
The crucial role played by the llaneros of Casanare in winning independence has long been recognized by Colombian historians. Although they have written little about the province before or after the great conflict, Camilo Riaño, Cayo Leonidas Peñuela, Eduardo Pérez Ochoa, and Javier Ocampo López have described the guerrilla warfare in the llanos, the declaration of a republic in 1818, and the liberation campaign in which Bolívar led the plainsmen of Casanare and Apure to victory at Boyacá. In La participación de Casanare, Pérez reinterprets these familiar events from a regional perspective, and although based on published primary and secondary sources, his synthesis is an important contribution to the literature.

Pérez’s narrative is meticulously footnoted and clearly written. In nine short chapters he analyzes the almost continuous confrontations, battles, and skirmishes and the first forms of republican organization on the llanos. Besides listing 250 Casanareños who fought in the war and asserting that archives in Yopal contain at least 800 more, he offers few new details; yet, by organizing the material around local concerns, the activities of llanero chieftains balance the better-known efforts of Santander and Bolívar. The destructive nature of the personal antagonisms between caudillos and between Colombians and Venezuelans takes on sharper focus, as does the brutality of the fighting. After reading Pérez, it is possible to understand how the events of 12 years demolished the province’s modest prosperity and reduced it to the utter prostration from which it has never recovered.

Most important, one finds in the book an affirmation of the provincial identity of Casanare, a region of endless tropical plains and mestizo cowboys and Indians, who, by the eighteenth century, had developed a unique system of beliefs, traditions, and folklore. Pérez demonstrates how the characteristic rebellious spirit of the llaneros became a positive force in the emergence of Colombian nationalism and remains a vital element in the intendency today. A native Casanareño, Pérez at present is the leader of a group of young intellectuals who are committed to recovering the history of the llanos. One hopes that he will continue to use his considerable scholarly skill to tap unexplored local archives and illuminate other episodes of llanos history, for, as he asserts in the preface, only by dispelling the ignorance of the past can the people of Casanare claim their rightful place in the future.

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