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COMMENTARY

FRANK A. KNAPP JR.

It is with a nostalgic remembrance of things past and a genuine pleasure that I make these brief remarks on Professor Hugh Hamill's balanced, interpretative, and informative paper dealing with the status of biography in Mexican historiography. This may sound like the most prosaic of all prosaic beginnings but I have both special and general reasons—or motives.

Perhaps I should feel on the defensive in some degree. Those who have read the analysis will immediately draw the conclusion that I am reciprocating with gratitude for Professor Hamill's generous and kindly comments about a biographic monograph I published several years ago *The Life of Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada*. That is partly correct. I am indeed grateful to learn that Lerdo, in his opinion, has managed to wear well with time and weather subsequent historical research. I should also confess to another minor fact related to my study on Don Sebastián. I was twenty years younger and I did not then realize that I would never again be capable of mustering the same dedication, zest, sustaining and all-encompassing interest, and spirit of pioneering which I applied to that research project. And I have undertaken and completed many—mostly anonymously—in subsequent years.

In truth, I am not only in basic agreement with all of the major conclusions in Professor Hamill's paper but they hold a highly personal meaning for me. He demonstrates clearly that there has been little basic change in Mexican biographic history over many years. At one time, I had grandiose plans for literary production in Mexican biographic history, an ambition which led me to conduct my own survey of the gaps and needs. The results of my personal compilation were strikingly similar to those of Professor Hamill, adjusted of course for subsequent production.

Having stated my virtual agreement with the selections and interpretations in this paper, I will add only comments which are primarily *obiter dicta*, not major substantive suggestions or criticisms: With regard to the criteria clearly set forth by the author for selecting titles, I recognize that this is the writer's prerogative, and Professor Hamill has adhered to his own framework of limitations, with a few exceptions. However, there are many biographical essays and essay collections of considerable merit which never see the light of print in the form of a full-dress monograph. Some of these titles deserve a place at least in a more detailed bibliographical compilation of Mexican biography, particularly because there are such wide gaps in this field of literature.

One other minor dissent which I have Professor Hamill's approach is his elimination of foreigners from the Mexican biographic scene. He states: "Foreigners whose careers included involvement in Mexican affairs have not been treated on the grounds that their lives belong to the historiography

of the country of origin" (p. 288) Should the dividing line be so sharp on the basis of nationality? A more flexible criterion would be the importance of the individual foreigner's role in Mexican political, economic, cultural, or social affairs.

The introduction to this paper contains the enduring enigma in Mexican historiography, as germane today as it was to me twenty years ago. Professor Hamill notes: "Nevertheless, the absence of many first rate biographies of Mexicans is curious in a society where personalist leadership has played such an important role" (p. 285). Leaders in different spheres worthy of biographic study are products of their times, which make the framework of their activities and opportunities. Yet it is equally axiomatic that prominent public leaders influence the course of events in perceptible ways. This applies to Mexico where strong executive leadership has been, and is, the tradition. Far more perhaps than in countries where political and governmental power is diffused and boxed in with elaborate institutional structures, bureaucracies, and rooted traditions. Hence, biography should rate in Mexico as an ideal medium for organizing political, economic, or cultural history. Still, Professor Hamill's study and selections demonstrate that biography is neglected in Mexico and indeed relatively more attractive to the *norteño* specialist than the Mexican scholar.

In partial explanation, he points out that the vogue of "behavioral sciences" and institutional studies have crowded biography with its literary pitfalls from the polemical-muckraking approach at one extreme to the saintly eulogy at the other. This may account for the concentrated biographical production on Benito Juárez, Porfirio Díaz, and a few other national figures and the scholarly indifference to a multitude of other worthy subjects, but not the almost complete absence of truly classical biographies. For example, where is a work comparable to Robert K. Massie's *Nicholas and Alexandra*?

