

Empresas y empresarios en la historia de Colombia, Siglos xix–xx: Una colección de estudios recientes. [Firms and Entrepreneurs in the History of Colombia in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Collection of Recent Studies]. 2 vols. *Edited by Carlos Dávila L. de Guevara*. Bogotá: Editorial Norma, S.A., and Ediciones Uniandes, 2003. lxxviii + 1348 pp. Notes, bibliography, figures, illustrations, tables. Cloth, \$165.00. ISBN: 9-580-47162-2 (for both volumes).

Reviewed by John Womack Jr.

Although business is as old in the Western hemisphere as the Genoese backing of Columbus, “business history” in Latin America started only about forty years ago. In Colombia it is still newer, dating only from the 1980s. The first Colombian business historian, trained at Northwestern by Frank Safford, is the editor of these volumes. Carlos Dávila knows the subject better than anyone else in the world, and he has assembled a rich array of new articles on “firms and entrepreneurs” in “Colombia” (the country’s name since 1863) over the last two hundred years.

The collection is not just a landmark, proving the field now exists professionally in Colombia. It is on its own merits a highly valuable contribution to historical scholarship on modern Latin America. After the editor’s extensive, illuminating introduction, two essays review theories of entrepreneurship and their applications to business history in Spain (a better model for comparison than the United States). There follow thirty-five studies on a range of topics: entrepreneurial elites in various Colombian regions, particular businesses and businessmen, business associations, and business interest in technology. Only one goes into the deep past, a study of the owners of the biggest hacienda around Bogotá between 1538 and 1790. The others cover periods between the 1790s and the 1990s. Of the thirty-nine authors, thirty-four are Colombian, of whom seventeen are professional historians, eight are economists, and five are sociologists. The collection, as the editor notes, is not a “manual” of Colombian business history, for the field is still “in formation.” But it presents a savvy choice of exemplary contributions to advance the field’s development.

The book has several commendable features. First, the authors all avoid the old vulgar urge to represent their subjects as extraordinarily heroic or demonic. Whether they treat businesses previously ignored by historians, as most here do, or study subjects long mythologized in the historiography (e.g., the famous *antioqueños*, reputed to be born for business), they follow regular academic standards in pursuit of historical explanations. Second, they all know Alfred Chandler's major arguments, but no author makes naïve application of them. They read them respectfully but critically. Third, various articles go beyond the famous Antioquia, to explore the Caribbean coast, Caldas, Cauca, Santander, and Bogotá, and the region around it. They vividly suggest Colombia's several historic centers of production and distribution, on both its coasts, along its two great rivers, and inevitably up in its great mountains, which all together form an extraordinarily complex set of centrifugal forces. Fourth, the sectors under view are not only the Colombian classics, mining, agriculture, and manufacturing, but also ranching, commerce, and transport. And the classics are not just the archetypical businesses, gold, coffee, and textiles, but they also include speculation, sugar, tobacco, printing, candy, leather, soap, hats, beer, cigarettes, matches, and steel. German as well as English merchants are prominent. And transport extends from steamships and railroads to mules and air cables. Fifth, several articles focus on the country's few big businesses, such as United Fruit, Colombian Navigation, Coltejer, Bavaria, Coltabaco, Cordicargas, but most study the vastly many more small and middling businesses. Whatever their English, German, U.S., or *antioqueño* connections, these minor firms were provincial in capital and in markets, and grew widely in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this context, United Fruit was a gross anomaly. Real capital accumulation happened broadly in Colombia, archetypically through a local family business, at least until U.S. investment after World War II. Many family firms would fail, but failure did not trim local propensity for such ventures. Finally, evidence abounds of the overlap between business and politics: most businessmen in Colombia were also in politics, or had close relatives who were, and this was perfectly normal.

While all the articles are of high quality, the most significant are three pieces on transport—on the Magdalena, railroads, and (after 1939) highways—because they indicate how future historians will probably explain the formation and development of

the country's markets. They convey the accurate impression that nationally the most strategic businesses were in transportation. Following trade with new means to facilitate it, opening new routes to lead and expand new exchanges, freight-haulers seem to have made the systems that made Colombia a country.

Granted that this collection is not a manual, much less a synthesis or textbook, and that its editor himself notes its limitations, there are some faults. No article focuses on internal ports, or on the oil industry, or on drugs. Nor do any focus on business law, or on businessmen involved in framing legislation. Compared with the current interest in "law and economics" among Mexican and Brazilian business historians, the lack of concern here for commercial codes or taxes or tariffs is odd. Only two authors in the collection attend to price indices, or exchange rates, and have graphs in "real" terms. The others only narrate reasons why businesses thrive or slump or go bust. The book is almost entirely without labor history. The only exception is the article on United Fruit from 1900 to 1970, which is revisionist, persuasive, and important.

The major fault is theoretical. The editor remarks that Colombian historians have not yet fully absorbed theories of "the entrepreneur," which they are learning primarily from Spanish sociologists and economic historians. They would do best to quit these lessons. The Spanish Chandler is Oliver Williamson's "mushy" Chandler; no author here evidently knows Williamazon's "sharp" Chandler, much truer to Schumpeter's original argument, analytically clearer, and therefore easier to read critically, and apply apropos. Neither the Spanish nor the Colombians evidently know the new "growth theory" (exemplified by Jean Tirole, Philippe Aghion, and Peter Howitt). Nor do they refer anywhere to Philip Scranton's anti-Chandler arguments, which they should also read critically.

As usual in books published in Latin America, there is no index.

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