In Memory of Robert M. Levine (1941-2003): Mentor and Friend

On the evening of April 1, 2003, the indefatigable historian of Brazil and Latin America Robert M. Levine died after a long struggle with cancer. He passed on with friends and colleagues at his side, including his beloved companion Karen Orlin who helped Bob throughout this difficult time. He is also survived by his two sons David and Joey; his parents, David and Ruth Levine; his sister, Kenneth; his sister, Janice Hirshon; and his nephews, Daniel and Michael Hirshon. His untimely death brought to an end a long career as a dedicated teacher, industrious administrator, and remarkably productive scholar. Indeed, Bob’s professional energy, drive, and interests seemed unbounded.

As a boy growing up in New York City, the future professor Levine fell in love with books. His memories of time spent rummaging through used book stores as a youth seemed remarkably sharp, and on the occasions he invoked them, his blue eyes would light up under his tuft of red hair, and they conjured a Jorge Luis Borges sense of amazement and comfort in their midst. He brought his passion for books and writing with him to Colgate University where he graduated with High Honors before he went onto graduate work in history at Princeton University. There he studied under the father of archive-driven Brazilian history in North America, Stanley Stein. Bob remained active in the alumni chapters of both of these institutions, generously contributing news articles, service, and funds to support them over the years.

Like a number of scholars of his generation, Bob's dissertation research focused on the rise of urban populism in Latin America just at the point that its vitality as a political movement began to sputter out. He conducted his dissertation research shortly after the 1964 military coup brought an abrupt end to populist government in Brazil. The book that came out of his dissertation, *The Vargas Regime: The Critical Years, 1934-1938* (1970) was an unflattering critical analysis of the mythic President Getúlio Vargas’s career as well as that of many of his political allies in the armed forces. The book focuses on Vargas’s indirect election as a democratic President in 1934 through his assumption of dictatorial powers in 1937 via a bloodless coup. The book remains an obligatory reference point for the many subsequent studies of populism in Brazil and Latin America. The Portuguese translation of *The Vargas Regime* was under contract for publication for ten years before the military government finally permitted its release in 1980. Brazilian readers kept *O regime de Vargas* at the top of Brazil’s nonfiction best-seller list for 12 weeks, and the editors of the prestigious weekly news magazine *Isto É* nominated it for “Book of the Year” honors.

While he finished up his dissertation and readied his book for publication, Professor Levine began teaching at SUNY Stony Brook in 1966 where he remained until 1981. During these years, he became known as a popular and committed teacher. Taking advantage of his lifelong fascination with photography, Bob compiled numerous slide shows of his own photographs to enliven his lectures on Latin American history. Some of these slide shows and photographs later became part of the 27 original audio-visual documentary histories he eventually produced. In 1978, his colleagues and students in the History Department at SUNY Stony Brook recognized his hard work in the classroom with the “Outstanding Professor” award.

While Bob became known as an inspiring instructor, his research went in an ambitious new direction toward collective biography and quantitative history. In conjunction with Joseph Love and John Wirth, he participated in a case study of the political elites of three different states during Brazil’s Old Republic and the early years of the Vargas era (1889-1937). Each researcher used the same quantitative model to map the characteristics and career patterns of those who held top political posts in three different states: Minas Gerais
(Wirth), São Paulo (Love), and Pernambuco (Levine). This path-breaking team project served as a model for subsequent studies of elites in other parts of Latin America.

