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Obituary
Woodrow W. Borah (1912–1999)

I go where the data take me.
(Woodrow Borah, in conversation with James Wilkie and Rebecca Horn, 1983)

The death of Woodrow Borah on 10 December 1999—he had toiled for some time, with hallmark dignity and candid resignation, from complications arising from a stroke—brings to a close an eminent chapter in the study of Latin America's past, one that began in the 1920s at the University of California in Berkeley and which the elusive term "Berkeley School" evokes but does not capture fully. Though Borah did not take up a position at Berkeley until 1948, by which time Herbert E. Bolton, Sherburne F. Cook, Carl O. Sauer, and Lesley B. Simpson had long since established Berkeley's Latin American credentials, it is arguably Borah's name that scholars (and computer search engines) might first generate when conjuring up the work of the Berkeley School, for his output was as prodigious as his views of Latin American history were provocative. Borah, of course, would have had none of this, insisting that an intellectual foundation

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had been laid by his colleagues before him, singling out Sauer's influence foremost of all. Reflecting on his years at Berkeley as a graduate student, Borah recalled:

> When I came to Berkeley, I intended to major in geography […] but I continued in history. When I began to talk to Herbert E. Bolton about study, he suggested that I make the acquaintance of Carl Sauer, who, after testing me a little, decided to let me into his seminar. I stayed in that seminar all the time that I was a student and a year or two afterward. The seminar provided an enormous amount of stimulus. Bolton had a huge seminar that dealt with the Southwest and Latin America. The students were probably of the same caliber as Sauer's, but Bolton treated them very gently, and he did not challenge them or drive them as Sauer did. […] Sauer had a broadly ranging mind that would bring up new and stimulating questions—they were revelations—and force the students to start thinking about them. Bolton was far more traditional; he let me have my head and do what I wanted, as he let others, by and large, but there was not the same excitement and stimulation that one got in Sauer's seminar.[1]

While, as a doctoral candidate, he considered it a privilege to have received his "Berkeley schooling" *in situ*, Borah always pointed out that the ideas of the School transcended Berkeley itself as a place of learning, springing up, living on, assuming new forms and developing new interests elsewhere, far from California's glittering Bay Area.[2]

Borah was born on 23 December 1912 in Utica, Mississippi, receiving his notable name in honor of the man who won the presidency of the United States that year, the first Democrat to do so in two decades. The infant Borah happened to be the first white child born in Utica after the election. "My father would have been lynched," Borah quipped, "if he hadn't named me Woodrow Wilson."[3] The family moved north to New York in 1914 and, ten years later, west to Los Angeles, where Borah attended high school and college. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1935 and his M.A. a year later, both from UCLA. Borah started his Ph.D. at UCLA but transferred in 1936 to Berkeley. "You know the ropes here too well. You're not really learning as much as you should. You ought to leave when you finish this year," urged his graduate advisor.[4] The choice was between Berkeley and Harvard. Matters of economy as well as proximity favored the former, so up the coast he moved.

At Berkeley, Borah began to blossom, though his doctoral work there was not undertaken without him running into difficulties posed by having the "unheavenly twins" of Sauer and Simpson serve as members of his examination committee. Borah remembered in particular one tricky round of questioning:

> Sauer tried a series of traps and, when these did not work (I would detect the trap), he finally asked me what I thought about the accuracy of Las Casas's reporting. Well, there I was, caught between Sauer and Simpson: Simpson thought Las Casas exaggerated terribly and was most unreliable; Sauer thought he was rather accurate. I had read a good deal of Las Casas by then and thought on the whole he was probably accurate. I decided that I might as well go down fighting for what I thought right, so I answered accordingly. Just as Simpson was preparing to spring, Sauer said: "I guess that's about right. I've new documents that seem to demonstrate it." And Simpson relaxed.[5]

The Ph.D. dissertation that Borah produced on Mexico's colonial silk industry was published as Volume 20 of *Ibero-Americana*, the pioneering Berkeley forum to which he subsequently made numerous outstanding contributions, either alone (for example, *New Spain's Century of Depression*, 1951) or in partnership with Sherburne F. Cook (for example, *The Aboriginal Population of Central Mexico on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, 1963). On his own Borah could certainly stir things up—a half-century after its publication, *New Spain's Century of Depression* is still a thought-provoking essay, as even as harsh a critic of its central theme as Carlos Sempat Assadourian once conceded when we spoke. In the course of his collaboration with Cook, however, Borah attained even greater feats of controversy, especially in relation to Hispaniola. But while many might consider the work of Cook and Borah on the contact population of the Caribbean island excessive in its numerical reckoning, the research findings of the two on the population history of Mexico are critically more accepted. In a *tour de force* of sustained, innovative scholarship, they estimate that, in an area defined spatially as Central Mexico, an Indian population of 25.2 million in 1518 had dropped to 1.075 million by 1605. At one breathtaking juncture in their final collaborative effort—Cook died in 1974—they summarize the results of a quarter-century of research succinctly thus:

> We conclude […] that the Indian population of Central Mexico, under the impact of factors unleashed by the coming of the Europeans, fell, by 1620–1625, to a low of approximately three percent of its size at the time that the Europeans first landed on the shore of Veracruz.[6]

It is the meaning and implications of that unparalleled demographic collapse, brought about primarily but not solely by the introduction of Old World diseases among immunologically defenseless Native American populations, that Borah and Cook, like Sauer and Simpson before them, sought to emphasize. In so doing, with Borah one of its key members and the ground-breaking research on Mexico serving as a model by which to gauge the colonial experience of other regions, the Berkeley School revolutionized the study of imperial land–life relations in Latin America.

Borah's career trajectory is an intriguing one. His doctoral work in history at Berkeley did not immediately lead to him securing a teaching position there. Quite the contrary. His first such post was a one-year position (1941–1942) at Princeton, after which he spent five years (1942–1947) analyzing information on Latin America for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services. When he returned to Berkeley as a member of faculty in 1948, Speech not History was Borah's departmental affiliation. "Bolton warned me very frankly that as a Jew I would have a great deal of trouble getting a job at any college or university, and I met a certain amount of that," he stated bluntly. "Berkeley itself had a good deal of anti-Semitism in the History Department until the early 1950s."[7] Problems in Speech, however, eventually led to a transfer to History, where he survived the heady days of the 1960s more or less unscathed, retiring from full-time teaching in 1980.

Of his fruitful collaboration with Cook, which began in the 1950s, Borah offered the following reflection:

> My collaboration with Cook came about after we had known each other for nearly two decades. We liked each other; we had desks near each other in the Bancroft Library; we had a series of discussions, so we knew each other's views. [...] Our joint venture began as a meeting several times a week in the afternoons. The sessions became more and more intense and interesting as we went along. [...] It still took a great deal of patience and tact on both sides, because there were things we disagreed on and we sometimes had quite heated disagreements. But they never moved beyond the bounds of friendship. [...] Collaboration requires a deep basis of friendship and certain agreements on essentials.[8]

The friendship Borah speaks of, with its ability to accommodate differences in order to focus jointly on research goals that neither scholar, individually, was capable of achieving, extended far beyond the cosy confines of the Bancroft Library to the demands of the field. Their treks through rural Mexico in search of data were often conducted on muleback, called for them to accept life unconditionally on local terms, and teemed with incidents, including inevitable bouts of sickness, nasty falls, and broken bones. Combing through Cook's field notes of a trip he and Borah made in 1956, I came across two entries that highlight playfully the differences in temperament and outlook referred to above:

> *July 13*: Rested and visited various people. Borah is an inveterate socialite and makes long calls on every possible person. He accomplishes a good deal by this method, but I think he overdoes it somewhat.
> *July 14*: Further loafing and visiting.[9]

When I mentioned Cook's observations to Borah, he gave me one of his piercing looks, then smiled. "Sher was a quiet, self-contained man. He was older than me and did not always allow for that. Especially when we got back into town, I liked being with other people, too." The lingering smile was that of a man remembering fondly.

Like many others, I look back on hours of memorable conversation with him, usually seated in the garden of his Berkeley home while we sipped sherry or enjoyed a glass of wine as his wife, Terry, prepared us all lunch. Borah's social mores were also noted by one Truls M. Fagrell, who interviewed Borah for a feature published in the *Mexico City News*:

> Borah became, for close to two generations, a highly respected leader among his professional colleagues around the world. His world-class reputation obviously stems from his original research and publications, still landmarks in their field. But Borah also happens to be a natural after-hours raconteur, who can spin a yarn—sobering off-the-record fact, or joke—about people in high places and low, in most of the state capitals and county seats he has visited all over Mexico during 50 years of archive research. A pro, he can deliver an engrossing recollection subdivided into chapters or an episode contained within a single word. [...] Someone in Mexico or the U.S. should grab this distinguished and entertaining gentleman and put him in front of a TV camera or a luncheon speaker's platform—frequently. Here is a most serious Professor Emeritus, who brings to the history of Mexico a delightful sense of the amusing and the absurd. [...] Give him the opportunity and he's a charmer.[10]

