A Concise History of Mexico

The second edition of this accessible guide to Mexico brings the story up to date with an examination of the presidency of Vicente Fox who came to power in the elections of 2000. Additional illustrations highlight Mexico’s development during this period. The book also includes a new section on the country’s cultural development from the founding of the country in 1821 to the present day. This section reinforces the importance of Mexico’s long and disparate history in the forging of the modern nation. This theme is central to the narrative, which charts Mexico’s history from the pre-Columbian era, through the European incursion and the colonisation of the country under the Spanish, to the collapse of New Spain in the nineteenth century and the founding of the Republic. In combination with an integrated account of Mexico’s political, social, economic and cultural history, the book tackles major themes including the relationship between constitutionalism and personal power, the debate over federalism and centralism, and the role of the Catholic Church in a secular state. The author’s first-hand knowledge of the country which he has been visiting for most of his life, and his appreciation of its complex and vibrant past, come through on every page. This book will be bought by students, travellers and all those interested in modern-day America.

Brian R. Hamnett is a Research Professor in History at the University of Essex. He has researched and travelled widely in the Iberian peninsula and Latin America, and has written extensively on Mexico. His recent publications deal with the late Spanish colonial period, the struggles for Independence, and nineteenth-century Mexican history.
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A Concise History of Mexico

SECOND EDITION

BRIAN R. HAMNETT

University of Essex
Dionisio alegaba que él no era antiyanqui . . . por más que no hubiese niño nacido en México que no supiera que los gringos, en el siglo XIX, nos despojaron de la mitad de nuestro territorio, California, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Nuevo México y Texas. La generosidad de México, acostumbraba decir Dionisio, es que no guardaba rencor por ese terrible despojo, aunque si memoria. En cambio, los gringos ni se acordaban de esa guerra, ni sabían que era injusta. Dionisio los llamaba ‘Estados Unidos de Amnesia’ . . . El hecho es que si los gringos nos chin-garon en 1848 con su ‘destino manifesto’, ahora México les daría una sopa de su propio chocolate, reconquistándolos con mexicanísimas baterís lingüísticas, raciales y culinarias.

Dionisio maintained that he wasn’t anti-Yank . . . even though everyone born in Mexico knew that the Gringos in the nineteenth century had stripped Mexico of half its national territory – California, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Mexico’s natural generosity, Dionisio was accustomed to say, meant that she bore no grudges: however, that didn’t mean she’d forgotten. The Gringos, though, didn’t even remember they’d fought the war, let alone that it had been unjustified. For that reason, Dionisio would call their country the ‘United States of Amnesia’ . . . The fact is that, if the Gringos fucked us up in 1848 with their ‘Manifest Destiny’, now Mexico would give them a taste of their own medicine, reconquering the lost territories by the most Mexican of methods – the Spanish language, racial identity, and the national cuisine.

Carlos Fuentes, *La frontera cristalina* (Mexico 1995)
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1925 José Vasconcelos, La raza cósmica (The Cosmic Race)

1926–29 Cristero Rebellion

1929 Electoral defeat of Vasconcelos

1929 Martín Luis Guzmán, La sombra del caudillo (The Chieftain’s Shadow)

1929–33 Impact of the Great Depression

1934–40 Lázaro Cárdenas, President

1938 18 March, Nationalization of the petroleum industry

1940s to late 1960s Economic expansion: Mexican predominantly urban

1946 Prior official parties, PNR (1929–38) and PRM (1938–46), transformed into PRI, which holds power until 2000

1947 Agustín Yáñez, Al filo del agua (The Brink of the Storm)

1950 Octavo Paz, El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude)

1953 Juan Rulfo, El llano en llamas (The Plain in Flames)

1955 Juan Rulfo, Pedro Páramo

1958 Carlos Fuentes, La región más transparente (The Clearest Region)

1962 Carlos Fuentes, La muerte de Artemio Cruz (The Death of Artemio Cruz)

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the years since the publication of the first edition, Mexican studies have continued to expand, as the additions to the bibliography clearly demonstrate. Mexico entered a new phase in its history, when in the presidential elections of July 2000, the electorate voted the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) out of power. Mexicans asked themselves in 2000 whether their country had finally become a working democracy, in which opposition parties gained national power and the institutions of federalism functioned effectively. High expectations of a reforming presidency gradually petered out in the subsequent years amid charges of empty rhetoric, unfulfilled promises and political confusion. I have included a brief analysis of the Fox Presidency of 2000–06 in a new Chapter 8. Since I am a historian and not a ‘political scientist’, I make no predictions about either forthcoming election results or future developments in the country.

This second edition retains the structure, periodisation and themes of the first. However, I have amended certain sections, particularly in Chapter 2, in the light of further reading, and corrected a factual error in Chapter 4, which should never have appeared in the first place. At the same time, I have removed several comments on the events of the later 1990s in Chapter 7, which seemed to be important at the time but which now do not. In retrospect, the first edition seemed to lean too far in the direction of economic and political analysis. I have sought to correct the balance by including discussion in a new Chapter 9 on key aspects of Mexican cultural life, particularly literature and cinema. Both of these have had considerable impact in the international community. This
chapter also responds to comment received in conversation that Mexico first struck the attention through its contemporary literature and cinema.


