

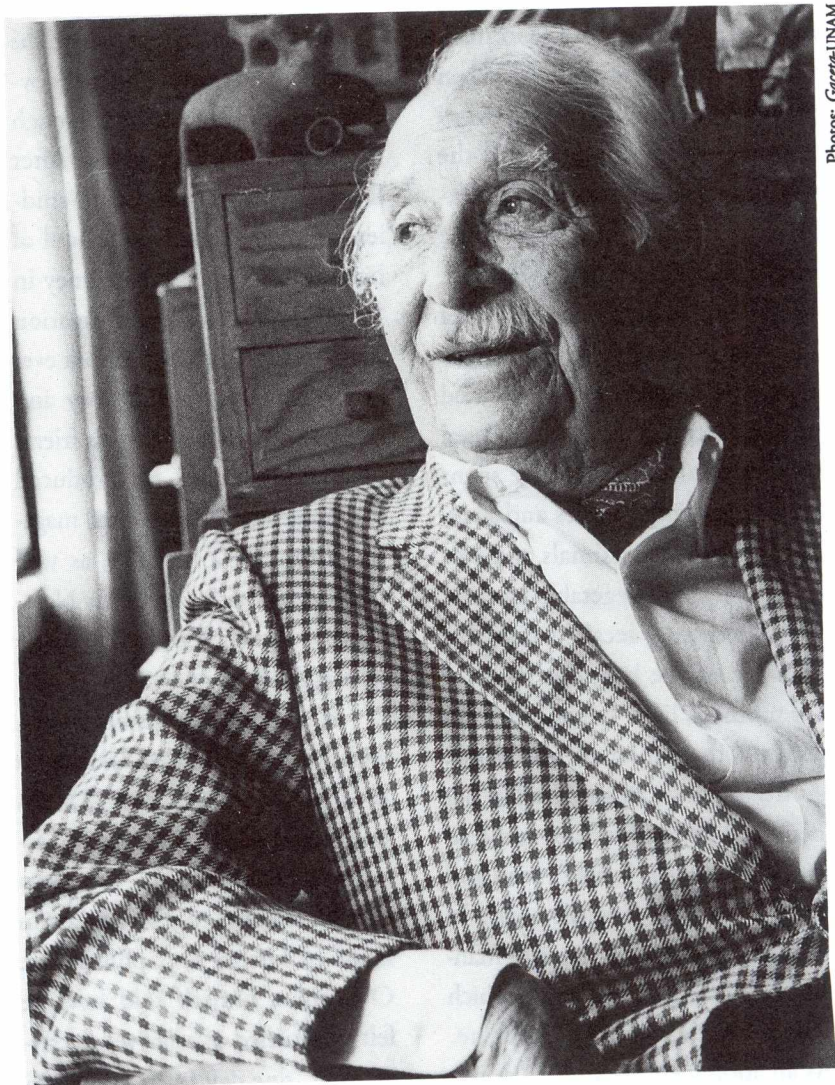
Edmundo O'Gorman: Controversial historian and critic

..I want an unpredictable history, like the course of our mortal lives; one susceptible to surprises and accidents, to fortune and misfortune, a history woven of events that happened in such a way that they may not have happened.

EDMUNDO O'GORMAN

Edmundo O'Gorman, one of Mexico's most important historians, known for the wealth of his work as well as for his constantly critical and innovative stance, died in Mexico City on September 28, at the age of 89. An excellent teacher who helped train several generations of historians, he revolutionized the study of history, refusing to reduce it to the elaboration of causal analyses "which presuppose the predetermination of the historical process." He maintained that the historian should base himself above all on the imagination as a creative and transformative force, since history "is nurtured not only by evidence but also by the historian's life experience, his training, culture and preferences, his likes and phobias."

O'Gorman was born in Mexico City on November 24, 1906. He spent part of his childhood in the city of Guanajuato, where his



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father, Cecil Crawford O'Gorman, worked as a mining engineer. When the Revolution broke out, work in the mines was halted and the O'Gorman family returned to Mexico City, settling in a large house in the San Angel neighborhood. While many homes in that area were taken over by the revolutionaries, O'Gorman's father decided to defend their home and refused to abandon it. The family spent its time making candles and soap, raising domestic animals and cultivating a small vegetable garden.

O'Gorman recalled that this was one of the happiest times of his mother's life. "My mother felt she was the center of our home. At nightfall we all gathered in her bedroom by the fireplace and read out loud.... This is how I read and reread the great English novels."

His parents gave him a humanistic and bilingual education, which led to his great love of literature. As an adolescent he studied at the

French-English College, where the world of 19th-century French novelists was opened up to him through learning a third language. After finishing his pre-university studies, he entered the Free School of Law, graduating as an attorney in 1928. He practiced as a litigation attorney for ten years, without ever losing his interest in history and literature. Together with his friend Justino Fernández he produced the *Alcancia* (Collection Box) magazine from 1932 to 1959, as well as *Cuadernos de Poesía* (Poetry Notebooks), of which only five issues were published in 1933.

