FOREWORD

FREDRICK B. PIKE

LIKE THE LADY whom Bing Crosby sang about in 1931, Manuela Sáenz came along from “Out of Nowhere.” Crosby, as a smitten troubadour, fears that his lady will return to her nowhere and disappear. This, alas, is how it has been with Manuela. A vast majority of male observers wanted her, expected her, to return to nowhere after the sort of brief interlude that Andy Warhol would refer to, in a different context, as her “fifteen minutes of fame.”

There was never any real likelihood that Manuela would disappear totally, but she did recede into some of the dark corners of history, and might have been scourged even there had it not been for her close relationship with a heroic man—Simón Bolívar, “El Libertador”—a role that evoked occasional reference to her as “La Libertadora.”

In Latin America, not until the twentieth century was well along, did Evita Perón, among others, help to make a feminine role in history acceptable and, at least to some, even laudable. Manuela bestrode the world in her own day, but only in a way that made it clear to most observers that her day would be ephemeral at best. With the struggle for independence under way, exceptions to the rules of conduct were allowed. But once normalcy was restored, the Latin American world expected to return to its old ways, in which women could aspire to social but not political power—unless they remained discreetly behind the scenes. Apparently, no one had informed Manuela. Certainly, she was not noted for her discretion, and so she was as likely to be dubbed a villain as a heroine.

An illegitimate child (a fact sufficient in itself to disqualify her from acceptance, let alone admiration, by respectable society), Manuela grew up in her native Ecuador. In due time, her father managed to arrange her marriage to a solid, stolid gentleman of good background, who often found his headstrong bride a bit more than he could handle. She, in turn, found her mate exceedingly dull, however grateful she might have been for the economic security marriage provided.

When the Latin American struggle for independence reached serious proportions in the nineteenth century’s late teens, Sáenz devoted her formidable energies to the patriot cause. Eventually, in 1822, she met El Libertador himself,

and the pair embarked on an often-interrupted eight-year relationship. In short, she became his mistress—at least, the one he generally preferred above others. However, even the love-smitten Bolívar found her a mite eccentric, referring to Manuela as the “amiable madwoman.” No doubt, he found her a little less mad when, in 1828, her remarkable courage and ingenuity saved him from assassination. Their relationship lasted until Bolívar’s death from tuberculosis in 1830.

Increasingly discouraged and dismayed by the course of events in South America, confined to a wheelchair as a result of an injury, and in financial distress following her husband’s death in 1847, Manuela found herself forced to depend increasingly on the hit-or-miss largesse of others. Nonetheless, she continued for a while to indulge her passion for behind-the-scenes political manipulation. Had she been able to foresee the future, she surely would have found nothing really remarkable about a North American politico who, in the 1930s and early 1940s, dominated his mighty country and a good part of the world from a wheelchair. Nor, projecting ahead, would she have found anything surprising about women serving as presidents of Chile and Germany in the early twenty-first century, and before that, of the Philippines and elsewhere. Undoubtedly, she would have been astonished that it took until 2007 for a woman to mount a serious campaign for the U.S. presidency. High time, she might have thought, that reality caught up with her own worldview.

Previously, most readers, even those at home in the Spanish language, would have known Manuela only through her heroic role as Simón Bolívar’s protector against a gang of would-be assassins. Now there is no danger of her having to “go back to nowhere.” She is reclaimed in Pamela Murray’s richly researched and enchantingly written biography as one of the hemisphere’s greatest women, one who paved the way for so many other women in modern times to manifest their own greatness. In a way, Sáenz has helped to lead a new revolution in Latin America, one of true woman’s emancipation and equality, that is every bit as important as the one Simón Bolívar mounted against Spain. Manuela Sáenz died in 1856 in the backwater coastal town of Paita, Peru, far from the political firestorms she adored, but what a life she left behind.

Fredrick B. Pike
Professor of History Emeritus
University of Notre Dame