

ROY HORA: *The Landowners of the Argentine Pampas: A Social and Political History, 1860-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

If Roy Hora had post-modernist inclinations, his book might have been entitled *The Invention of the Estanciero Class*. He does not possess such inclinations. What he has given us is a well-written and clear presentation of the emergence of the *estancieros* as a separate, powerful and influential class, and then their decline. The focus is on the great landowners of the pampas, particularly those of the Province of Buenos Aires. If one were forced to place the work in a single category of history, it would be difficult, since it lies at the intersection of social, political, intellectual, and economic history. Although the book could not have been written much earlier, given its dependence on current historiography and its willingness to move beyond ideologically charged visions of large estate owners, it is traditional history in most senses. In the opinion of this reviewer, that is a good thing.

What Hora sets out to do is show how socio-economic and political change created a landowning class and how that class reacted. He spends a good deal of time on the changing ways that the *estancieros* viewed themselves and were viewed by others. A principal goal—which he carries out with a great deal of success—is to challenge the vision of a dominant unchanging class that ruled the country almost unchallenged since Argentina's birth at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Certainly many historians have moved beyond this simplistic vision, but it remains enshrined in popular beliefs and lingers as well among those who should know better. Hora makes very clear, with his sophisticated treatment, that this over-simplification is almost completely wrong.

The strongest section of the book are the opening chapters. There Hora shows, in a clear and convincing manner, that as of the 1860s the landowners were not really a dominant class as such. They did not think of themselves primarily as landowners and were viewed by others as backward and a drag on the future of the nation. They also did not control the politics of the nation, since, for example, it was the interior provinces that defeated Buenos Aires in 1880. In 1893, when numerous key *estancieros* attempted to form their own political party in the Province of Buenos Aires, they failed. This was not the only such failure. The sparseness of the labor forces on the estates and the importance of towns made landowners, as such, less able to mobilize voters than those who dedicated themselves to politics.

According to Hora, it was the progressive sectors of the landowners that altered the image of the *estancieros*. By forming such organizations as the Sociedad Rural and pushing for the modernization of the grazing industry through selective breeding and other improvements, the *estancieros* not only transformed their industry but also their image, both for the general society

and for themselves. They became symbols of progress in a nation that longed for progress. Being an *estanciero* gave prestige. Many became fabulously wealthy. In this early stage, it remained an activity and a class that was open to the extremely lucky and skillful immigrant. This openness did not last.

The second half of the book –that which deals with the period of fair elections under the Ley Sáenz Peña, the 1930s and the period of military control, 1943-45– is somewhat less impressive. It is not that Hora is less convincing but rather that the *estancieros*, as drawn by Hora, become much closer to their stereotypical image. (It is the image of the *estancieros* of this period that has entered popular mythology).

The landowners had become a closed class that possessed fabulous wealth. While as a group they had not opposed the opening of the political system, many rapidly became unhappy with the political system that emerged and their growing loss of prestige. The latter occurred due to the growing social conflicts in the pampas, especially with the tenant farmers. This happened, as their economic position became more difficult, due to faltering markets for beef. Instead of being seen as a progressive force, once again the *estancieros* were pictured as impediments to progress. The 1930s saw a much more supportive government, but one that lacked the ability to greatly help the *estancieros*, despite large efforts. The world economic situation was against them. Argentina saw the importance of industrialists increase. As this happened, landlords invested more money away from their rural holdings. Prior to the 1930s, Hora argues that this occurred less frequently than other authors have claimed. The elite became ever increasingly general objects of scorn.

Hora argues that the death knell for the *estancieros* as a dominant class came during the military interregnum of 1943-45, when the government asserted controls over rents on large estates. Their long-time continuance changed the nature of latifundia in Argentina forever.

This book allows us to see the *estancieros* in a new light. They were not an all powerful class, nor was the nature of their power and wealth unchanging. This in itself should not be surprising, but for the first time we really can understand the nuances of this. The real existence and power of the *estancieros* as a class was brief, if vitally important in the creation of modern Argentina. In showing us this and much more, Roy Hora has written a very important book. It makes a critical contribution to a number of sub-fields of history. It is a book that anyone interested in Argentina from the 1880s onward needs to read, so that they can move further away from the simplistic stereotypes that we have all absorbed to some extent.