Fragments of University Reminiscence

William C. Atkinson

Edited and annotated by Ann L Mackenzie

Chapter 5

1962–: Brave New World

On again: 1962. 'If I had discovered America', said the cynic, 'I'd have kept it quiet.' Once Columbus had had his say that would no longer be possible. First the wonder of it, then the disillusion. 'Had I stolen the Indies and given them to the Moors, Spain could not have shown me greater enmity'.[1] There was disillusion too for any who took literally the suggestion that knowledge of Spanish was the open sesame to a career in Latin America, with a hundred millions speaking the language from birth and no reason for standing aside. That knowledge was still the necessary beginning.

Latin America had remained the Cinderella among area studies in British universities, the more remote for its non-involvement in the war. San Francisco 1945 and the United Nations altered the perspective powerfully. Twenty out of sixty founding member states—today's tally 160—lay south of the Río Grande. Latin America not merely deserved, it needed, to be known.

Opportunity to begin the acquaintance came in 1946 with a British Council lecture tour that, extended to six months and all twenty countries, became the most extensive and intensive in the record. I was the first such visitor since 1939, and curiosity to hear about Britain, especially about Britain at war, made it a royal progress.[2] In San Marcos, Lima, oldest

---

1 Said by Columbus in his final years, when, after his third expedition, he was suffering from complete disillusionment and was living in penury (see William C. Atkinson, *A History of Spain and Portugal. The Peninsula and Its Peoples: The Pattern of Their Society and Civilization* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960], 134).

2 It was in 1946 that Atkinson undertook his first lecture tour of Latin America, funded, as he says, by the British Council. There were several subsequent lecture tours supported by the British Council (most notably, in 1960, [?]1968 and 1971); he held the title 'Visiting British Council Lecturer'. At least some of the lectures he gave about Britain during these tours have survived and copies are in Glasgow University's Archives (see, for instance, 'El carácter inglés a través de la historia social inglesa', delivered throughout Latin America in 1946, and published in *Revista de América* (September 1946); 'Latin America As Seen from Great Britain', delivered at the Universidad del Sur, Bahía Blanca, Argentina, 1971). Just before his retirement in 1971, he wrote an article commenting upon his last tour of Latin America earlier that year, which also includes reminiscences of, and comparisons

university in the Americas, three lectures were broadcast to the nation and published.[3] In Bogotá, surely the highest return ever for a discourse, an honorary professorship of the National University of Columbia. In Mexico City three ex-Presidents of the nation in the audience. Unofficial speaking engagements and broadcasts far outnumbered the official. Hospitality public and private was overwhelming. And—perhaps most important of all—a vast range of contacts for Glasgow University opened up.[4] From the British Council an invitation to become its roving representative for the entire area, to which I preferred the knowledge that, under its auspices, I could repeat the experience at any time.

In Lima I was in at the establishing of Markham College, the first British public school outside Britain. On subsequent visits I would watch it grow mightily. Later my son would teach there for three years.[5] Buenos Aires provided my second front seat at the inauguration of a dictatorship. Three months earlier Perón had been an army colonel, Evita a third-rate actress.[6] A ward was reserved in every city hospital, fortunately unneeded. As I went on to visit that country's universities the shape of things to come was immediately apparent. The dictator's declaration of war on intellectual freedom began with the sacking of each university rector and the sacking by his replacement of each dean of faculty.

Now, in 1960, I was back for a third visitation, with two more to come. Open doors everywhere, and Glasgow's interest becoming generally known. One recalls the press conference in Santiago and the banner headline next morning: 'If you want to know about Latin America go to Glasgow'. In any

---

with, his earlier tours (see William C. Atkinson, 'A Rolling Stone Bows Out', *Glasgow University Gazette*, 67 [December 1971], 1–3; republished below).

3 At this remove in time, it is difficult to identify all three of these published lectures; but one of them might well have been his 'Impresiones de Latino-America', *Saber Vivir*, 65 (September 1946).

4 Atkinson made productive use of these numerous contacts, to the benefit of many of his students and former students at Glasgow University. For evidence of the assistance he generously gave them in their careers, whether in academia or elsewhere, see John C. McIntyre, 'Professor William C. Atkinson (WCA) As Remembered by Some Former Students'; see also Giovanni Pontiero, 'Professor William Atkinson', *The Independent*, 30 September 1992, p. 23.

5 A reference to his eldest child and only son, Anthony C. [Cedric] Atkinson. An independent, non-profit-making day school, Markham College is among the most prestigious schools in Lima, Peru. Founded by British expatriates, the College is co-educational, bi-lingual and secular.

6 A reference to the dictatorship of Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974), who became President of Argentina in 1946 and to the role of his second wife, Eva Perón (1919–1952). She collaborated closely with him in his political and other activities. Perón was overthrown in a *coup d'état* in 1955, but returned, after eighteen years of exile, to become in October 1973 briefly President of Argentina once more; he died in July 1974. His third wife, Isabel Perón succeeded him as President. We might wonder what Atkinson might have made of Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice's musical dramatization of the life of Eva Perón (*Evita*, 1978) and its now famous songs. He was clearly no admirer of Perón, or of Eva Perón.

country of the twenty, one could obviously study its culture as nowhere else: in none could one study that of any of the others. Brazil in particular, its different language and so different history two factors, stands out as more closely tied to the States, even to Europe, than to its neighbours.

