

## BEYOND THE CANAL: Recent Scholarship on Panama

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- PANAMA: LUCHAS SOCIALES Y AFIRMACION NACIONAL.* By Víctor Avila. (Panama City: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos "Justo Arosemena," 1998. Pp. 278.)
- PANAMA Y LA COMUNICACION INTEROCEANICA.* By Jorge Conte-Porras. (N.p.: Editora RDC, 1999. Pp. 178.)
- A PEOPLE WHO WOULD NOT KNEEL: PANAMA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE SAN BLAS KUNA.* By James Howe. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998. Pp. 390. \$55.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- CHARLES EDWARD MAGOON: THE PANAMA YEARS.* By Gustavo A. Mellander and Nelly Maldonado Mellander. (Río Piedras, P.R.: Mayor, 1999. Pp. 115.)
- PANAMA, 9 DE ENERO: QUE PASO Y POR QUE.* By Roberto N. Méndez. (Panama City: Universidad de Panamá, 1999. Pp. 269.)
- WE ANSWER ONLY TO GOD: POLITICS AND THE MILITARY IN PANAMA, 1903-1947.* By Thomas L. Percy. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. Pp. 232. \$45.00 cloth.)

Leading national and foreign scholars of Panama have traditionally concentrated on the international route, its impact on society, and the relationship of the isthmus to the United States. Panamanian historians, however, have tended to emphasize their country's right to autonomy in response to "the Black Legend" surrounding the independence of the isthmus. This historiographical interpretation, most effectively forwarded by Ricaurte Soler, typically outlined Panamanian nationalism as having evolved in the nineteenth century in response to Colombian neglect and failure to develop a canal. Soler and others interpreted the decades after 1903 as series of intermittent attempts to confirm Panamanian sovereignty, particularly in the face of U.S. imperialism. Underscoring the roles played by students, labor, and the middle class, they highlighted Panamanian efforts to eliminate the Canal Zone and thwart a self-serving oligarchy depicted as disloyal to the nation.<sup>1</sup>

1. Ricaurte Soler, *Formas ideológicas de la nación panameña*, 7th ed. (Panama City: Ediciones de la Revista *Tareas*, 1985); and *Nación y oligarquía, 1925-1975* (Panama City: Ediciones de la Revista *Tareas*, 1980).

Foreign historians like Gerstle Mack, William McCain, and Dwight Miner, meanwhile, concentrated even more exclusively on the interoceanic waterway, tending to present the country as a creation of the United States.<sup>2</sup> A recent publication entitled *Panama: Made in the U.S.A.* encapsulates this standard perspective of outside observers.<sup>3</sup> Scholars, especially foreigners, therefore narrated Panama's history largely in terms of its ties to the United States, offering competing visions of 1903, the year Panama seceded from Colombia. While some emphasized Panama's autonomous roots and its ongoing struggles, others depicted the country as a U.S. colony, little more than a zone of transit for global shipping. Developments over the last few decades, however, have led to serious fissures within these traditions as many historians have abandoned "geographical determinism" and expanded the scope of their research into other dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

In his preface to *We Answer Only to God*, Thomas Percy notes the importance of interoceanic transit in Panama's historiography (p. xi), but he also points out that several schools have emerged over the past decades downplaying or adding complexity to the trajectory of the Panamanian nation and its problematic association with the United States. This perspective has always been present in Spanish-language historiography. Yet the best scholarship had traditionally focused on U.S.-Panamanian relations, and the new and more domestically oriented approach is associated with a series of European-trained academicians who dramatically raised the quality of studies in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> These historians include Alfredo Castillero Calvo, Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, and Omar Jaén Suárez. Without discounting the canal or the consequences of geography, these investigators have turned their attention to issues related less to the anti-imperialist struggle to offer a more in-

2. Gerstle Mack, *The Land Divided: A History of the Panama Canal and Other Isthmian Canal Projects* (New York: Knopf, 1944); William McCain, *The United States and the Republic of Panama* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1937); and Dwight Carroll Miner, *The Fight for the Panama Route: The True Story of the Spooner Act and the Hay-Herrán Treaty* (New York: Octagon, 1966).

