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978-0-521-41248-3 - Bello and Bolívar: Poetry and Politics in the Spanish American Revolution

Antonio Cussen

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICAN  
AND IBERIAN LITERATURE 6

Bello and Bolívar

As Andrés Bello predicted in 1823, the glory of Simón Bolívar has continued to grow since the Spanish American Revolution. The Revolution is still viewed as an almost mythical quest, and the name of the Libertador has become synonymous with the region's hopes for integration. In this book, the official history of the Revolution – the heroic history of Bolívar – is replaced by the account of Bello, who was first Bolívar's teacher and later his critic. Through a detailed study of the manuscripts of Bello's unfinished poem *América*, Antonio Cussen reconstructs Bello's version of the Revolution and seeks to understand its political and cultural consequences. The author argues that Bello recorded the disintegration of the Augustan model of power and intimated the inevitable approach of liberalism with a certain longing for the classical culture of his youth.

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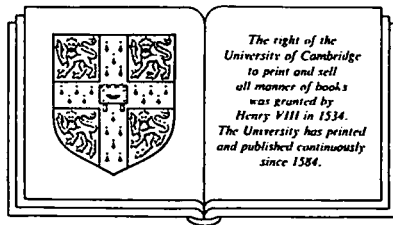
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# Bello and Bolívar

## Poetry and politics in the Spanish American Revolution

ANTONIO CUSSEN



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK PORT CHESTER MELBOURNE SYDNEY

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992

Printed in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Cussen, Antonio.

Bello and Bolívar: Poetry and politics in the Spanish American Revolution / Antonio Cussen.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Latin American and Iberian literature ; 6)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-41248-x (hardback)

1. Bello, Andrés, 1781–1865. Alocución a la Poesía. 2. Latin America – History – Wars of Independence, 1806–1830 – Literature and the wars. 3. Bello, Andrés, 1781–1865 – Political and social views.
4. Bolívar, Simón, 1783–1830. I. Title. II. Series.

FQ8549.B3A7436 1992  
861 – dc20

91-10546  
CIP

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Cussen, Antonio

Bello and Bolívar: Poetry and politics in the Spanish American Revolution – (Cambridge studies in Latin American and Iberian literature. 6)

1. South America, history, 1809–1830. Bello, Andrés 1781–1865. Bolívar, Simón 1783–1830  
I. Title  
980.02

ISBN 0-521-41248-x hardback

Cambridge University Press

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For my parents

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## Acknowledgments

My interest in Bello and Bolívar began during my years as a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley, when Michel Foucault led me to look at poetry as an archive that often includes secret meditations on power. I owe much to Luis Monguió for pointing out the need to study Bello's poetry in the light of Virgil and to G. Arnold Chapman, Francine Masiello, Tulio Halperin Donghi, Gwen Kirkpatrick, and Florence Verducci, who made valuable suggestions regarding my dissertation, which was an earlier draft of this book.

In Santiago, Chile, I spent many hours discussing Bello with the late Alamiro de Avila, who gave many helpful hints about Bello's London years and made valuable comments on the manuscript. With the generous assistance of Haverford College I made two trips to Caracas, where I met several distinguished scholars who guided me in my work. I have particularly fond memories of my discussions with Ildefonso Leal and Arturo Ardao. At the Casa de Bello in Caracas I spent many hours talking about Bello and Bolívar with Pedro Grases and Oscar Sambrano and was able to examine the manuscripts of Bello's poems, which allowed me to date them and suggest a chronology for his political and cultural evolution during the London years.

At Haverford I had many useful discussions with students and colleagues. I would especially like to thank Israel Burshatin, Richard Luman, and John Spielman for their editorial suggestions. I also benefited from the help of Serena Black, Jorge Edwards, Amy Einsohn, Julie Greenblatt, Enrique Pupo-Walker, Mario Lobo, and Mary Racine and from the comments of the anonymous readers of the manuscript. This book's errors and omissions are, of course, my own.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to my children for their interest in my work and to Celia for her generosity of heart and mind.

