
BACKGROUND BOOKS

PUERTO RICO

The 16th-century Indians of Puerto Rico believed that Spaniards were "immortal and incapable of dying from wounds or other disasters." Their awe did not last. As a test, writes Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés, natives drowned one hapless *conquistador* just to see if he would come back to life. When he did not, they were emboldened to resist the European invaders, who slaughtered them.

Oviedo y Valdés (1478–1557) was court chronicler to Emperor Charles V of Spain. In the handsomely illustrated **The Conquest and Settlement of the Island of Boriquén or Puerto Rico** (Limited Editions Club, 1975), many of his reports have been reprinted. Oviedo y Valdés never visited Puerto Rico. He based his stories on observations by, among others, Juan Ponce de León—who colonized Puerto Rico in 1508—and peppered them with Old World prejudices about "naturally ungrateful" Indians.

Balanced accounts, in English, of Puerto Rico's history before the United States took possession in 1898 are rare. Two concise essays by historian Adalberto López—in **Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans: Studies in History and Society** (Wiley, 1974), edited by López and James Petras—provide a useful overview.

López notes that as a result of warfare with the Spaniards and of smallpox epidemics, the island's population declined drastically from an estimated 30,000 after the Spanish arrived to a few thousand by

1520. Labor shortages led to the importation of black African slaves.

Life for the slaves in Puerto Rico was "short, nasty and brutish," writes López. Yet, in contrast to their predominance on other richer Caribbean islands, Africans during the 18th and 19th centuries constituted a relatively small fraction of the total population (32,000 out of 618,000 in 1872).

For 400 years, Spanish administrators ruled Puerto Rico. They stayed in San Juan and built few roads or schools; at the end of the 18th century, more than 90 percent of the people could not read. Native landowners, subsistence farmers, and urban craftsmen remained isolated from one another and relatively content to let the Spaniards run the island—unlike their counterparts in much of the rest of Spanish America.

In **Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation** (Random, 1972, cloth; Vintage, 1972, paper), Manuel Maldonado-Denis, an *independentista* political scientist, glowingly describes Puerto Ricans' occasional attempts to gain freedom from Spain and later the United States, from the early 19th century to the late 1960s.

A more comprehensive study is Gordon K. Lewis's **Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean** (Monthly Review, 1963; reprint, 1975). Lewis, a British historian, observes that prior to 1898, North Americans were preoccupied with westward expansion; most Latin Americans were busy consolidating their newly gained freedoms. Each culture, he says, nur-

tured "an abiding assurance of its own innate superiority." Puerto Rico, ceded to the United States after the Spanish-American War, provided the first arena for real interaction between Protestant North and Latin South.

In **Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal** (Univ. of Fla., 1960), historian Thomas Mathews examines the effects of Washington's early efforts to alleviate the island's chronic poverty. The Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, manned mostly by islanders, ran slum-clearance programs and hydroelectric projects—closely supervised by bureaucrats on the mainland. "Thirty years of neglect," he concludes, "were exchanged for excessive management."

Rexford Guy Tugwell, an intimate of FDR's, was the last mainlander to serve as governor of Puerto Rico. In **The Stricken Land: A Story of Puerto Rico** (Doubleday, 1946; Greenwood reprint, 1968), he gives an account of his difficulties in getting Washington to provide economic aid, while describing the rise of his friend, journalist Luis Muñoz Marín, who became the island's first elected governor in 1948.

Muñoz Marín emerged as a strong political father-figure in 1940 when his new Popular Democratic Party gained control of the island's legislature. According to economist David F. Ross—in **The Long Uphill Path: A Historical Study of Puerto Rico's Program of Economic Development** (San Juan: Talleres Graficos Interamericanos, 1966)—Muñoz Marín's success grew out of his direct appeals to the *jibaros*.

"Before, at political meetings the leaders would [present] truly eloquent orations about the mists, the seas, the fishes, and great things," recalled one poor Puerto

Rican farmworker. "Then, Muñoz Marín . . . came speaking of the rural worker, of the cane, and things were easier to understand." Anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz offers this and other evidence of Muñoz Marín's skills in his examination of peasant existence, **Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History** (Yale, 1960; Greenwood reprint, 1974, cloth; Norton, 1974, paper).