3. Panamanian authors on occasion have also taken this same position, presenting their country as little more than an invention of the United States. A classic example is Oscar Terán, *Del tratado Herrán-Hay al Tratado Hay-Bunau-Varilla: Historia crítica del atraco Yanki, mal llamado en Colombia la pérdida de Panamá y en Panamá nuestra independencia de Colombia* (Panama City: Imprenta de "Motivos Colombianos," 1934–1935). For more recent examples, see Ovidio Díaz Espino, *How Wall Street Created a Nation: J. P. Morgan, Teddy Roosevelt, and the Panama Canal* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 2001); and John Weeks and Phil Gunson, *Panama: Made in the USA* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1991).

4. Celestino Andrés Araúz, Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro, and Armando Pinzón, as quoted by Percy (p. xii).

5. For examples of these studies focusing on foreign affairs, see Harmodio Arias, *El Canal de Panamá: Un estudio en derecho internacional y diplomacia* (Panama City: Editora Panamá América, 1957); Ricardo J. Alfaro, *Historia documentada de las negociaciones de 1926* (Panama City: Editorial Universitaria, 1972); and Ernesto Castillero Pimentel, *Panamá y los Estados Unidos, 1903–1953* (Panama City: Humanidad, 1964).

ternally oriented examination of Panamanian society that explored topics such as race, class, and colonial and economic history.<sup>6</sup> In their wake followed other important national and foreign scholars who have continued to develop this newer approach to isthmian history.<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. invasion in 1989 and the recent closure of U.S. military bases seem to have reinvigorated scholarly interest in Panama, although the country remains one of the least studied by U.S. historians. The most recent literature covers a range of subjects, and although some newer studies adhere to the older historiographical paradigm of concentrating on foreign relations and the canal, others challenge the model, if not its underlying values. These more recent works raise important theoretical questions. Is the trans-isthmian tradition the most effective means of addressing Panamanian history, or can other insightful ways be found to study the country? The most impressive book in this selection of six titles, that by James Howe, openly questions the concept of nation and the merit of Panamanian efforts to achieve consolidation as it analyzes a minority group that was subject to the excesses of this campaign. Without discounting geography or the effects of U.S. imperialism, Howe as well as Percy suggest that Panama's history is complex and deserving of perspectives that transcend the canal.

### *Traditional Approaches*

In many ways, Víctor Avila's *Panamá: Luchas sociales y afirmación nacional* represents the conventional interpretation of Panamanian history: the country's past as seen through the prism of its relationship to the outside world. Several of the other works under review here also fall largely into this category, including Jorge Conte-Porras's *Panamá y la comunicación interoceánica*, Roberto Méndez's *Panamá, 9 de enero de 1964*, and Gustavo

6. Some of their most influential works include Alfredo Castellero Calvo, *Historia de la Villa de Los Santos y los orígenes históricos de Azuero* (Panama City: Dirección Nacional de Cultura, 1971); Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, *Domínio y sociedad en el Panamá colombiano (1821–1903)* (Panama City: Impresora Panamá, 1978); and Omar Jaén Suárez, *La población del Istmo de Panamá del siglo XVI al siglo XX* (Panama City: Omar Jaén Suárez, 1979).

7. See Celestino Andrés Araúz, *La independencia de Panamá en 1821* (Panamá: Academia de la Historia, 1980); Patricia Pizzurno Gelós, *Antecedentes, hechos y consecuencias de la Guerra de los Mil Días en el Istmo de Panamá* (Panama City: Fomato, 1990); Jorge Conte-Porras, *Réquiem por la revolución* (San José, C.R.: Litografía e Imprenta, 1990); María del Carmen Mena García, *La sociedad de Panamá en el siglo XVI* (Seville: Diputación Provincial de Sevilla, 1984); Alex Pérez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers: Panama from 1821 to 1903* (New York: AMS Press, 1978); George Priestley, *Military Government and Popular Participation in Panama* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986); Humberto Ricord, *Panamá en la Guerra de los Mil Días* (Panama City: n.p., 1989); Steve Ropp, *Panamanian Politics: From Guarded Nation to National Guard* (New York: Praeger, 1982); and Andrew Zimbalist and John Weeks, *Panama at the Crossroads: Economic Development and Political Change in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