Soon after the publication of *Pernambuco in the Brazilian Federation, 1889-1937* (1980), the University of Miami, Coral Gables recruited Levine in 1981 to develop a doctoral program in Latin American history. He subsequently held a number of administrative posts at his new home institution including History Department Chair from 1983 to 1991, Interim Dean of the Graduate School of International Studies (1984), and from 1989 to 2002 he directed the Latin American Studies Program. Bob used his administrative skills to help build a nationally recognized PhD program in Latin American history at Miami. He negotiated funding to hire two additional professors of Latin American history. The first hire, Steve Stein, had been Levine’s colleague at SUNY Stony Brook for years. A specialist in Andean history, Stein continues as a faculty member in the University of Miami’s History Department. The third tenure stream position has been held by Douglas Cope (now at Brown University), Thomas Abercrombie (now in the Anthropology Department at New York University), and is currently held by Martha Few, a specialist in colonial Guatemala. Through ups and downs, fits and starts Levine pulled together a team and a program that with very few resources soon had graduate students winning numerous national grants to conduct dissertation research. The students of this program have also won positions at Florida International University, Rhodes College, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Fordham University, Brigham Young University, Mesa College, Slippery Rock University, Miami Dade Community College, Universidad Javeriana (Bogotá, Colombia), the University of Louisville, La Universidad Católica (Santiago, Chile), Muskegon College, Michigan State University, La Universidad de San Marcos (Lima, Peru), the World Bank, and the State Department. Given the competitiveness of the job market, the almost overnight success of the program, which had no former glory upon which to build, is a testament to Bob’s determination, vision, and scholarly reputation.

As an academician, administrator, and instructor, Levine taught by example as well as through encouragement, patience, enthusiasm, and well-timed prodding. In seminar discussions, he did not try to dominate or steer the debate toward some sort of consensus. Rather, he quietly encouraged students to take their own stands on theory, methodology, and approach when evaluating the work of scholars or of fellow seminar participants. Once we articulated our opinions, he would play devil’s advocate, even when he largely agreed with the positions taken. While at times frustrating, the technique helped students to build confidence in their own ability to debate issues in an independent fashion without fear of violating the “orthodoxies” of a professor. I only came to fully appreciate the importance of this approach years later when I began teaching my own graduate seminars.

In the last two decades, Levine’s research interest fearlessly went in new directions that contributed to a number of important subfields. Most notably, in 1995, he published what I consider to be his best book, *Vale of Tears: The Canudos Massacre in Northeast Brazil Revisited* (1995). It is the most textured analysis to date of the events surrounding the shaky new Brazilian Republican government’s brutal repression of a millenarian community in backlands Bahia in 1897. The analysis moves from local to national and international contexts so elegantly and smoothly that the unique combination of trends and events that produced this tragedy come into clear focus. In particular, he highlights how political events in the state of Bahia worked to isolate the Canudos community and its leader Antonio Conselheiro from mainstream leaders that might have protected them.

Beyond his new interest in millenarianism, he began to mine another vein in historiography: the use of photographs as historical documents. My first and most stimulating seminar with Bob as a graduate student focused on the use of images as sources. At that time, he was working on a book dedicated to developing a methodology for analyzing...
historical photographs that went into print shortly thereafter, *Images of History: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Latin American Photographs as Documents* (1989). He later published a book that analyzed and contextualized the photographic work of Genevieve Naylor in Brazil in the 1940s. And photographs took Bob on his first voyage into Cuban history when he published *Cuba in the 1850's: Through the Lens of Charles DeForest Fredricks* (1990).

Life in Miami and the many local sources available on the Caribbean’s largest island nation ultimately drew Levine to write more about Cuba and eventually Cuban Miami itself. *Tropical Diaspora: the Jewish Experience in Cuba, 1902-1992* (1994) joined immigration history with that of an analysis of a religious and ethnic community’s development. He later collaborated with Moisés Asís to write *Cuban Miami* (2000), and when Bernardo Benes approached him and shared his own private archive of sensitive documents, Bob dove right in and like a reporter with a hot scoop, *Secret Missions to Cuba: Fidel Castro, Benardo Benes, and Cuban Miami* (2001) seemed to flow out of his fingers onto the computer screen in no time. These works are important new contributions to Latin American and U.S. history that bring new insight to one of the United States’ most influential immigrant communities, not to mention the significant contributions they make to official and unofficial diplomacy and espionage. Bob brought a critical perspective to this literature that only a Latin Americanist of his stature and experience could provide.

