

RAFAEL SAGREDO BAEZA. *J.T. MEDINA Y SU BIBLIOTECA AMERICANA  
EN EL SIGLO XXI: PRÁCTICAS DE UN ERUDITO*. SANTIAGO:  
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The craft of history requires historians, and few in Chile would question the extraordinary presence of José Toribio Medina, who is the subject of this book by historian and curator Rafael Sagredo Baeza. Medina bequeathed his considerable library, estimated at some 12,000 volumes, to the Chilean State. Today it occupies a privileged place in the second floor of the National Library, next to the office where Sagredo directs the Library's Centro de Investigaciones Diego Barros Arana. He has an easy walk through connecting doors to the Sala Medina, where he has been consulting the Medina collection for decades. No historian today has accumulated the knowledge and the expertise to provide such an insightful look into Medina's role as a historian and book collector. Sagredo also ventures into an analysis of Medina's multi-faceted personality.

There are many reasons why the publication of this book is welcome. Sagredo has mined every bit of documentary evidence to narrate the extraordinary career of Medina. However respectful, Sagredo's research is not all celebratory. In fact, he delves deep into the historian's personality to reveal his flaws, his insecurities, and his motivations for building an entire life around the collection of rare materials. For decades, he has been seen as the paragon of positivist history but now, thanks to this book, we see a picture that is far more complex.

A word or two about Chilean historiography might be necessary to understand the development of Medina's career as well as his emphasis on the colonial period. The Chilean government commissioned Claudio Gay in the 1830s to write a sweeping natural and political history of Chile, a herculean task to which he devoted his entire professional life. When the first volumes came out in the 1840s, a debate ensued as to the purposes of history writing. Opinion divided fairly evenly over a view of history as a scientific field based on the critical and impartial analysis of primary sources, and a view of history that, following Enlightenment principles, advocated an interpretive approach designed to promote social and political change. The center of the dispute was the interpretation of the Chilean colonial past, where Andrés Bello and José Victorino Lastarria emerged as the most prominent figures. Bello was able to show that not enough was known about the colonial past to establish any conclusions about the direction of history, much less to use it for political purposes. In the end, however,

historians for the rest of the century combined a politically charged condemnation of the conquest and colonization of Chile, with a greater emphasis on documentary evidence.

José Toribio Medina emerged from this mixed climate of opinion (other historians included Diego Barros Arana, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, and Miguel Luis Amunátegui): his famous work on the Inquisition in the overseas possessions of the Spanish Empire combined the condemnation of the actions of the tribunal with a massive identification of primary sources. Chile at the time, the 1880s, was immersed in a struggle over religious reforms. President Domingo Santa María, an anticlerical if there was ever one, welcomed and promoted Medina's work. In time, however, and driven by his utter fascination with the documents he encountered in Spain, Medina moved on to research a less politically-charged subject: the establishment of the printing press in Spain's overseas dominions. Leaving behind his early advocacies, Medina became an erudite, a single-minded collector of books and documents who put together one of the most magnificent collections on the colonial period.

It is in this area where Sagredo makes his most significant contribution: Medina's self-made transformation into a scholar. Early on he had been under heavy family pressure to become a lawyer and eventually a politician. Understanding that this was not his true calling (he was more interested in the natural sciences), he crafted a career that combined research with some diplomatic commissions, travelling to consult different collections to document his astonishing number of books. Sagredo shows that Medina overemphasized and even dramatized the originality of his work in order to justify what to many, and even to himself, was a useless career. In one of the most creative parts of his analysis, Sagredo focuses on engravings that Medina used to illustrate, in a self-deprecatory way, how removed he felt from the approval of his social milieu. To compensate, he carefully crafted an acceptable role for the scholar, assisting numerous other scholars and bibliophiles, and cultivating friendships with younger scholars who helped him promote his self-image. One of the most interesting, and also an entirely new historical treatment of the case, is Medina's complex relationship with Fernando Bruner Prieto. Readers will find the exchange between the two as worthy of a book by Umberto Eco or Nathalie Zemon Davies. Chasing endless and elusive documents, agonizing over the reception of their work, and facing the indifference of both government and society, Sagredo well illustrates the predicament of a new breed of historian: the collector who harbors doubts about the significance of his own work, and yet furnishes the essential materials that will aid generations of new scholars.

The book is beautifully illustrated and a joy to read. More than anything, Sagredo has restored the humanity of a great, if conflicted historian, and has provided us with new insights into the craft of history.

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