Mellander and Nelly Maldonado Mellander's *Charles Edward Magoon: The Panama Years*. Avila's volume collects nineteen essays written over several decades by a former leading figure of the Panamanian student movement. Much like Ricaurte Soler in *Panamá: Nación y oligarquía, 1925–1975*, Avila associates nationalism with class struggle, and while strongly criticizing the elite as subservient to U.S. interests, Avila identifies the masses as Panama's most progressive sector, particularly the youth organizations of the mid-twentieth century. Echoing the arguments of Rafael González in *Universidad de Panamá e independencia nacional*, Avila is adamant about "the important role" of the university "in the development of the national conscience and in the affirmation of our cultural values" (p. 143).<sup>8</sup> A major segment of the volume is entitled "Universidad y reforma," while another treats issues of nationality and sovereignty. A third section offers insights on diverse topics that include Rodrigo Miró's and Rafael Moscote's roles in the search for a Panamanian identity despite "the disruptive presence of the United States" (pp. 121, 11, 205, 237).

Conte-Porras is much less strident in *Panamá y la comunicación interoceánica* in presenting social conflicts as an important catalyst in the formation of Panama. Less concerned with the country itself, his work is more a study of interoceanic communication and its origins, which he traces to the Age of Discovery. Expanding on Ernesto Castillero Reyes's earlier work on this subject, Conte-Porras chronicles the numerous efforts to exploit Panama's strategic position from colonial times to the present.<sup>9</sup> He predicts a prosperous future for his country based on its provision of international services in an era of globalization. Conte-Porras is less critical than Avila of the world economy and Panama's traditional role in this system. He even expresses admiration for various U.S. leaders who were essential to the construction of the Panama Canal, including Theodore Roosevelt, William Gorgas, and George Goethals. Conte-Porras agrees nevertheless that "geographic determinism" has molded Panama and suggests that one consequence has been domination by the United States. *Panamá y la comunicación interoceánica*, which includes numerous photographs and illustrations, points to the "young generations" of the twentieth century as the most important group opposing U.S. imperialism (pp. 10, 11).

In general, Avila's and Conte-Porras's discussions are framed by a series of familiar events that together offer a cogent explanation of Panamanian history. Other important contributors to this same vision—Marco Gandásegui, Ricaurte Soler, Hernando Franco Muñoz, and Walter LaFeber—

8. Rafael A. González, *Universidad de Panamá e independencia nacional* (Panama City: n.p., 1994).

9. Ernesto Castillero Reyes, *Historia de la comunicación interoceánica y de su influencia en la formación y en el desarrollo de la entidad nacional panameña* (Panama City: Imprenta Nacional, 1941).

have presented Panamanian history primarily from the perspective of the canal, growing social tensions, and opposition to the United States.<sup>10</sup> According to this interpretation, the Panamanian masses became steadily involved in challenging the oligarchy and the U.S. presence on the isthmus. This large sector was in many ways responsible for forging the country because of what Avila describes as “the inability of the oligarchical class to lead the nation in its fight for sovereignty and independence” (p. 25). As Avila and others insist, this fight began in the nineteenth century.

Much like Catalino Arrocha Graell in his seminal work *La independencia de Panamá*, Avila traces Panama’s nationalism to the isthmus’s separation from Spain and the subsequent failure of Colombia to develop the transit route.<sup>11</sup> Avila emphasizes that Panama secured its own independence in 1821, and although the isthmus agreed to join Gran Colombia, it rebelled against Bogotá on several occasions over the following decades. Avila also notes that during much of the nineteenth century, Panama was governed under an extreme federalist system that had been designed and advanced to a great extent by Panamanian legislator Justo Arosemena. Avila stresses nonetheless the middle and lower classes and their growing involvement in defining Panama through their antagonism toward the United States. He highlights events like the “Tajada de Sandía,” the violent mob attack on the U.S.-owned railroad in 1856. Popular participation mounted, especially against the foreign presence, following Panama’s secession from Colombia in 1903.

