

Obituary

Thomas E. Skidmore (1932–2016)

Thomas E. Skidmore, the prominent historian of Brazil and professor emeritus of Brown University, passed away on June 11, 2016, in Westerly, Rhode Island. He left a rich intellectual legacy in his books and articles that analyze politics, society, and culture in twentieth-century Brazil.

Born in Troy, Ohio, on July 22, 1932, Professor Skidmore graduated from Denison University in 1954. He received a Fulbright fellowship to study at the University of Oxford, where he earned a master's degree and met his future wife Felicity Hall, the daughter of Robert Hall, chief economic adviser to His Majesty's government from 1947 to 1961, and Margaret Hall, an economics fellow at Somerville College, Oxford. He returned to the United States to complete his doctorate in European history at Harvard University in 1961, with a focus on late nineteenth-century German political history. Skidmore taught as an instructor and then as an assistant professor at Harvard from 1960 to 1966. While at Harvard, Skidmore received a three-year research fellowship to study a Latin American country. He liked to tell the story that Harvard offered Spanish-language courses at 8 a.m. and Portuguese at 11:00 a.m., so he chose Brazil.

The end result was his seminal work, *Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964: An Experiment in Democracy*, published in 1967 by Oxford University Press. Skidmore argued that the 1964 military coup d'état was as much a rejection of Getúlio Vargas's nationalism and populism as it was an attempt to eliminate supposed communist influences in the government of President João Goulart, who was deposed by the coup. *Politics in Brazil* immediately became the definitive political history of this tumultuous period in mid-twentieth-century Brazil. The Portuguese-language edition, *Brazil: De Getúlio Vargas a Castelo Branco, 1930–1964* (Editôra Saga, 1969), immediately became a classic. Oxford University Press published a fortieth-anniversary edition in 2007, and it was recently reissued by the Brazilian publishing house Companhia das Letras.



Figure 1. Thomas E. Skidmore. Courtesy of Felicity Skidmore.

Skidmore followed up that volume with a political history of the military regime, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964–85*, published by Oxford University Press in 1988, which documented the political system under the dictatorship and the gradual return to democratic rule in the early 1980s. As in *Politics in Brazil*, Skidmore engaged in meticulous research in available archives and produced a political narrative that also included a detailed economic overview of the two decades of authoritarian rule. The footnotes remain a rich guide for new generations of scholars working on this period. Taken together, these two volumes offer the most comprehensive survey of modern Brazilian history in English and have become classics in the history of Republican Brazil. Skidmore also produced an important history textbook, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (Oxford University Press, 1999), with a second, revised edition in 2010.

In 1967, he moved with his family to Madison, Wisconsin, where he became a full professor at the University of Wisconsin the following year. Skidmore was the backbone of the Latin American studies program there. He also edited the *Luso-Brazilian Review* and trained many generations of scholars, while continuously maintaining a close relationship with Brazil.

While at Wisconsin, Skidmore wrote *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1974; Duke University Press, 1993), which traces the changes in notions of race in Brazil from debates during slavery to the eugenic and nationalist movements of the twentieth century. *Black into White* offers important insights into how the Brazilian elites understood race and how those ideas changed over time. Like his two works on the political history of twentieth-century Brazil, this volume has become a reference point for all subsequent treatments of the subject. He continued publishing on this topic in an edited volume, *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940* (University of Texas Press, 1990).

Skidmore's interest in modern Latin American history led him to coedit with Simon Collier and Harold Blakemore *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Cambridge University Press, 1985, 1992), which has also been published in Spanish. He coauthored with Peter H. Smith *Modern Latin America* (Oxford University Press, 1984 and seven subsequent editions), coauthored with E. Bradford Burns *Elites, Masses, and Modernization in Latin America, 1850–1930* (University of Texas Press, 1979), and edited *Television, Politics, and the Transition to Democracy in Latin America* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1993).

Professor Skidmore moved to Brown University in 1988, where he was appointed the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes Professor of Modern Latin American History. He taught in the Department of History and was affiliated with the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies. He directed the Center for Latin American Studies until his retirement in 2000. Skidmore served as president of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) and the New England Council of Latin American Studies.

Among the most well-known academics working on Brazil in the United States, on two occasions he made public statements about the political situation in that country that caused confrontations with the military dictatorship. In 1970, Skidmore and three other prominent scholars of Brazil in the United States—Richard Morse of Yale University, Stanley J. Stein of Princeton University, and Charles Wagley of Columbia University—signed an open letter condemning the imprisonment of the leading Marxist historian Caio Prado Júnior. At the time, Skidmore served as chair of the Government Relations Committee of LASA. In that capacity, he sponsored a resolution condemning the military regime's systematic repression of Brazilian academics and other oppositionists that was approved in a general meeting of the body and later ratified by the LASA membership. In retaliation for his political stance, the Brazilian government denied him a research visa to teach a seminar at the State

University of Campinas (UNICAMP) in the summer of 1970. While lecturing in Brazil in 1984, on the eve of the return to democratic rule, Professor Skidmore was summoned to appear before the Federal Police for commenting on the political situation and was threatened with expulsion from the country. Charges were later dropped. Many Brazilian scholars, politicians, and journalists came to his defense, considering the actions of the Federal Police unconstitutional and a violation of academic freedom.

In Brazil, Skidmore became the personification of the Brazilianist or *brasilianista*, a term originally coined as a pejorative reference to North American scholars who worked in Brazil and allegedly misunderstood the country's history, society, and culture or had preferential access to people and archives. Skidmore embraced the term and was warmly received by his intellectual counterparts because of his noted love for the country and its culture, his sharp mind and wit, his genial personality, and his impeccable scholarship.

Skidmore is survived by his wife Felicity, his three sons—David, James, and Robert—and three grandchildren. The family has requested that donations in his memory be sent to Skidmore Memorial Brasiliana Library Fund, Brown University, Box 1877, Providence, RI 02912, USA.

JAMES N. GREEN, Brown University

DOI 10.1215/00182168-3824089