

*Francisco de Miranda: A Transatlantic Life in the Age of Revolution.* By KAREN RACINE. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003. 336 pages. \$65.00 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

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Venezuelan-born Francisco de Miranda (1750–1816), regarded as “the Precursor” of South American independence, always seemed to find himself at the center of dramatic historical events in Europe and the Americas. Miranda hobnobbed with George Washington and Alexander Hamilton in the aftermath of the American Revolution. He debated constitutional theory with Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. He discussed history with Edward Gibbon and plotted an invasion of South America with the younger William Pitt even as Spanish spies dogged his every move. He mentored future liberators of South America such as Simon Bolivar and Bernardo O’Higgins. He romanced Lady Hester Stanhope (among many others) and captivated Empress Catherine the Great of Russia. He barely escaped the guillotine in revolutionary France. He was at various times a Spanish colonel, a French general, a Russian count, an English political consultant, and the governor-general of the First Venezuelan Republic. Accounts of Miranda’s political—and amorous—adventures strain credulity, but as Karen Racine’s fascinating new biography attests, the facts of his life surpass the most imaginative fiction.

Racine’s fresh interpretation highlights Miranda’s place in the late-eighteenth-century transatlantic Enlightenment. Like Thomas Paine and the Marquis de Lafayette, Miranda devoted himself to the advancement of liberty in general as well as to a particular nationalist cause. Living in exile for most of his adult life, Miranda was part of an international community of intellectuals, reformers, and quasi-professional revolutionaries who shared a common language of republicanism. Inspired by the successes of the United States and steeped in Enlightenment idealism, Miranda wished to be a historical actor, a heroic liberator in the mold of George Washington.

Using Miranda’s own voluminous diaries and correspondence, Racine ably charts the process by which the Precursor self-consciously constructed an identity as the leader of Spanish American independence. Miranda claimed a “longer, whiter lineage” (3) in Venezuela, but in fact his father emigrated from the Canary Islands. Mercantile success did not insulate the family against conflicts with local creole elites that took the form of accusations about the Mirandas’ racial purity. In part to escape the controversy, Miranda sought preferment in Spain where his father purchased him a captaincy in the army. (Interestingly, Racine speculates that Miranda’s service in Spain’s North African outposts gave the Venezuelan his first taste of a hostile local population’s resistance to empire.) Army service also brought him into contact with the British at Gibraltar, which led to lifelong friendships. When in 1780 the Spanish crown threw its support behind the fledgling United States, Miranda was part of the fleet sent to attack British positions at Pensacola. While serving in the Caribbean, however, he alienated some powerful local administrators. With his career at a standstill, facing arrest and charges of spying for the English, Miranda fled to the United States in 1783.

Armed with introductions and his considerable personal charm, Miranda spent 1783–84 touring America from the Carolinas to New England. Racine quotes freely from Miranda’s diary to supply a fascinating portrait of postrevolutionary society. Establishing patterns he would follow throughout his life, Miranda interviewed people from all walks of life and assiduously visited colleges, military installations, statehouses, and archives to try to understand the nature and practice of a successful revolutionary republic. He also cultivated contacts among the powerful, including Henry Knox and Alexander Hamilton. By 1784 Miranda had broached the idea of an expeditionary force to liberate Latin America.

With his American audience unwilling to commit to a military venture and the Spanish

clamoring for his extradition as a deserter, Miranda embarked on a grand tour of Europe with American diplomat William Steuben Smith, John Adams's son-in-law. For four years Miranda traveled from court to court, promoting himself and, increasingly, the idea of Spanish American emancipation. He continued to lobby British and American policy makers once he settled in London. Racine's description of how Miranda turned himself into a widely acknowledged leader in exile of Latin American independence makes for fascinating reading and illustrates the continued importance of face-to-face contacts even in a modernizing, complex Atlantic world. He commanded no armies, resources, or, apparently, much of a following at home, yet Miranda's personal networks and storehouse of useful information about the Americas won him the attention of distinguished leaders in every country he visited. Miranda's self-appointed role as liberator also became an economic necessity, since he relied on the patronage of powerful people.

Miranda remained something of a gadfly whose curiosity and zest for travel often took precedence over his cause. An ardent bibliophile, he sought out his heroes—Gibbon in Switzerland, Adam Smith in Edinburgh, Abbé Guillaume de Raynal in France, to name a few—and joined intellectual circles wherever he went. Racine argues that Miranda's exile accentuated his sense of American identity, yet his internationalist tendencies sometimes made him seem out of place in an era of growing nationalist fervor. In 1792, frustrated with the lack of Anglo-American aid for his scheme, Miranda accepted a commission from the French revolutionary army—a decision that left him vulnerable to attacks by Jacobins and English supporters. Later, his English ties (Miranda married an Englishwoman and purchased a house in London) made some Venezuelans accuse him of divided loyalties.