While Bob crossed into new territory in his research on Cuba and Miami, he never abandoned his first love: Brazil. With his long time friend and colleague José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy (and Sebe’s dedicated team of students who worked with him in the center for oral history at the Universidade de São Paulo), they located the descendants of the amazing Brazilian woman who wrote the best-selling book in Brazilian history, Carolina Maria de Jesus. Carolina’s 1960 diary of her life in a São Paulo slum (translated into English as *Child of the Dark*) became an international phenomenon, and it brought overnight wealth and renown to a woman who had lived precariously by collecting cardboard to support herself and her children. Translated into dozens of languages, *Child of the Dark* was a glimpse of life from the perspective of a desperately poor and little-educated black woman who was a member of Brazil’s legions of poor slum dwellers in one of the Third World’s largest industrial centers. It is hard to exaggerate the uniqueness of her diary as a source for historical inquiry. The diary quickly became a staple of Brazilian and Latin American history courses in the United States and Europe, but Carolina’s fame and fortune in Brazil would be short-lived.

Based on oral history interviews with her children and new sources, such as the original hand-written manuscript from which Carolina’s *Child of the Dark* had been drawn, Levine and Sebe explored why and how the Brazilian reading audience first embraced and later rejected Carolina, who, especially after the military coup of 1964, slipped back into obscurity and poverty. She went on to publish two more diaries, neither of which enjoyed the success of her first book. Columnists, intellectuals, and politicians began to criticize her spending habits, dress, lack of deference, and affairs with men. In two different but related books, *Cinderela Negra: A Saga de Carolina Maria de Jesus* (1994) and *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (1995), Levine and Sebe explored the mutually constitutive intersections of gender, race, illegitimacy, and class that Carolina’s Cinderella story illuminated. The authors also worked to have new editions of Carolina’s diaries published in Portuguese, including an unedited version of her original manuscript of *Child of the Dark*. Levine oversaw the editing and translation of this latter work into English as well as of Carolina's other two diaries. Bob collaborated to bring an important and largely ignored body of work to the attention of reading audiences on both sides of the equator.
In the last few years, Bob had been working with José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy to research and write a book about the social and cultural history of tobacco in Brazil, which will be published soon. The breadth of his contributions to so many areas of historiography is astounding.

Bob also wrote synthetic and edited works designed for classroom use. In *Father of the Poor? Getúlio Vargas and His Era* (1998), he revisited his original interest in the enigmatic populist leader of Brazil, Getúlio Vargas. He wrote the text for use in upper-level survey courses, and it is a brisk synthesis of the latest research and materials related to Vargas and his era. *Brazilian Legacies* (1997) treats a number of important themes in Brazilian history and culture and is intended as a companion to Brazilian history courses. He also edited with John J. Crocitti *The Brazil Reader* (1999), the best collection of primary and secondary sources available for a Brazilian survey course. *The History of Brazil* (1999) is a concise nonacademic history of Brazil intended for a general reading audience. He had fleshed out a manuscript, *Cambridge Concise History of Cuba*, but his health prevented him from finishing it. Currently, Professor Frank Mora of Rhodes College is revising and completing this manuscript. In addition to this awe-inspiring list of publications, Levine edited numerous special journal editions to which he also contributed his own articles. He published more than 60 scholarly articles and book chapters and countless newspaper articles, book reviews, and encyclopedia entries. He also authored five reference texts.

Without exaggeration, his colleague Steve Stein described Bob as “the most productive Brazilianist in the world.” The University of Miami recognized Professor Levine’s many weighty contributions to the world of scholarship with a Provost’s Award for Excellence in Research in 1998 and by naming him Gabelli Senior Scholar in the Arts and Sciences in 1999. Of course, to do all this research Bob had won many prestigious national grants, from SSRC funding to support from the NEH, Fulbright, the Ford Foundation and so forth. Several of his books, articles, and audio-visual documentaries won prizes from different academic organizations.

