
These studies in the legal and institutional history of the Spanish Indies by the distinguished Spanish scholar Ismael Sánchez Bella have all been previously published, some in journals of difficult access. Volume 1 is devoted to the subject of the visita general, one of the two procedures the Spanish crown used to make sure that government officials in the New World exercised just and efficient administration (the other was the residencia). Based on a mass of archival and printed sources, the essays in this volume add to our knowledge and understanding at numerous points.

While most of these pieces have a technical or documentary character, in the essay “Eficacia de la visita” Sánchez Bella attempts to assess how well the visita general achieved its objectives. He notes the generally negative judgments of modern scholars like Ernst Schäfer and Guillermo Lohmann Villena, whose criticism centers on the visitas’ excessive cost, long duration, and meager results. He also cites the oft-quoted comment of the Marquis of Montesclaros, viceroy of Peru from 1607 to 1615, who compared the visitas to gusts of wind in streets and public squares that accomplished nothing but to raise dust, straw, and other refuse, making passersby cover their heads.

Conceding the validity of much of the criticism, Sánchez Bella nevertheless concludes that the visita general was more effective in achieving the royal end of just and efficient administration than those critics thought. One wonders, however, whether it is possible to speak of the pursuit of an abstract “justice” in reference to a colonial system based on pitiless exploitation of Indian, black, and mixed-blood masses and administered by a bureaucracy notorious for its practice of corruption, nepotism, and venality. On close examination, however, most of the visitas Sánchez Bella discusses appear to pursue not justice but a greater flow of revenue to the crown, the solution of disputes between peninsulars and creoles over the allocation of jobs, and other pragmatic issues.

About half of the bulky second volume deals with compilations of and commentaries on the Laws of the Indies. The remaining essays address special aspects and episodes of colonial government. Of particular interest are the carefully researched studies “El gobierno del Perú, 1556–1564” and “Las Audiencias y el gobierno de las Indias (siglos XVI y XVII).” Both throw new light on these important subjects. Despite its slightly apologetic, Hispanista tinge, this collection of essays has a large informational and analytical value.

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