

LA BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL MÁS ANTIGUA DE AMÉRICA

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Historia de la Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia. (Publicaciones
del Instituto Caro y Cuervo, number 38). Bogotá: The Institute.
1977. Pp. xviii, 447.

The Biblioteca Nacional in Bogotá is the oldest national library in the Americas, indeed, is older than any but about a half dozen national libraries in Europe. With the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, their property was turned over to the crown. The society's library in Santafé de Bogotá contained 4,182 volumes. Largely at the instance of the creole Francisco Antonio Moreno y Escandón, the Real Biblioteca de Bogotá opened its doors in 1777. The first of sixty-three librarians through the bicentennial was Anselmo Álvarez. Among them have been such brilliant names as Miguel Antonio Caro, Daniel Samper Ortega, and Tomás Rueda Vargas.

Here is the first chronologically complete history of the first two centuries of the library. Eduardo Posada, the noted Colombian bibliographer and historian, published *Narraciones: Capítulos para una historia de Bogotá* in 1906, with one chapter on the library, the best available study to date. The present work uses many documents and much iconographic material that could not find a home in Posada's relatively short work. The authors have used original documents (manuscript and printed), new printed editions of sources, and many portraits, photographs, and facsimiles (74 plates in all). This book is mainly a framework, however, and the critical analysis of the past history of the Biblioteca Nacional and its prognosis for the immediate future is a chore that remains to be done.

The story of the Latin American national libraries, even the fairly large ones in México and Río de Janeiro, is, in general, pathetic. They have received nothing like the support given to European national libraries, even in the smaller jurisdictions. They have been political booty for men of letters and other persons on the right side (as have many state libraries, even today, in the U.S.). The present work reflects this situation, but it is an eligible point of departure for future studies, particularly with the indication of source material. There are only bibliographical footnotes, not a bibliography.

There is a section on special collections. Like most of the recent U.S. "research" libraries, the collections are spotty, with isolated cismelia. Most valuable are the collections on Colombian literature and history, of which a catalogue would be useful. A few of the other

special collections also deserve to be made better known through catalogues.

The gradually increasing interest in the library history of Latin America is most encouraging. Perhaps more than most institutions, libraries can profit from the examination of the past, for the physical evidence of achievements and mistakes is on all sides and must be handled on a continuing basis. Here is a cornerstone for Colombian library history.

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En *The American Historical Review*, New York and London, abril de 1980, pág. 488.