
This work is the latest example of a genre which has proved to be popular in the past and for which, apparently, there is still a market: the collection of biographical vignettes of women remembered by historians under the label of “notable.” Comprised in this volume are sketches of La Malinche, Inés de Suárez, the Nun Ensign (Catalina de Erauzo), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Policarpa Salavarrieta, Archduchess Leopoldina of Habsburg, Mariana Grajales, Gabriela Mistral, and Tania (Tamara Bunke). The authors tried to find a new dimension to explain the use of an already well trodden path. In the introduction, they propose that their chosen subjects possessed “intelligence, perseverance and character,” which they used to challenge, in various ways, the normative standards of their times and the society into which they were born (p. xxii). Thus, these women are supposed to be seen as exceptions and, at the same time, typical of “major ethnic and economic groups” (p. xxi). These are conflicting propositions. While some of the examples used may be accepted as “typical,” the exceptional qualities or circumstances of most of them make it difficult to believe that they were largely representative of Latin American womanhood. It may be that the only way of accepting their typicality is to see them as stereotypes, such as the suffering wife, the political superwoman, or the fruitful and strong mother. Even so, the case remains weak.

It is unlikely that the specialist will find much new in this work. Standard sources have been used to retell stories of standard heroines. While there is enough data on some of them to sustain a comfortable narrative, the strain produced by the lack of information on others forces the authors to use a significant amount of material on events of their times, their husbands, children, or family to cover up great biographical gaps. The use of a traditional approach to the history of women in Latin America, coupled with the lack of originality in the material offered, is disappointing. The book provides no new interpretations, challenging hypotheses, or suggestive questions which may encourage the search for new answers. I recommend this work for use by high school and beginning college students, and for the general public.

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