As Conte-Porras and others have argued, Panamanian independence was inherently flawed by the conditions imposed on the country by the Hay–Bunau–Varilla Treaty. In their view, widespread discontent arose almost immediately after the 1903 separation, when “the Canal Zone was only beginning to be structured” (Avila, p. 17). Gustavo Mellander and Nelly Maldonado Mellander offer a divergent view of this period in a book that reflects much of the English-language historiography, *Charles Edward Magoon: The Panama Years*. Their central concerns are the organization of the Canal Zone and diplomatic relations between Panama and the United States, the traditional areas of interest of U.S. historians and topics treated earlier by Gustavo Mellander.<sup>12</sup> The authors focus on Panama’s international con-

10. Marco A. Gandásegui, *La democracia en Panamá* (Mexico City: Mestiza, 1989); Soler, *Nación y oligarquía*; Soler, *Panamá: Historia de una crisis* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1989); Hernando Franco Muñoz, *Movimiento obrero panameño, 1914–1921* (Panama City: n.p., 1979); and Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

11. Catalino Arrocha Graell, *Historia de la independencia de Panamá: Sus antecedentes y sus causas, 1821–1903* (Panama City: 1933; reprint, Litho-Impresora Panamá, 1973).

12. Gustavo A. Mellander, *The United States in Panamanian Politics: The Intriguing Formative Years* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1971).

nections, although more from a U.S. perspective best personified by David McCullough's classic *The Path between the Seas*.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Avila and Conte-Porras, these authors point to "the unparalleled degree of friendship and goodwill that existed between the two countries" during these early years, a factor they cite as critical to Magoon's success as Canal Zone administrator and minister to Panama in 1905–1906 (p. 105). Mellander and Mellander conclude that the "warmhearted, jovial" Magoon (who later came under severe criticism as U.S. governor in Cuba) succeeded in Panama largely due to the isthmian and U.S. interests that supported construction of the canal (p. 26). In particular, they credit Magoon for advancing sanitation, combating tropical diseases, and improving schools and living conditions in the Canal Zone. *Charles Edward Magoon* thus contradicts the account of McCullough, who recognizes Chief Engineer John Stevens (1905–1907) for much of this work.<sup>14</sup>

Mellander and Mellander also discuss Magoon's role in Panamanian politics, particularly his part in reducing violence in the 1906 elections that pitted the incumbent Conservatives against the Liberals. Magoon's interventions helped prevent a Liberal rebellion and eventually fostered an agreement between the two parties on how to divide the seats in the National Assembly. While Patricia Pizzurno Gelós and Celestino Andrés Araúz have included many of these details in their recent study and offered the most sophisticated interpretation of the republic's political life, Panamanian historians have disregarded to a great extent such issues and depicted the period instead from a more nationalist perspective emphasizing the clear limitations placed on their country by the Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty.<sup>15</sup> Avila comments, "from its birth . . . the Republic . . . was hindered by the United States" (p. 55).

The subsequent decades for Avila and Conte-Porras constitute a series of struggles to consolidate Panama's autonomy in the face of U.S. imperialism. Both historians highlight the role of "the new generations," the middle- and working-class groups who became more vocal in the following years (Conte-Porras, p. 11). Avila and Conte-Porras provide a list of conflicts and events representing the steady advance of the nationalist cause against the United States and its allies among the oligarchy. They include the Panama City's Renters Strike of 1925, the 1926 rejection of the Kellogg-Alfaro Treaty, the rise of Acción Comunal and Arnulfo Arias as political actors in the 1920s and 1930s, and the popular outrage at the Filós-Hines agreement in 1947, which would have extended the concession of U.S. bases erected during World War II. Both authors underscore the growing mili-

13. David McCullough, *The Path between the Seas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

14. *Ibid.*, 459–533.

