

Inter-American Notes

STEPHEN RANDAL NIBLO—AN OBITUARY

Latin Americanists, and especially Mexicanists, lost a valuable colleague in February 2008 when Stephen “Steve” Niblo died of a heart attack at his holiday home near Melbourne, Australia. He was sixty-six.

Steve Niblo grew up in Colorado and in early 1977 joined the History Department at La Trobe University, a new institution with a fine reputation as both a major research center and a university where student teaching was taken very seriously. He came to La Trobe and Australia after he had spent six years teaching at the Universidad de las Americas (UDLA) in its then newly built campus in Cholula, Mexico. Steve completed his doctoral research at the University of Northern Illinois, DeKalb where his dissertation adviser was the distinguished colonial Latin Americanist, Benjamin Keen. Ben Keen was not only a fine scholar but also a politically sophisticated and progressive observer of the US and Latin America, something that clearly impressed Steve deeply. He would frequently recall Keen and those days at DeKalb with great fondness. Like his mentor, Steve Niblo was careful to embed his own substantial scholarship within a deeply felt commitment to social justice and respect for working people in the Americas. Steve was certainly no dry as dust academic.

Academic life for Steve was more than a set of narrow, scholarly games. He could always be counted on for support when academic stupidities and crimes had been committed. His outlook on the world had changed dramatically during two years as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia where Steve first encountered the challenges facing rural workers and small peasant farmers. He carried his commitments to Mexico and to the UDLA where he obtained his first teaching job. Those were difficult times for many of the UDLA’s scholars. His career at the University of the Americas ended in 1975 when he became involved in a struggle by faculty members against an administration which was seeking to transform the university into a business enterprise.

The focus of Steve’s doctoral research at DeKalb was the presidential administration of Manuel González in Mexico, 1880-84. Although his research interests

soon shifted away from nineteenth century Mexico, his first publications were centered around that period and especially the political and economic history of the porfiriato. They included an important bibliographical essay in the *Latin American Research Review* reviewing historical literature on nineteenth century Mexico (coauthored with Laurens Perry) as well as a volume (coauthored with James L. Hamon) *Los precursores de la revolución agraria en México* in which he examined the writings of Wistano Luis Orozco and Andres Molina Enriquez. During his years at the UDLA Steve also managed the Porfirio Diaz archive which the university had recently acquired.

Once established at La Trobe University in Melbourne (where he joined a team of Latin Americanist historians made up of Inga Clendinnen, Barry Carr, and Tony Disney) Niblo shifted his attention more and more to the study of contemporary Mexican history. His speciality became the nineteen forties in Mexico, a period that had been seriously neglected by English-speaking historians. His two books on this period, published by Scholarly Resources, have become obligatory references for scholars and students both in the US and Europe and in Mexico where a Spanish translation of *Mexico in the 1940s Modernity, Politics and Corruption* will appear in early 2009.

The History Department at La Trobe University was the largest History program in Australia when Steve joined it. It was a lively place with a wonderful collection of scholars drawn from North America, the UK, Europe, South Asia, Australia, and New Zealand; the department was easily the most ethnically and linguistically diverse program in Australia at the time. Moreover, the History Department at La Trobe had already pioneered the development of Latin American history teaching in Australia at a time when Latin American Studies were still in their formative stage in the antipodes. Steve made an enormously important contribution to the department's already considerable Mexican focus. He was also one of the most active contributors to the new academic area of Development Studies. On several occasions Steve was Director of La Trobe's Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS), and for six years he edited the JILAS: Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies which had been produced by a La Trobe-based team since the mid 1990s.

But it would be a disservice to Steve to remember him only in terms of the dry figures of publications, conference papers, and courses taught. Steve Niblo was a man with a big personal following among his students and friends. He was an immensely generous man giving his time and energy to generations of undergraduates and postgraduates. He had little sympathy for academic pomposity and aloofness. He knew how to introduce humor and lightness into his teaching. His jokes and anecdotes enlivened his classes and lectures. He gave wise advice to many and strong support to students and colleagues whose life circumstances had created problems.

Steve died on the deck of his holiday home at Fairhaven, about an hour and a half's drive from Melbourne. He was enjoying his favorite views of the ocean, a

bottle of fine Australian wine and the company of his wife Diane when it happened. Steve enjoyed the good life Australia can provide its more fortunate citizens and he also gave back, in return, a good deal. He will be remembered not just as a fine historian and Mexicanist, but also as a generous colleague, loving father, and husband. His colleagues at La Trobe have established a memorial fund to award prizes for the best academic work published on Latin American topics in the JILAS (now JILAR) journal. Donations to the Stephen Niblo Memorial Prize can be sent care of the Institute of Latin American Studies. La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, Australia, 3083.

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