Racine treats her subject with critical appreciation and she astutely handles the difficulties inherent in assessing an individual whose towering ego and concern for posterity's opinion led him to amass, and alter, his own personal archive. She also does an excellent job of informing the reader about the extensive scholarship on Miranda, especially when her own interpretations are at odds with those of others, without interrupting her entertaining central narrative.

On the surface, Miranda's concrete contributions to Latin American independence were limited. He led one disastrous military expedition to Venezuela in 1806–7—backed by British money and staffed by Americans—that ended in the capture of most of his force and treason trials for the Federalist officials in New York who lent him tacit support. He served in the First Venezuelan Republic (1811–12), but was initially kept at arm's length by a local movement that was anxious about his foreign ties and his radicalism. The republican congress named him *generalissimo* in 1812, just in time to preside over the Republic's collapse in the face of internal division and Spanish military action, and Miranda spent the last four years of his life chained to a wall in a Spanish prison. Ultimately, Racine concludes that Miranda's distance from the complex realities of class and race in his homeland, coupled with his romantic Enlightenment ideals, left him hopelessly unprepared for the violent realities of nineteenth-century wars of colonial liberation.

By Racine's own accounting, Miranda's activities deserve greater consideration than even she gives them. Like Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, Thomas Paine, and other key figures of America's nascent revolution, Miranda created organizations and communication networks; he helped to give South America's independence movement a coherent ideology and a continental scope. As early as 1785, he wrote newspaper articles in London and America in which he "articulat[ed] a Creole consciousness that drew upon a wide array of sources from throughout the philosophical Atlantic world: the theories of John Locke . . . the nature and practice of the successful American Revolution; and Spain's abrogation of the historic compact that had brought the Americas into the Empire after the Conquest" (73). Later, from his home in London, Miranda organized fellow exiles in an extensive publication effort (funded in part by American ambassador Rufus King) to advance the notion that independence was "both just and historically inevitable" (183). The group printed what

became a key text for the revolutionary movement: *Carta a los Espanoles Americanos* (Open Letter to Spanish Americans), written by an exiled Peruvian Jesuit, Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán. Miranda also sent a series of circulars to the *cabildos* (town councils) of the “Columbian Continent” (185) that described a history of prior revolts against Spanish authority and argued in favor of the legitimacy of local self-government. He briefly operated a newspaper in 1810, *El Colombiano*, which informed its South American audience about the collapse of the Spanish state under Napoleon’s onslaught. In addition Miranda established a Masonic lodge that spawned affiliates throughout Latin America; most future leaders of South American independence became members.

Racine notes that Miranda’s London home became a clearinghouse for people and ideas, yet ultimately she focuses more on his attempts to enlist British public opinion than on his efforts to organize and inspire his South American audience. The reader is left wondering about the extent of Miranda’s contacts and influence in South America; even the degree of his continued financial dependence on his family remains murky.

One would also like to see more analysis of Miranda’s republicanism. Racine argues that Miranda, more a soldier than a theorist, oscillated between a romantic Greek model of small republics and a British-style constitutional polity with a strong monarch. She takes him to task for not being a more systematic political thinker, but how many of his revolutionary contemporaries were? Thomas Paine’s plans for government institutions were vague at best in 1776. Granted, Racine has her hands full in confining Miranda’s career to a brisk, well-written 258 pages; yet the ways in which Miranda’s political views evolved as a result of his experiences with revolutionary despotism in France and his association with reformers such as English abolitionist William Wilberforce seem worth exploring more fully. For example Miranda purchased a slave in 1780, yet by 1811 he was advocating the abolition of slavery and inviting women and people of color in Caracas to join his Patriotic Club, an organization dedicated to political activism. Indeed, Miranda’s gender politics were particularly intriguing. His sexual exploits have been the subject of entire volumes, but his advocacy of women’s education and political participation truly made him exceptional among his Enlightenment peers.

Overall, Racine has written a suggestive biography of an important figure whose sprawling transatlantic career touched on the seminal events of the Age of Revolution. The book should command an audience far beyond specialists in Latin America; students of Atlantic history, early America, and comparative history will find much of value in this accessible work.