And Glasgow's interest was fructifying. One of its graduates headed the Bank of London and South America in Bogotá, a central factor in the Colombian economy. Another, in Lima, was representative for all of Latin America of one of Britain's industrial giants, G.K.N.[7] A third, teaching in a university in the States, was seconded for two years as the only non-U.S. member of a team invited by the government of Ecuador to overhaul that country's educational system. A fourth and fifth were directors of British Institutes in Mexico City and Buenos Aires, their students numbered in thousands, while a sixth would launch another in Brasilia, the breath-taking new capital of the colossus, as large as the other nineteen countries put together and proud to be known as the land of the future.[8] Reviewers had chided for my writing once that Brazil had been fortunate in falling to Portugal. Fortunate too in Britain's share in her so strikingly different achievement of independence, that maintained an empire intact where Spanish America had disintegrated explosively.[9]

Explosive was now the word for the university situation in Spanish America. With the sixties came the fiftieth anniversary of the famous "University Reform" of 1918, born in Córdoba, Argentina. Its chief conquest, the famous *tercio estudiantil* or student-third participation in all university bodies, was still being proclaimed a triumph when in 1946, in Lima, Dr Alberto Sánchez, stormy petrel and eventually patriarch of Latin-American university administrators, then recently returned from exile to the rectorship of San Marcos, proudly presented me with a copy of its new constitution embodying the principle.[10]

---

7 GKN plc is a British multinational company specializing in automotive and aerospace components. Formerly known as Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds, the company, with its headquarters in Redditch, Worcestershire, can trace its origins back to 1759 and the Industrial Revolution.

8 Impossible now to identify all of the graduates from Glasgow University Atkinson refers to here, who, with his support, went out to various countries in Latin America to make or to further their careers. However, the graduate who launched and became director of the new British Institute in Brasilia (1960–1962) could have been Giovanni Pontiero (see McIntyre, 'Professor William C. Atkinson [WCA]'); A. Gordon Kinder, 'Giovanni Pontiero (1932–1996)', *BHS* (Glasgow), LXXIII:3 (1996), 333–35 (p. 333). According to Kinder, however, Pontiero was 'Director of Studies at the English Cultural Institute (British Council)' in João Pessoa. If Kinder is correct, then it was another of Atkinson's graduates who launched the British Institute in Brasilia.

9 The reviewers who chided Atkinson no doubt were reviewing his *A History of Spain and Portugal* (1960), in which he makes similar observations about Brazil: whose 'vast extent found its answer not in disruption but in the principle of empire; […] Brazil was fortunate in having fallen to Portugal' (276).

10 Born in Lima, Luis Alberto Félix Sánchez Sánchez (1900–1994) was a Peruvian lawyer, jurist, philosopher, historian, writer and politician. During Alan García's presidency

The consequences had been traumatic. San Marcos by the sixties had its University City too, on the outskirts, Dr Sánchez's offices, high in a business block in the centre, were guarded by heavies and notably difficult of access. Why does the Rector never show himself on the campus, I asked. 'He wouldn't dare'. In Bogotá on my next visit my honorary professorship was in abeyance and, by request, no lectures. Instead tanks on the campus and burning buses in the streets. The National University of Costa Rica welcomed with a huge banner: 'Bienvenidos a estudiar y a luchar'. Study if you choose, but you are here to fight.

One of the century's great pathetic fallacies was bearing its fruit, and exporting it. By my next visit to California it had reached Berkeley, whence it crossed the States, then the Atlantic, to culminate in the Paris riots of '68 that threatened for a moment to topple de-Gaulle's France. Some anniversary. A decade later, coinciding at a conference in Toronto, I asked Dr Sánchez, still Rector, if he was still the enthusiast. Perhaps he conceded, it would have been better to have made it the student fourth.[11]

There was of course more to Latin America than student violence. These were the years too of that other wholly estimable, if in the end no less pathetic, fallacy, that, given the resolve and the means, even human nature allied to secular tradition can be overcome. President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress of 1961 pledged itself to drag a score of undeveloped

---

of Peru (1985–1990), Dr Alberto Sánchez was his Vice President and was appointed for a short period as Prime Minister of Peru. In Congress he served twice as President of the Senate. He was three times Provost of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos.

