

OBITUARY

Guillermo Hernández de Alba (1906–1988)

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On July 17, 1988, just three days short of the 20th of July, a national and a local holiday which he had done so much to commemorate, Guillermo Hernández de Alba died in Bogotá, aged 82. A native Bogotano, Don Guillermo was a scion of a family of architects and builders who had embellished nineteenth-century Bogotá proper, as well as its then suburb, Chapinero, with their works. He received a sound classical education at the Colegio de San Bartolomé, where he completed his secondary work in 1925. He pursued his professional studies at the Colegio de Nuestra Señora del Rosario.

Like many Colombian intellectuals of his day, Don Guillermo held a variety of official posts, beginning in 1932 and ending a half-century later. Almost all of these lay in the realm of culture. He was at various times head of the Archivo Histórico Nacional, professor at El Rosario, director of the Biblioteca Nacional, chief of the cultural history department at the Instituto Caro y Cuervo, and founder-director of the Casa-Museo del 20 de Julio de 1810. Often, his career as a functionary coincided with his historical and cultural interests. Thus, his concerns for the preservation of the remnant of central Bogotá's colonial buildings still standing after the destruction of April 9, 1948 (and efforts by indifferent developers) also deserve mentioning.

At 24, he was elected to corresponding membership in the Academia Colombiana de Historia (1930). In that body, he would enjoy the company and critical support of a number of distinguished elder colleagues (e.g., Eduardo Posada and José María Restrepo Sáenz). Their example and advice were not lost on him. In his own historical writing, Hernández would join together an eloquent Spanish prose style and a thorough familiarity with archival and printed sources. His emphasis was more on political than on economic or social themes, a reflection of his place and times. Yet, in

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Don Guillermo, Colombian cultural history also enjoyed one of its earliest and most enthusiastic exponents.

Starting with his joint effort with Father Daniel Restrepo, S.J., *El Colegio de San Bartolomé* (1928) and continuing with his *Crónica del . . . Colegio Mayor del Rosario* (2 vols., 1938–40), both mines of biographical data, Hernández went on to enlarge his consideration of higher education in his essays, *Aspectos de la cultura en Colombia* (1947). In 1953, he collected and edited the *Analectas del Colegio Mayor del Rosario*. In 1969, he published the initial volume of *Documentos para la historia de la educación en Colombia* (1540–) (drawn mainly from the Archivo Nacional), which, in its seventh volume (published in 1986) had reached 1807. It is hoped that the concluding volumes will be printed, albeit posthumously. In 1977, Hernández, in collaboration with Juan Carrasquilla Botero, brought out the informative *Historia de la Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia*.

Substantial as the above-noted works are, they represent but a fraction of Don Guillermo's historical production. His interest in art history can be dated to the early 1930s, when he began to print a series of articles on historic local churches and their builders, craftsmen, and artists. Some of these, together with other new ones, he brought together in his pioneer *Teatro del arte colonial: Primera jornada en Santafé de Bogotá* (1938), whose illustrations revealed the rich colonial artistic legacy still extant in the Colombian capital. This work was followed by *Guía de Bogotá: Arte y tradición* (1946), in which, in 44 gracefully written vignettes, he described the principal buildings and historically important sites of his native city. In 1955, he published *Arte hispánica en Colombia* (1955), and eleven years later, *Gregorio Vázquez de Arce y Cevallos*, a study of the seventeenth-century Santafereño religious painter.

In a lighter vein, Don Guillermo was largely responsible for the delightful *Gloria arte y humor en José María Espinosa*, which featured the drawings, engravings, and some cartoons of that memoirist, boy *prócer*, and Bogotá miniaturist (1968). Don Guillermo's last two efforts in this vein were an edition of the *Acuarelas de la Comisión Corográfica (1850–1859)* (1986) and one of the paintings of the gifted twentieth-century landscape painter, Ricardo Gómez Campuzano.

Despite the importance of the above contributions, Hernández's main historical thrust would lie in the late colonial and independence periods. His interest in Antonio Nariño (1765–1823), *el Precursor*, remained lifelong and led to a series of informative and well-researched works, starting with his brief *Diez años [1799–1809] desconocidos en la vida de Nariño* (1933), which drew on Nariño letters in his possession. Other themes would divert him from Nariño, but a three-year stint as Colombian consul

in Madrid (1947–50) allowed him to return to it. One result of his Spanish sojourn was the important *El proceso de Nariño a la luz de los documentos inéditos* (1958), drawn from Madrid's Archivo Histórico Nacional. Then in 1966, Hernández brought out *Cartas íntimas de Nariño*, and, between 1980 and 1984, a two-volume, greatly enriched version of *El proceso de Nariño*. In 1983, he published *Iconografía de don Antonio Nariño y recuerdos de su vida*, and in 1985, his *Casa de Nariño*. These all point to a larger work which he did not manage to complete.

While the fiery dissident Nariño attracted him, Don Guillermo was also drawn to the pious physician from Cádiz, José Celestino Mutis (1732–1808), colonial scientific *prócer* and director of the Real Expedición Botánica. An initial result of this interest was his 1947 edition of the *Archivo epistolar del sabio naturalista José Celestino Mutis* (2 vols.), containing manuscripts culled from various private, public, and printed sources, mainly Colombian. While he was stationed in Madrid, Don Guillermo did research in the Real Jardín Botánico, where he found a great trove of Mutisiana. He transcribed and edited Mutis's *Diario de observaciones* (2 vols., 1957–58) and, in 1968, issued a greatly enlarged *Archivo epistolar de . . . don José Celestino Mutis* in two volumes. Finally, he published the *Escritos científicos de Don José Celestino Mutis* in 1983, and in 1986 his compilation, *Historia documental de la Real Expedición Botánica . . . después de la muerte de su director Don José Celestino Mutis 1808–1952*.

As prolix as the Hernández de Alba opera may seem from the foregoing, this is, in fact, a selection that omits mention of a baker's dozen of other books, as well as the several hundred articles, all of which deal in some way with Colombia's past. Guillermo Hernández de Alba was in addition a helpful colleague, a charming raconteur, and a man with an unparalleled grasp of the men and events of New Granada's eighteenth century. Dean of the Academia Colombiana de Historia, member by election of two dozen other learned bodies (including the Hispanic Society of America and the Academy of American Franciscan History), Don Guillermo's many friends and colleagues in his native Colombia, in Spain, in Venezuela, and in the United States mourn his passing.