One perceptive study of the post-war period of rapid growth is by Henry Wells, a University of Pennsylvania political scientist. His **The Modernization of Puerto Rico: A Political Study of Changing Values and Institutions** (Harvard, 1969) focuses on the leaders who came into power in the 1940s and remained influential through the late '60s. Mainland-educated, many wavered between seemingly conflicting values—Spanish "fatalism" (the conviction that life is shaped by God, not man) and a strong respect for rigid hierarchies in society and the family, versus a North American faith in mankind's ability to manage nature and control fate, to create equality and progress.

Today, perhaps inevitably, Puerto Ricans of all classes identify themselves with Hispanic traditions less than do other Latin Americans. That is the conclusion of anthropologist Oscar Lewis in **La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York** (Random, 1966; Irvington reprint, 1979).

Among other evidence, Lewis cites Puerto Ricans' spoken mixture of English and Spanish and their Hispanization of many English words (e.g., *el bossa*, *la T-shirt*).

A portrait of Puerto Ricans in New York City is drawn by sociologist Patricia Cayo Sexton in **Spanish**

Harlem: An Anatomy of Poverty (Harper, 1965). Impressed by crime, drug addiction, and run-down tenements, she argues, many visitors to *El Barrio* overlook the inhabitants' strong family and neighborhood ties. During the 1964 Harlem riots, she points out, the Spanish sections remained peaceful.

Not all Puerto Rican immigrants to the mainland gravitate to large cities, notes Marxist economist Felipe Rivera, in **Labor Migration Under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience** (Monthly Review, 1979), a survey by the History Task Force of CUNY's *Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños*.

Agricultural jobs in Puerto Rico declined from about 200,000 in 1940 to 35,000 in the late '70s, partly as a result of mechanization and industrialization. Many farm workers—lacking the training to work in the island's industries—headed for the mainland. Rivera estimates that 60,000 Puerto Rican farm migrants out of the 74,000 now on the mainland work without contracts (notably, in Florida and New Jersey) and have little job protection.

The scholars' statistics take on new life in the hands of Puerto Rico's transplanted poets and novelists.

Piri Thomas, a black Puerto Rican, paints a harsh, loving picture of growing up in Spanish Harlem in the 1940s and '50s in **Down These Mean Streets** (Knopf, 1967, cloth; New American Library, 1968, paper). Pedro Juan Soto's **Spiks** (Monthly Review, 1973, cloth; 1974, paper) is a

collection of short stories that conveys the passion with which New York's young Puerto Ricans strike out at the law and one another.

Puerto Rico's rich indigenous literature has, for the most part, gone untranslated. Two representative anthologies are available, however: **The Puerto Rican Poets: Los Poetas Puertorriqueños** (Bantam, 1972, paper), edited by Alfredo Matilla and Ivan Silen, and **Borinquén: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Literature** (Knopf, 1974, cloth; Vintage, 1974, paper), edited by Maria Teresa Babín and Stan Steiner.

The most influential 20th-century Puerto Rican poets have been Luis Llorens Torres (1878–1944) and Luis Palés Matos (1899–1959). Palés Matos belonged to a group of Puerto Rican and Cuban poets who wrote "black" poetry. In **Literary Currents in Hispanic America** (Harvard, 1945; Russell & Russell reprint, 1963), critic Pedro Henríquez-Ureña notes that, rather than describing the sufferings of their race in the New World, Hispanic poets have harkened back to African traditions, imitating the cadencies of African language and dance.

Llorens Torres' poems, like much Puerto Rican literature, are explicitly nationalistic: *Blue swan the Hispanic race/ lay an egg, blind and deaf,/ in the nest of the fat/ North American duck./ And already, from my window/ I see the northern ducks,/ of gloomy, hypocritical peak,/ who the swan of Puerto Rico,/ of blue plumage and red peak,/ they call Ugly Duckling.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This essay is based on research conducted by Barbara Mauger, an intern at the Wilson Center's Latin American Program. Former U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia Ben Stephansky, Wilson Center Fellow Angel A. Rama, and Jorge Heine also advised on the selection of titles.*