I am particularly grateful to Professor Valerie Fraser, Department of Art History and Theory, University of Essex, and Curator of the University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, for assistance in selecting three images from the collection as fresh illustrations for this edition. Similarly, I must thank Dr Roderick McCrorie, Department of Mathematics, University of Essex, for the use of his Private Collection of Mexican Lithographs. I received considerable help in the technology of picture transmission from Belinda Waterman, Secretary in the Department of History.
PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Research on Mexico is an exciting and fast-developing topic. Perspectives are repeatedly changing. Mexico, with a population around 95 million, forms part of the North American sub-continent. Since the early sixteenth century, it has been part of the Atlantic world that resulted from European expansion. Before that time, Mexico was also part of a pre-Columbian world unknown to Europeans. For that reason, the country has a complex multi-ethnic and multi-cultural pattern that continues to have an impact on contemporary events. Nevertheless, anyone interested in Mexico quickly discovers that there are few things for the beginner to read. At the same time, those who perhaps might have returned from their first visit to the country will frequently look in vain for a book which enables them to analyse what they have seen with any thematic coherence.

I first went to Mexico as a research student in January 1966. A great deal of my own history has been lived there since that time, and the country itself has in some respects changed beyond recognition. Yet, at the same time, particularly in the provinces and the villages, and in general attitudes and assumptions, a great deal of the traditional outlook, for better or for worse, still persists.

Approaching Mexican history as I initially did from the geographical perspectives of the centre and south, the core zones of Mesoamerican civilisation, I was always conscious of the deeply rooted inheritance of the indigenous American past. My consciousness of the importance of the pre-Columbian era has grown over the years, particularly since the region I originally studied was Oaxaca, the centre of Zapotec and
Mixtec cultures and still a state with an indigenous majority. My specialisation then was the late colonial era. When I first arrived in Mexico I came by sea from Cádiz after a long period of study in the Archive of the Indies in Seville. I sailed on a 6,000-ton Spanish ship which took two and a half weeks to reach Veracruz by way of Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. After the turbulent January winds across the Gulf of Mexico, I certainly did not feel like a Conquistador when I first arrived on Mexican soil. Nevertheless, I had come to Mexico to study the colonial era, and bold decisions had to be made as to how to go about it. In the cities and towns of the central core of Mexico from Zacatecas (where the north begins) to Oaxaca in the south, the richness of a colonial culture transforming from European to American can be immediately appreciated. Cities such as Puebla, Tlaxcala, Querétaro, Guanajuato, Morelia (then Valladolid), San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas and the capital itself all exhibit an architectural and artistic wealth comparable to European cities of the period. My experience as a ‘Mexicanist’ began that way. However, many other tendencies have emerged since then, the most recent being deepening interest in the north. Readers will find the north and the ‘far north’ (currently described in the USA as the ‘American Southwest’) abundantly present in the following pages.

This book adopts a number of significant positions. It does not start in 1821 with the independence of Mexico from the Spanish Empire. It does not assume that in historical perspective Mexico should be defined as the truncated political entity of the period after 1836–53, when the United States acquired half of Mexico’s claimed territory. The approach is thematic as well as chronological, allusive perhaps rather than all-inclusive. The book opens with a look at Mexico today and a few suggestions about how it came to be that way. After this, we shall then go back to the pre-Columbian era for the real historical beginning, and continue forwards from there through a combination of themes and chronology. The periodisation I have adopted corresponds more to contemporary reinterpretations of Mexican history than to traditional approaches.

In attempting a revised periodisation, I still found I had to compromise significantly. I had originally hoped to bridge the traditional historiographical divisions at Independence (1810–21) and the Revolution (1910–40) by a more radical periodisation: ‘Destabilisation and Fragmentation, 1770–1867’; ‘Reconstruction, 1867–1940’; and
‘The Monopoly Party, 1940–2000’. However, I still found that the dividing lines at 1810 and 1910 could not and should not be avoided. At the same time, I have compromised by placing these more traditional turning points within the context of my original broader sweeps. It seemed to me also that the collapse of the French Intervention and with it Maximilian’s Second Empire in 1867 represented a major turning point in the nineteenth century. This signified the end of European attempts to recover control in Mexico and assured the survival of the sovereign state which had emerged from the War with the United States (1846–48). Similarly, 1940 and 1970 emerged as subsequent points of arrival and departure. The former initiated the period of consolidation of revolutionary changes and provided a symbolic starting point for three decades of economic expansion and political stability; the latter opened the way for descent into three decades of political division and economic dislocation. These lines of demarcation are, of course, subject to criticism and revision. I hope that the question of periodisation will occupy part of the ongoing historical debate concerning the interpretation of Mexican (and Latin American) history.

Colleagues and friends in Mexico and elsewhere have contributed to this book, sometimes without realising it. Many rewarding conversations helped to give it shape. Dr Josefina Zoraida Vázquez (El Colegio de México) has been a continuous source of encouragement and support in many of my recent projects, and always a stimulating critic and discussant. Professor Brian Connaughton (UAM – Iztapalapa) has also been a great help in probing the problems and issues of late-colonial and nineteenth-century Mexican history, not only as a result of seminars at the UAM, but also in regular, three-hour breakfasts in Mexico City, which have ranged across the dynamics of Mexican culture. Dr Bernardo García Martínez (El Colegio de México), author of an alternative concise history of Mexico, pressed home to me the dynamics of the north in a memorable conversation in a Galician restaurant in Mexico City in March 1996, and thereby contributed decisively to my shift in perspective. Professor Paul Vanderwood (San Diego State University), who has been a source of ideas and a good critic over two decades, gave me his hospitality in San Diego at a crucial stage of rethinking and writing early in January 1998. The libraries of the Instituto José María Luis Mora and the Centro de Estudios de Historia de México (CONDUMEX) provided agreeable places of study.
Preface to the first edition

Students and colleagues at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Strathclyde University, and Essex University helped refine the ideas and interpretations offered here. I am particularly grateful to Xavier Guzmán Uribiola and Carlos Silva Cázares, in Mexico City, for their help in selecting the illustrations and maps which form a significant part of this work.