

JOHN LEDDY PHELAN (1924–1976)

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In the immediate aftermath of John Phelan's sudden, unexpected death—on July 24, 1976, at age fifty-two—there was a general outpouring of eulogy and grief among students of Latin America, in this country and elsewhere. Friends and colleagues, juniors and elders, expressed their sense of loss and lamented the tragedy of a productive career cut off long before its normal culmination. Now some months have passed, and the time has come for a more serene perspective on a personality long since mature, a life's work in many respects very well developed.

Born in Fall River, Massachusetts in 1924, John received a bachelor's degree at Harvard, graduating cum laude in 1947; he took his doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1951. After some further study in France and a time as a research fellow at the Newberry Library, in 1956 he accepted a teaching position at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 1960 he moved, already a tenured faculty member, to the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin, which was thenceforth to be his base. In the course of his life he published three significant books and completed a fourth, wrote many smaller pieces, and supervised a good number of doctoral dissertations (it was after his appointment there that Madison began to become a center for graduate study in Latin American history). His work received the recognition of numerous research grants, including Fulbright, Guggenheim, and American Council of Learned Societies awards. He was a member of the Colombian and Ecuadorian Academies of History. He served on the editorial boards of several journals in the field, including the *HAHR*. In 1973 he was elected Chairman of the Conference on Latin American History.

Such is the outline of his career. Behind it was a person of more than usual complexity. With most people, one soon knows whether they are creatures of solitude or of society, but with John it remains far from clear. He was much alone: a bachelor, addicted to the monastic aloneness of the archives, owner of a Mediterranean island retreat,

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and alone at the time of his death. Yet in a way John was gregarious. He loved gatherings, had friends and correspondents on three continents, and without a doubt was gossipy. On the one hand, this side of him brought his graduate students in the 1960s into his home for seminars and sherry afterward, and gave us a stock of anecdotes about such figures as Woodrow Borah and Lewis Hanke (always referred to by first name, for John did love to drop names). On the other hand, this facet made John a great asset in constructive organizational activity in his history department and in CLAH. It led him also to involvement in Democratic politics, from the hosting of parties for notables to passionate declarations of principle on matters of national welfare.

Of a prominent Boston Irish family, John had a lifelong intimate emotional involvement with Christianity and the Church. At Berkeley he was much attracted to mysticism and medieval Christianity. His dissertation and first book has such matters as almost its main substance. As he moved toward administrative history, there was always some hint of the older orientation. His work on the high court of the Quito region contains an entire chapter on a future saint, the "Lily of Quito." And whatever the exact nature of his religious beliefs as an adult, John would seem to have been deeply affected by the notions of priesthood and monasticism, to have practiced professorship on the analogy of priesthood—a high calling demanding both training and dedication, an activity superficially of daily routine but essentially of soaring to the sky.

Yet John was an art connoisseur, bibliophile, collector of colonial art objects, and proud possessor of a Frank Lloyd Wright house in Madison. Indeed, as a knower of good food, wines, and furnishings, John was in the best sense a *bon vivant*. At the core, this aspect of John was by no means incompatible with a priesthood. It was simply sensitivity combined with the desire that everything around him, everything at all permanent, formal, or potentially public, should be perfect, rare, rich, and high in a way amounting to holiness.

All these things show themselves in John's work. Within the framework of what was important to him, his research was meticulous and thorough, in the service of some higher concept, and the writing was done with art, balance, and lucidity. (This tightly controlled writing was vastly different from John's charmingly breathless conversational style, in which one partial sentence was tied, after a pause, to another, and often yet another, all topped off, for finality, by a cocked head, tightlipped downturned smile, and generally authoritative look.)

The work showed itself as very personally John's in other ways as well. Here too he was quite alone, yet associated with fellows. Most of his strict contemporaries of the immediate postwar epoch turned to the study of the national period of Latin America, the first serious movement in that direction. Only after ten years and more was there a strong (if partial) trend back to the early period, John's principal field of activity. Thus John stood a demi-generation between two groups, his half-mentors, such as Borah, and his half-students, of whom I was one.