15. Patricia Pizzurno Gelós and Celestino Andrés Araúz, *Estudios sobre el Panamá republicano, 1903–1989* (Panama City: Manfer, 1996).

tancy of students, which culminated in the Flag Riots of 1964. This subject is also covered by Roberto Méndez, whose account contradicts that of Jules Dubois, a U.S. interpreter of the same occurrences.<sup>16</sup>

In *Panamá, 9 de enero de 1964: Qué pasó y por qué*, Méndez essentially accepts the traditional paradigm of Panamanian history, viewing the country's past largely through its relationship with the United States. He places Panamanian history in an even more global historical context in linking the disturbances of 1964 to the broad anti-imperialist movement of the postwar years. For Méndez, "the events of January 1964 . . . were one of the most important episodes of the struggle . . . against colonial exploitation" (p. 257). He outlines Panama's long and problematic relationship with the United States, treating the "interventions" and "political abuses" covered by the other authors and argues that the canal primarily benefited the United States, particularly U.S. shipping interests, the U.S. military, and U.S. residents of the Canal Zone (p. 45). Questioning so-called advantages to Panamanian society, Méndez believes that the interoceanic waterway served to distort the isthmus's economy and created an exploitative and unstable social structure. The anger generated by these injustices culminated in the late 1950s and early 1960s, exacerbated by the economic downturn of that period.

Even more important were the hopes and frustrations created by the Alliance for Progress, which Méndez thinks found little if any support among the Panamanian oligarchy. The promises of economic and social reform went largely unattended, further fueling "a wave of anti-North American sentiment" (p. 66). In Panama these feelings were heightened by Operación Amistad, a program initiated by the Kennedy administration to improve relations between the two countries. One concession offered by the United States was that the Panamanian flag would fly in the Canal Zone wherever civilian authorities raised the U.S. banner. To avoid conflicts, Governor Robert Fleming further ordered that Canal Zone schools would fly no flags. Students at Balboa High School, however, disregarded Fleming's decision and provoked a march by their counterparts at Panama City's Instituto Nacional, one of the most politically active secondary schools in all of Latin America.

A turbulent encounter on the Balboa campus led to five days of rioting in which twenty Panamanians died and hundreds more were injured in a "genuine, although unequal, military combat" between the protesters and U.S. forces (p. 114). The strength of *Panamá, 9 de enero* lies in Méndez's account of the violence, which includes dozens of testimonials from witnesses and participants. Pointing out the weakness of unions, the Communist Party, and the Catholic Church, Méndez depicts the Flag Riots as a spontaneous and massive uprising by individuals representing Panama's humblest social sectors. His biographical sketches of the victims seem to confirm Avila's assertions that the masses have been the true forgers of the Pana-

16. Jules Dubois, *Danger over Panama* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

manian republic. These nationalists acted on their own initiative and not as part of a Communist conspiracy, as Dubois argued.<sup>17</sup> Much like César León and Alessandro Russo Berguido in their earlier works, Méndez concludes that the sacrifices of January 1964 were critical to the eventual “decolonization” of the isthmus (p. 255).<sup>18</sup>

### *New Interpretations*

In *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama, 1903–1947*, Thomas Percy examines another watershed event considered crucial to the same process of national liberation: the popular mobilization against the 1947 Filós-Hines Treaty. Avila describes these student-led protests as a “patriotic struggle” that had “political ramifications of extraordinary importance” for the country, particularly for Panama’s quest for “sovereignty and liberty” (pp. 62, 80). David Acosta reached similar conclusions in a more extensive analysis, linking the public’s outrage to the anti-imperialist struggle.<sup>19</sup> Percy, however, examines this movement from a different perspective, outside the traditional framework of U.S.-Panamanian relations and in a more domestic context. His main topic is the rise of the military, a subject that has received considerable attention in the last years. Much like Carlos Guevara Mann in another recent study, Percy refuses to view military dominance as merely the result of U.S. policies or “an essentially post-1968 phenomena” (p. 2).<sup>20</sup> For Percy, “Panama’s recent military government are not historical aberrations” but the consequence of what he describes as a long-term governmental crisis (pp. 2–3). This crisis, with roots in the nineteenth century, culminated following the events of 1947.

