

Horacio Rodríguez Plata (1915–1987)

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Horacio Rodríguez Plata, Colombian historian, died in Bogotá on August 28, 1987, after a long illness. Scion of families long prominent in the department of Santander, he was born in El Socorro on March 19, 1915, and received his primary schooling there. As a secondary school student in Bogotá, the young Horacio volunteered for service against Peru in the Leticia conflict in 1932, only to catch yellow fever and be forced to return to his studies. He then served a stint as circuit judge at Barrancabermeja (1938–39) before completing his degree in law and political sciences at Bogotá's Universidad Libre in 1940.

With excellent Liberal credentials, Rodríguez Plata was successively director of public education (1941), secretary of finance (1941), secretary of government (1942), governor (1942), and, again, secretary of government (1944) in his home department. He also served as a deputy for Santander in the national congress in 1943–44. These experiences brought him not only political insights, but also much firsthand knowledge of his ancestral region.

The collapse in the mid-1940s of the Colombian Liberal polity forced Rodríguez Plata to abandon his promising political career for many years; only in 1958–62 did he become national senator. He spent 1945–58 as manager and partner of a Bogotá paper products company, and, in the early 1950s, also started Editorial Sucre, an enterprise which would last about a decade, during which it published a number of historical works. In addition, Don Horacio taught Colombian history and geography and the Spanish language in various Bogotá preparatory schools from 1945 to 1969. He also taught at various institutions of higher learning, including

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the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (1962–69) and the Universidad de los Andes (1982–86).

Rodríguez Plata's writings brought him membership in more than two dozen historical academies and societies in Spanish America and in Spain. He was an active and vigorous member of the Academia Colombiana de Historia for nearly a half-century, serving as its president in 1953–54 and its treasurer from 1962 to 1970. Don Horacio also was the driving force behind the creation of the Casa de la Cultura in Socorro in 1954, an institution which has played a major role in preserving local notarial and other historical documentation. At the national level, he reaped some recognition for his efforts on behalf of his country's culture through an appointment as subdirector of the Instituto Colombiano de Cultura (1969–70), and as syndic-administrator of the Universidad Nacional in 1972–73.

Dr. Rodríguez Plata's long and consistent concern for, and work in, his native region's past would be the main theme of his voluminous historical production. He saw his role as that of a retriever of an important regional past, cast into oblivion during nearly fifty years of Conservative ascendancy (1886–1930). Through his writings, he attempted to set the record straight. The *Comuneros* (1780–82), the many Socorranos *próceres*, General Francisco de Paula Santander, and the many other Santandereano leaders of the first fifty years of the republican existence of Colombia were restored to their rightful places in Colombia's pantheon thanks in part, at least, to Rodríguez Plata's efforts.

Although he began publishing brief articles in Bucaramanga newspapers while a teenager, Rodríguez Plata's more substantial historical effort dated from 1939. Between that year and 1986, he produced more than a hundred and fifty articles in journals and periodicals. Their topic was primarily the regional past of Santander Department, but this single focus did not lessen his contribution to Colombian twentieth-century historiography. His first substantial work was *Andrés María Rosillo y Meruelo* (1944), a carefully crafted biography of a perennially contentious Socorro-born canon of the Bogotá Cathedral (1758–1835). Then appeared his *José María Obando íntimo* (1958), an insightful glimpse into the Cauca caudillo's family life between 1840 and 1849. This was followed by *La antigua provincia del Socorro y la Independencia* (1963), a work that went far to confirm the preeminent role of El Socorro as the epicenter of much of the Colombian independence movement. In his fourth major work, *La inmigración alemana al estado soberano de Santander en el siglo XIX* (1968), Don Horacio showed the impact of German business entrepreneurs and educators on the economic and cultural growth of Santander between 1863 and 1885. His fifth book, *Antonia Santos Plata* (1969), was a life of

this Socorrana heroine of independence (1782–1819) with an essay on her extended family, the historically noteworthy Platas.

Santander en el exilio . . . 1828–1832 (1976) was to be his next large work. It is a richly documented account of Santander's years of prison, exile, and travels in Europe and the United States. Rodríguez Plata would compile three volumes, *Escritos sobre el general Santander* (1980), of writings dating from 1851 to 1977 about the general and, with Pilar Moreno de Ángel, compile a handsome pictorial tribute, *Santander, su iconografía* (1984).

This recital of bibliography does not really do justice to Horacio's historical effort, for his shorter writings, articles, and essays all bore his trademarks: primary research and measured analysis. Apart from his major themes, Rodríguez Plata wrote studies of colonial weights and measures, the history of the Colombian postal service, and slavery and its abolition. A minor but enduring classic is his delightful tongue-in-cheek "Las hormigas 'culonas' en la historia y en el folklore," which has seen at least five reprintings. It became one of Don Horacio's articles that were collected in a volume, *Temas históricos* (1978). In one of his last works, *Aspectos del radicalismo en Colombia* (1985), Dr. Rodríguez Plata sought to set the record straight on the achievements (especially in education) of the Radical Liberals up to the time of their political demise in 1885.

In sum, Don Horacio was a man of many interests, a man of strong regional and national convictions, yet a cultured person familiar with the wide world. His was the work of a political historian in transition toward a more social approach to the Colombian past. To have had him as a colleague was a delight, to have enjoyed his warm friendship over thirty-five years, a signal honor.