Professor Hamill may have struck the key reason in the practice of retaining private source collections in private hands. When carrying out research in Mexico in 1947, I became fascinated with the idea of writing a biography of Matías Romero and had access to his published works and some of his scattered personal letters in other mss. collections. I obtained an interview with the elderly descendant, who had inherited Romero's personal papers —reputedly voluminous. He was most courteous in his treatment of me and sympathetic toward my proposal; but he also firmly refused me any use of these materials for somewhat esoteric political reasons. I wondered at the time whether this problem of access to original sources might not be a serious obstacle to Mexican historical output, particularly biographic.

Professor Hamill also notes another hurdle to biographic history which is hardly confined to Mexico. This is the seemingly universal reflection of nationalism, accepted national symbols, and national heroes in the writing of national history. As a consequence, the so-called "losers" in the struggles over national ideals, principles, and issues are relegated to the discard heap or perform in history as traitors or villains. This factor may render partly understandable the oversight in biographic studies of the last of the Viceroy, the clerical-conservative leaders of the Reform and Intervention

periods, and many of the prominent Porfiristas after the Revolution of 1910. In truth, the cult of national hero worship (or iconoclasm) places biographic history in an intolerant straightjacket and chases scholars to less controversial fields of endeavor. As Germán Arciniegas has stated: "Our heroes, like the Greeks, constantly get farther from being men and approach closer to the gods". And he adds that Latin American historians have led the world to believe that the entire nineteenth century was nothing but "heroes of the Independence and caudillos". (*Este pueblo de América* [México, D. F.: 1945], 119-121.)

Because I once harbored lofty ambitions to produce Mexican biographic history, I cannot resist the temptation to append a few ideas of my own to the gaps in the field which Professor Hamill has adeptly enumerated. I am convinced that one of the most valuable historical projects for the nineteenth century in Mexico would combine historiography with political and cultural biography. Many of the great figures of this era were not only prominent in national politics but also in literary pursuits, especially historical writing and journalism. Their political roles could be closely correlated to their historical "methodology" and interpretations. I have in mind such men as Manuel Payno, Lucas Alamán, José María Luis Mora, Francisco Zarco, Ireneo Paz, Vicente Riva Palacio, Guillermo Prieto, Justo Sierra, Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, José María Iglesias, and others. In addition, the opportunities seem almost unlimited for biographies related to local leaders who attained a measure of prominence on the national scene at some juncture in their careers. Equally unexplored is the sphere of economic biography—the major landholders, the "captains" of industrial development, and even the principal economic planners and financiers of this century.

Professor Hamill's discussion of research in progress suggests the value of compiling a comprehensive guide on unpublished theses and dissertations on Mexican biographic topics. Apart from serving as a convenient guide to research, such a compilation might open a few doors to publishing houses. Certainly a select few of these buried titles, with revision and some additional research, might merit the printed page.

The development of oral biographic history, which Professor Hamill mentions briefly, does appear to offer biographers a new and relatively unique primary source, the importance of which cannot be evaluated accurately at this stage. Obviously, the persons interviewed are fully conscious of recording their thoughts for history and hence their statements must be weighed in much the same manner as a memoir or autobiography. Nevertheless, this technique holds the promise of being of more value to biographers than some of the "methodology" in vogue among behaviorists. The recorded voice and the style of expression give the listener a sense of reality; the "actor" has the opportunity to explain his motivation at critical periods in his career, albeit with the benefit of calm retrospect; and he may be willing to express his opinions on the influence of others with whom he was associated in public and private life. Certainly, a great deal of strictly biographical factual data on a subject, which is often time-consuming to locate, can be concentrated in taped interviews.

In concluding this commentary on Professor Hamill's excellent synthesis,

I can only hope that the audience of distinguished scholars will receive my rather candid criticisms on the status of research in the field with a measure of tolerance. I am guilty in a small way in not carrying out some of these grandiose biographic projects which I had in mind some twenty years ago. I shall duck behind the pages of *Sebastián Lerdo* and take refuge in the kindly remarks of Professor Hamill. And I feel confident that his presentation of biographic problems will be a stimulus to some of the renowned historians at this meeting and possibly in turn to their students.