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## Introduction

On April 19, 1810, after learning that the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte were in control of the Iberian Peninsula, the people of Caracas moved to oust the local Spanish officials and to form their own governing junta. The Venezuelans were fearful of French aggression, and in June they sent a diplomatic mission to London in search of an ally. The mission was headed by Simón Bolívar; its secretary was Andrés Bello. Bolívar returned the same year to Venezuela, where he helped transform the grievances of the Caracas junta into a decisive call for independence. Bello, for his part, remained in London until 1829. As a leading voice in three London journals – *El Censor Americano*, *La Biblioteca Americana*, and *El Repertorio Americano* – he became one of the most accomplished members of the Spanish-speaking intelligentsia, whose headquarters during this period were in London. And in his unfinished poem *América* (1811–26), Bello recorded a version of a crisis whose repercussions are still felt throughout the American continent.

In Spanish America, Bello and Bolívar are often invoked as the representatives of the Americanist ideal, the union of all the Spanish-speaking countries on the continent. We often hear how Bolívar with his sword and Bello with his pen gave political and cultural independence to the continent. The alliance of the two founding fathers forms one of the most enduring myths of the Spanish American Revolution, and we seem to cling to that myth all the more strenuously the more we realize that the Revolution's promises of freedom and well-being failed to materialize.

In this book I look closely at Bello's poems, particularly the fragments of *América*, which are among the principal sources of this myth. Poetry was always the medium that linked Bello and Bolívar. In the years before the Revolution, both attended the neoclassical literary gatherings of colonial Caracas, where they



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and their friends could assume the disguises of Horace, Virgil, and Maecenas and attempt to replicate the glories of the Augustan principate. Still undisturbed by romanticism and republicanism, they could then play out their pastoral fantasies by imitating and translating the Roman poets or by acting out the more severe role of critic or patron. After 1810, once the events of the Revolution separated them, Bello expressed in poetry his most compelling thoughts on the Libertador; and in the scattered documents that reveal Bolívar's passion for poetry, we discover his reactions to the lines of his old friend.

The evidence presented in this book is mostly Bello's, and therefore the story is told from his perspective. I have made no attempt to temper his claims and his often impassioned allusions to Bolívar, and if the tone is partial it reflects primarily the partial feelings of Bello. I have traced his thoughts on Bolívar and the Revolution throughout his long life, from Caracas to London to Santiago, where he lived for thirty-six years, until his death. But my main effort has been to reconstruct Bello's version of the Spanish American Revolution during his London years. I have therefore tried to replace the official history of the Revolution – the heroic history of Bolívar – by the account of a poet who was recording his thoughts and feelings on the Revolution from a distant and perhaps privileged vantage point.

I like to think of Bello's *América* as an archive of undiscovered statements about the Spanish American Revolution. Read in isolation, these statements do not speak to us: they are like old files in a corner collecting dust. But once we evoke their historical context, they become vibrant testimonies, documents that illuminate the past. Poems, however, are not ordinary documents. They not only yield historical information that satisfies our positivistic anxieties; they also furnish a wealth of information that enables us to perceive the sensibility of an era. Poems, especially poems written in times of revolution, are also an intense response to a generalized crisis of meaning; we can find in them the roots of a culture that is being threatened and transformed.

Bello's reputation as a poet has suffered because readers have tried to see in him what he clearly was not, a romantic poet, a contemporary of Wordsworth and Coleridge. When Bello arrived in London in 1810, he began to write a philosophic and

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didactic poem in imitation of Virgil's *Georgics*, a genre that was completely out of style in England. Like other Spanish American authors before and after him, he was following a literary model that was hopelessly out-of-date in northern countries. But his Virgilian lines were describing one of the most radical and profound upheavals of the day, a revolution that shook and altered the West. Bello may well be a prime representative of the conflict between past and present – a characteristic of Spanish American letters. It is his *destiempo*, this clash of a classical voice with a world that is inexorably subverting all the major strongholds of classical culture, that constitutes the peculiar appeal of his poetry.