Borah's rhetoric in truth could be dazzling. On my first visit to Berkeley in 1983, Richard Salvucci mentioned to me that he had invited Borah to give a guest lecture to his undergraduate class in Latin American history. I asked if I could sit in. Borah's topic, "Indian Depopulation and the Seventeenth-Century Economic Crisis", saw him incorporate, with sweeping scope yet exemplary attention to detail, not only Mexico and Peru but also California and Chile. Salvucci's large class was enthralled. Even the loquacious young man in front of me, who at the start of the lecture was paying considerably more attention to his chances with the good-looking woman sitting next to him than to what Borah had to say, finally shut up. The hush was palpable as Borah drew to a close. He spoke, in relation to Chile, of Araucanian resistance to the incursions of Pedro de Valdivia even as disease exacted a heavy native toll. His soft voice mouthed each word carefully, choosing with precision what he had to say. How Borah described Valdivia's capture and execution will stay with me always, for it was delivered with one of his legendary one-liners: "As they poured molten gold and silver down his throat, the last words Valdivia heard were: 'Now, have you had enough?'"

Professionally, Borah's work earned him great acclaim, in Latin America as well as in Europe and the United States, though in his home country formal acknowledgment arrived rather later. He was in his seventies when, in 1984, the Conference on Latin American History honored him with the Herbert E. Bolton prize for his book *Justice By Insurance: The General Indian Court of Colonial Mexico and the Legal Aides of the Half-Real* (1983), an inquiry that, as with so much of Borah's work, has substantial comparative content besides dealing with the Mexican scenario. In 1986 the American Historical Association awarded him Distinguished Service recognition.

Borah is survived by his wife, Terry, whom he married in 1945, and by his son, Jonathan, and his daughter, Ruth. A memorial service was held for him at the University of California in Berkeley on 24 March 2000. Anyone who had the immense satisfaction of knowing Woodrow, as I did, as a mentor and a colleague as well as a friend, understands well that, though he is no longer with us, what he leaves behind not only endures as a contribution to knowledge but enriches our humanity.

Wherever the data have taken him, there rests an original thinker, and a remarkable man.

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Notes

[1] James W. Wilkie and Rebecca Horn. 1985. An interview with Woodrow Borah. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 65 (3): 405–6. This insightful and informative document, on which I lean heavily, is culled from some eight hours of taped conversations conducted in late 1983. Wilkie and Horn do a marvelous job of transcribing and editing to impart to the reader a real sense of Borah in his own words. The interview belongs to a genre that deserves greater attention from the profession, for when carried out not just comprehensively but creatively, as

is the case of Wilkie and Horn with Borah, the results are of inestimable worth. Borah told me that he appreciated being interviewed by Wilkie and Horn very much, indeed found the experience a lot of fun, though clearly a lot of hard work went into its production. I have a signed offprint of the interview, on which Borah bids me, with impish good humor, "Buen Provecho!" For some time now, a documentary project called "Geographers on Film" has resulted in important figures in that discipline being interviewed for posterity, including two of Borah's esteemed Berkeley colleagues, Carl O. Sauer (1889–1975) and James J. Parsons (1915–1997). If such an initiative does not exist in History, it might well be worth someone's consideration.

[2] In a letter to me dated 22 April 1986, Borah wrote: "We of the so-called Berkeley School are neither the beginning nor the end of the universe." Eleven years later, in correspondence dated 4 November 1997, he put the matter more boldly: "Bill Denevan and I are among the few survivors of the contributors to *Ibero-Americana*, the last leaves of a brilliant summer. It is a pity that you never knew Sher Cook, with whom I had a long, friendly, and fruitful collaboration. Now that most are gone, and I totter a bit, I console myself that in my life I have known brilliant scholars. One cannot ask for more. I am sure that schools as good as the *Ibero-Americana* group will appear in due course. I am sorry to say that Berkeley is now an unlikely place, but … we shall yet appear again, somewhere, in new forms." Borah's frankness will come as no surprise to anyone who knew him.

[3] Wilkie and Horn. An interview with Woodrow Borah. 403.

[4] Wilkie and Horn. An interview with Woodrow Borah. 405.

[5] Wilkie and Horn. An interview with Woodrow Borah. 407.

[6] Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah. 1979. Royal revenues and Indian population in New Spain. In their *Essays in Population History*, 3:102. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

[7] Wilkie and Horn. An interview with Woodrow Borah. 411.

[8] Wilkie and Horn. An interview with Woodrow Borah. 413, 419–20.

[9] Cook's field notes are held with his other papers in the Bancroft Library, where they make fascinating reading.

[10] Truls M. Fagrell. 1987. Borah's Mexico: computers, archives, and history. *The Mexico City News* (Arts and Leisure). 8 November: 16–18. I thank Wayne Bernhardson for drawing to my attention this colorful profile of Borah, whom Truls M. Fagrell clearly found most enchanting.

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