radio to print has been skillfully managed. This book is not a mere "spin-off." In spite of his modesty and hesitation and tributes to producers and editors, much of the credit for the achievement is due to Lewis himself. He has done the requisite homework, asks intelligent and probing questions (his experience on the other side of the interviewer's microphone

stands him in good stead here), and manages to keep several main themes in careful focus. The result is a superbly useful work.

Readers will find here discussions with well-known authors such as Wiesel, Thomas, Styron, and Steiner; film and sculpture are explored in the conversations with Ingeborg, Hans Jurgen Syberberg, and George Segal; and Lewis's discussions with Aharon Appelfeld, Yaffa Eliach, and Jurek Becker introduce us to newer or less well-known writers of Holocaust literature. All in all, *Art out of Agony* will be of interest to the specialist in Judaism or Holocaust studies or modern art, religion, and culture, or to the general reader who believes with Aharon Appelfeld that "Jewish experience applies to every human being in the world." □

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