As depicted by Percy, Panama is a highly divisive society in which the elite has typically relied on coercion to maintain its status, turning first to foreign troops and then to a domestic force. Percy refers to what he terms “the armed perpetuation of privilege” (p. 13). This model was established during the Colombian period, when Panama’s commercial oligarchy first used Bogotá and subsequently Washington to safeguard its position amid ethnic and political tensions. The elite emerged intact from the nineteenth century, but fractures grew more apparent in the next decades as Panama achieved independence and underwent a rapid modernization, including “the massive demographic and social upheaval” associated with

17. *Ibid.*, 285–313.

18. César A. León, *Significado histórico de la actual crisis entre Panamá y los Estados Unidos* (Panama City: Asociación Científico-Cultural de Panamá, 1964); Alessandro Russo Berguido, *¡Panamá, nación mártir!* (Panama City: n.p., 1964).

19. David Acosta, *Influencia decisiva de la opinión pública en el rechazo del Convenio Filós-Hines de 1947* (Panama City: Editorial Universitaria, 1993).

20. Carlos Guevara Mann, *Panamanian Militarism: A Historical Interpretation* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1996).



building the canal (p. 7). As a result, middle- and working-class opposition expanded over the following years, particularly after World War I and during the Great Depression. Subsequent political leaders were unable to rule Panama and turned quickly to the tactics of their predecessors, relying increasingly on the police.

The traditional elite lost control of Panama in the coup of 1931, but even the nationalist, middle-class administrations of the 1930s could not “form a united front capable of governing the nation” (p. 58). The Generation of ‘31 splintered, and leaders modernized the security forces to maintain stability. Percy notes the irony in the fact that civilians like Presidents Harmodio Arias and Juan Demóstenes Arosemena helped to foster the downfall of the democratic system by professionalizing the police and depending on it for support. Percy argues that by the mid-1940s, police officers had developed “a sense of collective identity and political cohesion capable of dominating an otherwise fragmented state” (p. 39).

Percy’s work is not unique in detailing the roots of militarism or the disintegration of republican political culture. Guevara Mann has offered another “historical interpretation” insisting that “illegitimacy” had plagued the government since the early nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> George Priestly, Steve Ropp, and Sharon Phillipps Collazos have also pointed to similar trends, although they have tended to emphasize U.S. policies, particularly support for the military following the Cuban Revolution. They view the culminating moment as 1968, when the Panamanian Guardia Nacional overthrew President Arnulfo Arias and began twenty-one years of rule.<sup>22</sup> Percy’s *We Answer Only to God* is distinctive in that he insists on an earlier date for this transition from civilian government to military ascendancy and stresses that domestic factors lay at the root of the change.

For Percy, “the decisive moment” occurred in 1947, when unpopular President Enrique Jiménez attempted to secure passage of the Filós-Hines Treaty and provoked massive protests by students, women, and opposition parties (p. 133). Although the government was discredited, its adversaries quickly splintered into competing factions. As Percy points out, “In the resulting vacuum, the police emerged with a dominant voice in the nation’s political sphere” (p. 107). He also notes that the subsequent years witnessed the rise of Commander José Remón, “Panama’s first bonafide political strongman,” who “appointed and removed presidents at will” and assumed the executive office himself in 1952 (p. 83). Remón and his fellow officers had become the most influential sector, one functioning with increasing autonomy. Percy then recasts the traditional interpretation of the Filós-Hines

21. *Ibid.*, xviii.

22. George Priestley, *Military Government and Popular Participation in Panama: The Torrijos Regime, 1968–1975* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986); Ropp, *Panamanian Politics*; and Sharon Phillipps Collazos, *Labor and Politics in Panama: The Torrijos Years* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991).

Treaty. He removes the agreement's rejection from the older nationalist trajectory and presents it as a marker for the ascension of the military, which he portrays as a domestic institution and less a creation of the United States.