One might assume, given Levine’s family commitments and his impressive publishing, teaching, and administrative record, that he would not have time for service to the scholarly and broader communities, but here again he made extraordinary contributions that I will only be able to highlight here. Over the past decade he served as a co-editor of the *Luso-Brazilian Review*, and before that edited the *South Eastern Latin Americanist* from 1985 to 1988, the journal of the Southeastern Conference on Latin American Studies. He served on the board of editors for the *Hispanic American Historical Review* from 1986 to 1991. He edited the “Latin American Realities Series” for M. E. Sharpe since 1997, and co-edited the University of Wisconsin Press’s “Living in Latin American Series” with Jane Collins since 1998. He helped to organize and was elected co-chair of the new Brazil section of the Latin American Studies Association in 1998. He served on numerous committees and advisory boards for scholarly organizations and institutions. For instance, from 1985 to 1998, Levine served on the Conference of Latin American History’s Committee on Teaching Materials. He served as a consultant for Public Radio International on the documentary series “Race and Minorities” and for “The History of the Future.” In 1974 and 1975, he served on the Emergency Committee to Aid Chilean Exiles. He was also the founder and director of the Public History Institute at the University of Miami and served as its director from 1982 to 1986. This is not to mention the many book and article manuscripts he read for academic presses and journals, and those that he commented on for fellow scholars seeking his sage advice. The acknowledgement pages of so many books and articles in our field note Robert M. Levine’s helpful comments and critical suggestions.

The chemo treatments made Bob sluggish during the last months of his life, but he chose to continue to work, teaching and writing up to the final days. Asking Bob to stop
work would have been akin to asking him to stop breathing. Professor Michael LaRosa, a personal friend from graduate school who happened to be a visiting faculty member in Miami’s History Department last spring, informed me that in the weeks before he died Bob had put yet another book manuscript on American photography in the mail. One cannot help but to wonder what more he might have accomplished if cancer had not cut his life short.

In an email, Bob’s friend and colleague Joseph Love perceptively remarked that the lethargy brought on by the chemo treatments “must be hell for someone with Bob’s energy.” I had a brief visit with my mentor in early February this year, and if he was experiencing hell, he did not let it show. I will always remember him playing with our one-year-old son Aodhan in his office that day when he gave him a simple flexible plastic toy frog figure to bite and bend. This frog was one of several leftover gifts that he and his students had taken to an orphanage during the yearly Spring Break study trip he led to Mérida, Mexico, where students combined tourism, academics, and community service. While Aodhan contentedly contorted his new toy, my wife Erica Windler and I had a lively conversation with him, even though he was visibly weak. He wanted to talk about the University of Miami, its new President Donna Shalala, and the College of Arts and Science’s impressive new Dean James H. Wyche. He was also excited by the prospect that Professor Guido Ruggiero, who holds the Josephine Berry Weiss Chair in the Humanities at Pennsylvania State University, had been offered the chairmanship of Miami’s History Department (a position he has since accepted, a real coup for the university). Bob also talked about the graduate program in Latin American history he had worked so hard to build over the years. He presented us with a copy of his latest book, and we talked about exciting new work. While he declared his determination to overcome his disease, he was not interested at all in discussing his illness. His thoughts were alive with the future, and I left him that day thinking it would not be the last time I would see him.

In Bob, I lost a mentor and a friend whom I admired deeply. His death is a great loss to the many communities he touched as a teacher, scholar, family man, and good citizen. He will be missed and is loved by his many colleagues, friends, students, family and faculty members who will carry some of his spirit, warmth, and energy with them.

Peter M. Beattie, Michigan State University
Recife, Pernambuco April 5, 2003

Robert M. Levine’s Bibliography

Monographs


Cambridge Concise History of Cuba. A book that is under contract with Cambridge UP, which Professor Frank Mora of Rhodes College has agreed to revise and complete.


Edited Books, Special Journal Editions, and Reference Works


