

Book Review

– *The Rarified Air of the Modern: Airplanes and Technological Modernity in the Andes*, by Willie Lee Hiatt. Oxford University Press, 2016

Although Peru does not appear in the title, Willie Hiatt takes the reader on an aerial journey along the early history of Peruvian aviation, spanning from an abortive first encounter with flight in 1911 to the role of air power around the time of WWII, with an epilogue that provides the reader with a dizzying overview of Peruvian aviation from 1950 to the turn of the century. The first chapter, *Modernity's Surprise Landing in the Andes*, describes the country's very first encounter with aviation by telling the story of three of the country's sons, two of whom piloted the very first airplanes over the skies of Lima in 1911, providing Limeño elites with a very first taste of the possibilities that flight might bring with regard to resolving the problems of Peruvian nation building. The airplane provided the prospect of accomplishing what no technology had thitherto done: to allow Peruvian mountain ranges, deserts, and jungles to be traversed and thereby to connect the disparate parts of the nation to the capital.

The second chapter, *Peruvian Air Farce*, describes the rapid development and maturation of Peruvian aviation during the *Oncenio* (1919-1930). Through trial and error, and built atop an unfortunate number of aviators who plummeted to their deaths, this period saw the development of Peruvian aviation as an economically viable industry that rather quickly saw the emergence of several commercial airlines, carrying an increasing amount of (moneyed) passengers and mail along the coast, into the interior, and indeed to foreign destinations. The third chapter, *Flying Cholo*, is focused on the namesake of Lima's modern commercial airport in Callao, Alejandro Velasco Astete and his flight from Lima to Cusco in 1925, followed by his unfortunate death that resulted from an improperly prepared runway in Puno. The chapter follows Velasco Astete, a Cusqueño son, and the effect of his arrival in Cusco, where elites allowed themselves to imagine a means of connectedness to the modern world through the technological miracle of flight. In a similar vein, the fourth chapter (*High Technology in the Jungle*) describes the arrival and development of flight over the Amazonian lowlands east of the Andes. This chapter includes fascinating ethnographic accounts by crash-survivors who traveled through the jungles to "civilization," aided by local indigenous peoples, laying bare the

contradictory racial logic of early twentieth-century upper crust Peruvians and visitors. Chapter five, *The Window Seat of Modernity*, meanders between the psychological impact of viewing the country from above, the maturation of the commercial airlines, “bourgeois modernity,” and the emergence of new travel narratives. Unlike the other chapters, this chapter comes across as rather disjointed and unfocused. The next and last chapter, *When Technology Bombs*, makes up for the shortcomings of its predecessor by focusing very clearly on the emergence of aviation in the 1930s as serving a specific military purpose, that could be (and was) used not only against neighboring Ecuador in 1941 and Colombia in 1933, but also against its own population with the bombing of APRA rebels in Trujillo in 1932.

This book tells the story of early Peruvian aviation to a large extent through powerful descriptions of the men involved. Indeed, we have detailed descriptions of the pilots who laid the groundwork for Peruvian aviation, as well as of the unfortunate things that happened to a surprising number of them. Moreover, Hiatt provides us with a view of both the sense of possibility that was felt by Peruvian elites, as well as the disappointment that often followed when things went terribly wrong. Of particular interest are the excellent ethnographic descriptions, especially in the chapters on the sierras and the lowlands (chapters 3 and 4, respectively), which richly illustrate elite attitudes towards their indigenous compatriots. Hiatt is consistently able to demonstrate how Peruvian elites viewed their country and their fellow citizens: alternating between hope and despair over the country’s future with roughly equal measures of defeatism and unbridled enthusiasm.

While often fascinating, the work does have its shortcomings, most of which result from lack of detail. The author has a tendency to use the words ‘Peru’ and ‘Andes’ interchangeably, as is evidenced by the title of the book itself as well as that of the first chapter: the book is about Peru, not the Andes. Just one chapter is devoted to the Andes proper. The first chapter, *Modernity’s Surprise Landing in the Andes*, describes the arrival of the first airplanes in Lima, which is most decidedly not in the Andes. To most students of Peruvian history, that is not a trivial fact. A lack of attention to detail is further apparent in a number of at times frustrating omissions. We learn, for example, that the airplane purchased by Cusqueño elites cost them 18,000 soles, but it is left to the reader to determine whether this constitutes a large amount of money (it does: it equates to roughly 560,000 US dollars in 2017). Likewise, we learn that when Velasco Astete died, he had 41 *Libras* in cash on him, but we are left in the dark as to what that means. We are told on page 60 that by 1928 there were three commercial airlines, but we have to wait until page 108 to learn what their names were. Perhaps the most baffling omission is the almost complete absence of information about the myriad different types of airplanes mentioned throughout this work: only one merits a description of its capabilities, namely the Keystone Pronto biplane (which is referred to as a Keystone float-plane on page 90), which could apparently carry two passengers and 400 lbs. of

luggage and mail for a distance of 400 miles (pp. 90, 109). Given that the word ‘airplanes’ is in the title, one could be forgiven for hoping for at least some description of the flying machines involved.

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