James Howe performs a similar task in *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna*, an impressive examination of the 1925 Kuna rebellion. As he observes in his conclusion, "generations of Panamanian commentators" have discussed the 1925 uprising as part of the chronicle of anti-imperialism (p. 292). Within this paradigm, they have tended to depict the Indian revolt as a dangerous plot fostered by U.S. adventurer Richard Marsh, who needlessly stirred up the Kuna and threatened the nation.<sup>23</sup> This portrayal derives from several sources: from Marsh's own activities, his plans to convert the region into a U.S. protectorate, and the historic ability of the Kuna to resist Hispanization, in part by seeking opportunistic alliances with English-speaking outsiders. Marsh escaped prosecution by Panamanian authorities through what Howe fittingly characterizes as "cruiser diplomacy": the deployment of the *USS Cleveland* to the region (p. 271). Other historians have presented the revolt as "a ridiculous and tragic adventure" with the potential for ultimately dividing Panama.<sup>24</sup> While acknowledging "the leading role of this 'real-life Indiana Jones,'" Howe insists that the Kuna "would have revolted even without Richard Marsh" (p. 292). Howe presents the rebellion as far more complex and emphasizes the legitimacy of the Indians' behavior. Reminiscent of Michael Conniff's study of the isthmus's West Indians, Howe's account treats the fortunes of a minority population whose existence was threatened by Panamanian nationalists.<sup>25</sup> More generally, Howe's intricate work is infused with ambiguity, in contrast with the clear path of the nation outlined by Avila and others.

Howe asserts that Panama's separation from Colombia in 1903 thrust the Kuna into a new era of struggle "after more than a century of peace" in the region (p. 5). The Colombian period had left Kuna society largely autonomous because neither Bogotá nor Panama secured effective control of the San Blas Islands. Nevertheless, historical disputes were growing within the indigenous community, particularly over how to relate to the outside world. Independence and the U.S.-controlled canal aggravated these generational divisions as the Kuna were subjected to a host of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, Afro-Panamanian settlers, and new economic interests.

Particularly influential was the "civilizing mission" of the Panamanian government, which under President Belisario Porras sought to establish authority in San Blas and eliminate the Indian presence from society. This "cultural conquest" formed part of a larger nationalist program linked to

23. See, for example, Castellero Pimentel, *Política exterior*, 247–48.

24. Ernesto Castellero Reyes, *Historia de Panamá*, 9th ed. (Panama City: Renovación), 228.

25. Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

Panamanian humiliations by the United States and the immigration of thousands of West Indians who came to work on the canal (p. 177). In response, the Panamanian state adopted a mestizo, Hispanic identity and attempted to promote the culture of the country's central provinces. In San Blas, this campaign took various forms, including attacks on indigenous dress, religion, and customs and the imposition of the Spanish language, social dancing, and intermarriage. According to Howe, "To destroy indigenous culture was . . . the heart of the matter," and into this conflict stepped the enigmatic Richard Marsh (p. 178).

As Howe explains, Marsh "demonstrated . . . the grip ideology had on every actor in the struggle" (p. 9). Indeed, a major focus of Howe's narrative is the power of ideas, particularly their effect on outsiders who approached indigenous society with strong preconceptions. Howe describes the interactions between the newcomers and Kuna as "an extended conversation" in which these fallacies often determined one's attitude toward indigenous peoples as well as ideas regarding other ethnic groups (p. 6). Marsh, who had clearly fallen under the influence of social Darwinism, consistently viewed the Indians vis-à-vis blacks. Blacks were arriving in the region, often as part of the government's efforts to establish authority through the extension of police outposts. According to Howe, Marsh described the newcomers as "mostly ignorant . . . , unable to meet the serious obligations of citizenship in a republic" (p. 76). The Kuna, in contrast, were the ancestors of an ancient white race that he connected to the great achievements of pre-Hispanic civilization. This view was reinforced by the Kuna proclivity toward albinism, which Marsh stubbornly interpreted as a racial characteristic.