His interest in history began with his study entitled *La historia de las divisiones territoriales de México* (The History of Mexico's Territorial Divisions). It was then that he decided to give up law in favor of history and philosophy. O'Gorman himself told how he felt unsatisfied as a lawyer, recalling that "one day I was talking to

a client regarding testimony about a mortgage, in order to begin a lawsuit, when I turned to him and said 'Mr. Miller, I don't care if they pay or not, God didn't bring me into this world to devote my life to this kind of business.'" Thus, in 1938 he exchanged the courtroom for a job as a historian at the General Archive of the Nation.

At the age of 42 he received a master's degree in philosophy with the thesis "Crisis and Future of Historical Science," receiving a doctorate in history three years later with a work entitled "The Idea of the Discovery of America." He joined the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters as a professor, teaching a seminar on historiography, and later became the faculty's director. He is remembered for his critical and polemical attitude, which made him very popular among his students—but not so popular with some of the other teachers. Doctor Jorge Alberto Manrique, one of his disciples, notes: "When it seemed that everyone was in agreement, when everything appeared to be clearly defined, his sharp wit intervened. It was almost as if he was spurred on by something bordering on the Mephistophelian, pushing him to express his dissidence...."

O'Gorman said that it was there that his struggle began against the supposition of historical causality and the zeal for exhaustive data, and in favor of historians' use of the imagination: "I had terrible enemies in the faculty. There was

one person who hated me; he would stand in the doorway of my classroom and tell the students: 'Don't go in, don't go in —that isn't history'. But this only made them more curious."

O'Gorman was always interested in reflections on the history of the Americas and Mexico in particular. Outstanding among his most important works are: *Fundamentos de la historia de América* (Fundamentals of the History of the Americas, 1942); *La evolución política del pueblo mexicano* (The Political Evolution of the Mexican People, 1948); *Dos concepciones de la tarea histórica: Polémica con Marcel Bataillon* (Two Conceptions of the Historian's Task: A Polemic with Marcel Bataillon, 1955); *La supervivencia política novohispana: Monarquía o república* (Political Survival in New Spain: Monarchy or Republic, 1969); *Meditaciones sobre el criollismo* (Reflections on Creolism, 1970); and *México: El trauma de su historia* (Mexico: The Trauma of Its History, 1977). He was also involved in publishing works by classic authors of Mexican historiography as well as fundamental documents in the study of Mexican history.

La invención de América: El universalismo de la cultura de Occidente (The Invention of America: The Universality of Western Culture, 1958) is one of his most controversial texts, the product of more than ten years of research and reflection on what the appearance of the Americas meant in the con-

text of Western culture. According to O'Gorman, the conception that America was discovered one fine day by Christopher Columbus did not satisfactorily explain the problem of its historical appearance: "The key lies in considering this event as the result of an invention of Western thought and not as a purely physical discovery, which furthermore, happened by chance." This book was translated into English in 1961 by the University of Indiana, and later republished by Greenwood Press. O'Gorman himself said that it gave him great satisfaction, since he considered it one of his most original works and "worthy of being exposed to the rigors of public inspection."

His rejection of the use of terms such as "conquest," "discovery of America" and "fusion of two cultures" led to his resignation in 1987 from the Mexican Academy of History (associated with the Royal Academy of Madrid), which he had been a member of since 1964 and directed from 1972 until his resignation. O'Gorman proposed that those terms be replaced with "takeover," "domination" and "invention," among others.

His always-critical posture was reflected in the intense debates he had with other historians, in which he accused them of basing their knowledge solely on the fallible accumulation of rational data. His historical convictions led him into intense polemics with Daniel Co-

ssío Villegas, Miguel León Portilla, Marcel Bataillon, Leopoldo Zea and Octavio Paz. In the words of historian Enrique Krauze: "Like no other 20th-century historian, Edmundo O'Gorman was the crucible of several virtues: imagination, intelligence, a profound knowledge of sources, and passion. Ironic, elegant, provocative, he said that 'themes should come from the gut,' but in his case they also filtered through the mind and heart."

He received the National Award for Letters in 1964, the Rafael Heliodoro Valle History Award in 1983 and the National University Education in Humanities Award in 1986—the latter awarded by UNAM, the institution to which he dedicated his life and which named him Doctor *Honoris Causa* in 1978. The government of Poland also awarded him a medal in 1979.

O'Gorman defined himself as a "skeptical optimist." Possessor of a great sense of sarcasm, he was capable of introducing humor and irony into even his most serious talks. Apart from history, inescapable topics for this exquisite conversationalist included women and love. These themes came together to express what was, until the end, his personal theory of life: "History is like love. It is a hallucination in which a person attributes virtues to someone, who, perhaps, does not even possess them." ^YM

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