11 For reference to student unrest in 1968 and thereafter, as it affected British universities, see McIntyre, 'Professor William C. Atkinson (WCA)'. Regarding student unrest at Essex University in particular, where Albert Sloman was its first vice-chancellor, see Ann L. Mackenzie, 'Sloman, Sir Albert Edward (1921–2012), Hispanic scholar and university administrator', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2016), Oxford Biography Index Number 101105451; <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/105451> (accessed 6 February 2018). The Department of Hispanic Studies at Glasgow University saw its share of student unrest at this period, as several articles published in the University's student magazine, *Glasgow University Guardian*, reveal. See, for instance, 'Explosion in Spanish Department!', *Guardian*, 19:7 (14 February 1969), 1; 'Professor Threatens SRC [Student Representative Council] with Prosecution', 20:5 (22 January 1970), 1–2. In Atkinson's department the students were protesting in part because there was no staff-student committee. Such committees are the norm in the twenty-first century, but were still regarded askance in some departments at Glasgow in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Atkinson's Department of Hispanic Studies, in 1969–1970, the students were also protesting that there was too much medieval Spanish literature taught in the Ordinary (i.e., First Year) classes; and that prose-translations were marked to a higher standard in Spanish than in the other Modern Languages. The students believed that these factors contributed to the fail rate of 50% or more in Hispanic Studies First Year Degree Examinations. Eventually, compromise was reached through discussions, and harmony was restored. See, on this dispute and its resolution, Bernard McGuirk's memoir of Geoffrey W. Connell (1928–2014)', *BSS*, XCIII:1 (2016), 153–56 (p. 154).

nations into the modern world, all this within ten years.[12] Travelling around, I watched the feverished activity, the burgeoning of development agencies of every kind, the multiplying of tripwires that channelled resources into unintended destinations. Illiteracy, bugbear no.1, created Pátzcuaro in Mexico as centre for fundamental research into techniques applicable to a continent of infinitely variable linguistic situations, where for millions the schools and the teachers would first have to be improvised.[13] Primitive agriculture, primitive communications across vast distances, primitive standards in health care, in administrative competence and probity: where did one begin? Why, I asked one ambassador, does no Minister of Agriculture ever tackle land reform? 'Because he would be signing his own death warrant'.

A stocktaking at mid-term showed the dream already on the wane. With food production barely keeping pace with population, the U.S. Congress cut its financial commitment by a quarter. Full term, 1971, and, the framework still in position, achievement had for practical purposes been written off. Illiteracy, still bugbear no. 1, Mexico now combating it by radio. To-day no more is heard in Latin America of the Alliance for Progress, Washington's concern now the twin threats of default on soaring national debts and of the communist advance that feeds on the failure of the Alliance to pull these countries up by the bootstraps.

Why do the best-laid plans and fairest prospects in Latin America go awry? On my first visit in 1946 the Mexican peso had stood at 12.50 to the dollar. On my last, 1971, still 12.50, the stablest currency around. Then Mexico struck oil, and struck it inordinately rich: an end to the country's problems. The rate today is some 450 to the dollar, and the national economy is in crisis. Economists do not have the answers. They lie far back in history.

But does one despair of the Brave New World, to which Canning once turned to redress the ill-balance of the old?[14] There is much to be learnt

---

12 President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963), President of the United States from 1961 until his assassination in 1963, established the Alliance for Progress, of which Atkinson is so critical, to assist underdeveloped countries worldwide. Initiated in 1961, the Alliance for Progress (Alianza para el Progreso) aimed to establish economic cooperation between the US and Latin America; it was disbanded in 1973.

13 During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), Pátzcuaro became a cultural centre and major destination for tourism. Public monuments were built and archeological excavations were carried out to help conserve its colonial and indigenous history and traditions. A recent book, the product of archival and historical research, argues that the creaton of Pátzcuaro laid the foundations of modern Mexico (see Jennifer Jolly, *Creating Pátzcuaro, Creating Mexico: Art, Tourism and Nation Building under Lázaro Cárdenas* [Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2018]).

14 George Canning (1770–1827) was Foreign Secretary (1807–1809) under the Duke of Portland. He was passed over as successor to Portland in favour of Spencer Perceval. After Perceval was assassinated in 1812, Canning served under the new Prime Minister, the Earl of Liverpool, as British Ambassador to Portugal (1814–1816). He was Foreign Secretary and

from the study of it, including the relativity of all forms of government and the ultimate value of the individual who can shrug off the tentacles of disillusions. Tanks on the campus, and in a back street in the same Bogotá a hand-painted board affixed to a shanty door: 'Universidad de Corte' (dress-making), a widow plying her needle and willing to teach others to fend for themselves.

It has been a good life.

Leader of the House of Commons (1822–1827). Canning had major achievements in foreign affairs, helping to guarantee the independence of the Latin-American colonies of Spain and of Portugal (i.e. Brazil) and ensuring a major trading advantage for Britain. Named after him, Canning House in Belgravia, where the Hispanic and Luso Brazilian Council is based, houses a research library and is used for cultural and educational events. What every schoolboy is said to know about Canning is that he 'called a New World into being to redress the balance of the Old'. Or so Atkinson put it, in the lecture he delivered at Canning House, London on 27 March 1950, to commemorate the bicentenary of Miranda's birth. For this lecture, see William C. Atkinson, 'Miranda: His Life and Times' (London: Venezuelan Embassy, 1950), 24 pp.; see p. 14.