The son of an Illinois congressman and a dropout from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Marsh had spent much of his youth traveling abroad and had "alternated between engineering work and speculative business practices" (p. 73). He first arrived on the isthmus in June 1910 to accept an appointment at the U.S. legation. As chargé d'affaires, he quickly provoked a major diplomatic scandal. Marsh brazenly threatened to dissolve the republic if the National Assembly allowed Carlos Mendoza, a mulatto, to retain the presidency. Mendoza had assumed office following his predecessor's death but needed the approval of the legislature to complete the term as "first designate." Mendoza ultimately stepped down, but Marsh was dismissed from Panama. He returned nevertheless thirteen years later, representing U.S. companies looking for land for rubber production. Marsh encountered the Kuna in the Darién and organized a second expedition shortly thereafter. Following a scientific tour to the United States with a group of so-called "white Indians," Marsh returned to Panama again to assist the Kuna in the Tule Rebellion.<sup>26</sup>

26. Marsh actually published a book entitled *White Indians of Darien* (New York: Putnam, 1934).

It is important to note that most of *A People Who Would Not Kneel* focuses on the Kuna who responded to Marsh and other outsiders in a complex manner. There was no unified reaction to Panamanian independence and government efforts to create a state presence on the coast. Howe compares Kuna society to "earth's unstable tectonic plates, shifting and realigning under increasing pressure" (p. 24). Leaders like Charly Robinson and Claudio Iglesias openly cooperated with Panamanian officials to consolidate their own position in Kuna society. Others like Inanaginya fervently resisted the government's entry and maintained loyalty to Bogotá. More typically, figures like Cimral Coleman and Nele Wardada changed their positions, initially recognizing Panama but then working to weaken its rule, first through subterfuge and protest and then through rebellion. Such resistance became more evident after 1921, when the government increased its efforts to "civilize" the Indians, and a network of spies and subversion even infiltrated the indigenous police.

Howe describes the actual revolt as a confluence of various factors. The noticeably weakened Panamanian state was nevertheless oppressive, while Marsh's presence offered hope of an outside intervention. The combination of these abuses and perceived opportunities produced the uprising, often portrayed as "a tragic adventure."<sup>27</sup> Howe concludes, however, that the movement partly succeeded in achieving its goals. The U.S.-brokered peace accord "cast off police domination" (p. 292). Nevertheless, the larger relationship between the Kuna and the Panamanian state would be resolved only after years of negotiation and the establishment of an indigenous *comarca* (district) in 1938. More important, the Kuna continued to face numerous challenges. Even today they remain divided over how to deal with the outside world as new economic and political pressures have emerged to threaten the community. The overall picture is one of ambivalence, which contrasts sharply with the linear advance traced by Avila and other nationalists. As Howe concludes, the Kuna "quietly acknowledge that then and now, they have always struggled among themselves and within themselves, and while defeat may be permanent, victory is never final or complete" (p. 300).

### *Conclusion*

As Howe's work indicates, Panama's history is complex and entails perspectives that scholars have ignored to some extent, in part due to their commitment to the anti-imperialist struggle or their preoccupation with U.S. foreign policy. The Tule Rebellion was not simply the work of an irresponsible U.S. adventurer. Rather, it represented a legitimate response by the Kuna to efforts to destroy their culture. Similarly, Percy demonstrates that Panamanian militarism was not entirely a U.S. creation but more the prod-

27. Castellero Pimentel, *Política exterior*, 247.

uct of the isthmus's tumultuous modernization. Such conclusions do not negate the validity of other viewpoints, particularly many positions of the nationalist school. Indeed, Méndez's treatment of the 1964 Flag Riots confirms many nationalist assumptions, particularly in regard to the working class and its opposition to the United States. Both Howe and Percy, however, suggest that the nationalist perspective has its limitations and has obstructed to some degree scholarly understanding of isthmian society, particularly concerning minority groups and the rise of the military. These recent works are helping create a larger scholarly tradition that has begun to challenge the more conventional approaches to Panamanian history, examined largely in terms of the nation's relationship with the United States. Recent developments in Panamanian historiography suggest that this literature is becoming more diverse, especially in moving beyond the canal toward a more internally oriented vision.