In his French studies John had toyed, and more than toyed, with the pan-Latinism of the mid-nineteenth century; later he was to write a famous review article on a series of expressions of twentieth-century Mexican nationalism ("Mexico y lo mexicano," *HAHR* 3: 1956, 309–318). These were more than mere episodes, but the main focus stayed on the early period. John distinguished between the interpretive or intellectual framework, where he ranged widely, and the field of application, which was most distinctly colonial Latin America. In interpretive outlook he was in some ways akin to, both influencing and influenced by, scholars as diverse as Richard Morse, Stanley Stein, and John Johnson.

John was a pioneer in moving the locus of his research from region to region and time to time, that is, in viewing Latin America as a single entity. It was not because of mere esotericism that he seemed to avoid "central" or popular places or times. If something is a unit, the weaker, more remote, or earlier facets of it are as important to its nature and its operative processes as any others. For whatever reason, John was one of the first twentieth-century Latin Americanists who did not become a specialist in any one nation.

His work nevertheless contained very strong lines of development. Let us look at some of them, both the more external ones and the internal ones of thrust and approach. John's dissertation and then first book, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World: A Study of the Writings of Geronimo de Mendieta (1525–1604)* (University of California Press, 1956; 2d edition, 1970), came out of the ambience of Berkeley, strongly influenced by his studies there in medieval intellectual and religious history. It is a concise, eloquent statement of a major Franciscan writer's visionary Christian interpretation of Spanish action in America, with considerable attention to medieval intellectual origins. It stands as one of the very few high quality works of intellectual history in the historical literature on early Latin America.

After *The Millennial Kingdom*, John turned definitively from the purely intellectual to the study of Spanish imperial activity and especially to topics of administrative history. His second book, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), put the Philippines directly in the context of Spanish practices elsewhere. Here John began the liberal use of interpretive ideas from the social sciences in his analysis, something which was to characterize all his work thenceforth. The book originated in the time of John's fellowship at the Newberry Library, repository of so many Philippine sources.

A new phase of John's work was announced in his important article "Authority and Flexibility in the Spanish Imperial Bureaucracy," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 5: 47-65 (June 1960). On analogy of what had been found for some later governmental systems of other parts of the world, John proposed that, in view of multiple hierarchies, regional diversity, and great distances, the lack of strict fulfilment of edicts was an integrated part, indeed a positive virtue of the Spanish system: that conflicting standards allowed for flexible action best suited for specific situations, while selective enforcement through the *residencia* and *visita* allowed higher authorities to regain control when necessary. In the article John announced his next book as the place where he would work out these themes in detail. The book, *The Kingdom of Quito in the Seventeenth Century: Bureaucratic Politics in the Spanish Empire* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), became a large one, throwing light on many aspects of a neglected time and place as well as demonstrating its principal themes. It also moved in the direction of social history, following the President of the Audiencia in much greater depth, with a broader perspective and a better sense of career patterns, than had been the case in previous administrative studies. This central figure, Dr. Antonio de Morga, represents one of the threads in John's work, since Morga had been an important administrator in the Philippines (as well as author of a historical work on that area) before he came to Quito.

Doing research on Quito led John to a knowledge of the archives of Colombia, and he gradually became a Colombian expert—the closest he ever came to a national specialty. The last time I saw him, in December 1975, I asked him if he was going to carry out his old intention of returning to his first arena, Mexico, after finishing his current project. He said that though he sometimes thought of doing so, he had now invested too much of himself in Colombian matters to leave them again.

The project that drew John to Colombia was a study of the Comuneros revolt of 1781. With this undertaking he had proceeded gradually from sixteenth through seventeenth to latter eighteenth century, the whole time span of the colonial period. Thematically the Comuneros work related to *The Kingdom of Quito*, and John begins a draft of the introduction to the manuscript with the simple statement that “this book grew out of my last book.” Where the emphasis in the earlier work was on mechanisms for conciliating tensions and conflicts, the later one studies the conditions of the occasional breakdown of the system. Fortunately for the field, this largest of John’s enterprises was complete at his death. The book *The People and the King: The Comunero Revolution in Colombia, 1781* had been accepted for publication and is expected to appear in the course of 1977.

Thus despite his untimely death, John has left the field one of its significant *oeuvres*, spanning centuries and continents, uniting disciplines and approaches, replete with materials that will continue to give enlightenment for many years to come.