

Stringing Together a Nation: Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon and the Construction of Modern Brazil, 1906–1930. By *Todd A. Diacon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. xi + 228 pp. Photographs, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$74.95; paper, \$21.95. ISBN: cloth 0-822-33210-8; paper 0-822-33249-3.

Reviewed by Gail D. Triner

Not many people have a state named for them, but Cândido Rondon, whose namesake is Rondônia, has been so honored for his contributions to the “construction of modern Brazil.” Rondon is credited with (or blamed for) furthering the Brazilian policies that protected and/or encouraged the assimilation of the indigenous populations; in the United States, he is known, if at all, for acting as former president Theodore Roosevelt’s guide during an expedition in the Amazon in 1914. Rondon’s leadership in building the first telegraph line through parts of the Amazon Basin explains his importance in Brazilian history.

Stringing Together a Nation, by Todd Diacon, tells the social history of constructing this telegraph line through the prism of Rondon’s experience. Leading teams of men (and sometimes their women) into the unexplored and hostile environment of the Amazon Basin was an intimidating task. Disease, daunting logistics, unfamiliar terrain, and wavering political support presented greater difficulties than the actual job of stringing wires. The goal was to extend the line as far as the Bolivian border, thereby enabling the Brazilian army to maintain constant, instantaneous communication. Logistical problems during the Paraguayan War (1864–1870) provided the justification for the Army to undertake this project at the beginning of the twentieth century. Diacon does not discuss the extent to which the army took the national security needs for the telegraph seriously. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the military, rather than commercial, origins of the project. Even so, Rondon was committed to the developmental potential of the line, particularly its usefulness for establishing contact between the indigenous population and westernized Brazilians. The project was extremely difficult and dangerous. By imposing harsh discipline, taking risks, and accepting death among his

workers, Rondon strung more than eleven hundred miles of telegraph wire through some of the most forbidding terrain on earth.

This book is neither a business nor an economic history. Nevertheless, it touches on many issues that must be taken into account by historians in these fields who are interested in topics and locales outside the United States and Europe. The first consideration is the reality that ideology and politics may be powerful motivations for technological development, as powerful as any other. *Stringing Together a Nation* emphasizes that the telegraph embodied positivist goals for a unified, strong, and modern Brazil. Positivism was considered a religion by its adherents and it had significant currency among policymakers in Latin America from the end of the nineteenth century through the early years of the twentieth. It shaped the political environment, opening space for technological and economic development, and it provided the context for the military's participation in the government and economy of many nations. In describing Rondon's adherence to positivism, Diacon presents a clear and sophisticated explanation of the ideology (or religion, as Rondon practiced it).

Diacon also emphasizes multiple interpretations of particular events. Notably, Roosevelt's trip through the Amazon has often been described not only as a demonstration of TR's adventurous and curious frame of mind but, here, it is also an example of his disdain for indigenous people. Rondon viewed his assignment as TR's guide as an opportunity to promote the construction of the telegraph, both globally and within Brazil. However, the expedition became a distraction from the immense task at hand, seriously delaying construction. Roosevelt's imperiousness and lack of interest in both the telegraph project and its promoters made Rondon's project more difficult.

Although it was not Diacon's purpose to write about economics and technology, the scant coverage of these topics is nevertheless surprising. On its completion, the telegraph line was mainly used by its own officials. It did not promote settlement or advance development of the region (pp. 137–140.) By extending the chronology beyond the construction of the line, the author could have revealed whether this situation changed in subsequent years. The scale and (presumably) the expense of laying a telegraph through the Amazon in the early twentieth century beg for examination and leave unanswered a number of questions: How much did this utopian project cost Brazilian

citizens? Was there a way of making it less unprofitable or more useful? How did telegraph development compare with advances in other forms of infrastructure (railroads, electric grids, etc.) in Brazil or with telegraph lines in other developing nations?

Notwithstanding these questions, *Stringing Together a Nation* is an excellent social history with a fascinating story to tell. It reveals a chapter of Brazilian history that deserves attention, and it addresses a number of issues that economic and business historians of Brazil (and Latin America, more generally) have overlooked. The book is well written and a pleasure to read, making this relatively unknown chapter of Brazilian history interesting and accessible to a wide audience.

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