

Don Ernesto de la Torre Villar

Professor Emeritus

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Courtesy of *Caceta UNAM*

In his extremely brief 2005 autobiography, Don Ernesto de la Torre commented that he still had the good fortune to be giving his doctoral course, advising students on their theses, orienting students and reviewing their work. He wrote, “Neither envious nor envied, I continue with the teaching mission that has been my vocation. I give thanks to the Lord that he has allowed me to spend almost 70 years spreading knowledge and experiences among young students.”

His vocation for teaching has not been given the weight it deserves. His many talents as an erudite man, researcher, editor and creator of institutions has made it easy to lose

track of his much beloved day-to-day efforts over the years at the School of Philosophy and Letters. That is why in this article I am going to tell a story; perhaps too personal a story, but one that is a small example of what his work as the teacher of several generations of students meant.

Around 1987, I went back to school to study my master’s in history and, on the advice of Masae Sugawara and Miguel Soto, I decided to take the seminar Don Ernesto gave every Thursday around noon at the School of Philosophy and Letters. And, as he wrote every semester on the doctoral program grade sheet, I “attended the seminar unfailingly.”

Professor De la Torre’s seminar was a big attraction. It would be hard to find anyone who did not at one time or

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another sit in on his class, even if only temporarily. For long periods, we spent our time studying the important institutions of New Spain, especially the ecclesiastic institutions, making those teachings decisive for my research. At one point we studied the seventeenth century because, as the professor used to say, it had been somewhat neglected by historiographers. In other courses, we delved into the sixteenth century: there we followed the footsteps of the first Franciscans in the New World, “the twelve,” the establishment of a missionary church, their evangelizing among the neophytes, the catechisms and Zumárraga and Gante, among so many other topics. Through his words I came to appreciate the rectitude of figures like Bishop Don Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, whom the professor would later dedicate an entire work to. We studied crucial figures like Mendieta and Las Casas. With the same facility that Professor De la Torre was able to deal with the great topics of the colonial centuries or the period of independence struggles, his prolific production of more than 100 volumes restored our proximity to the men who had made their indelible mark on our past. We got to know figures who are essential for really valuing New Spain’s culture, like the eminent Eguíara y Eguren; the elder statesman from Michoacán, Pérez Calama; or Mariano Beristain from Puebla—his “countryman” as the professor used to say— just to mention a few.

It was in his seminar that for the first time I came to value the humanism of New Spain, that I began to understand processes fundamental for my training: missionary activity and the processes of enforcing the Rule and of secularizers. With no pretensions to revisionism, the professor taught us the wealth of the world of New Spain and of the great men who forged its culture. With extreme modesty and pristine clarity, he let us see the importance of this Catholic culture, which he covered seamlessly and lovingly, just as he loved all these figures and their institutions.

Just as naturally, De la Torre understood the way in which New Spain society suffered under the colonial yoke. And he professed that same devotion to the fathers of our country. Of all our national heroes, for him, Miguel Hidalgo may have been the most interesting: he was the one who, as Don Ernesto points out in many of his texts, divided our history into a “be-



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fore” and an “after.” Three unique works of his deal masterfully with the independence process.

Reticent to fall in line with fashionable, sometimes seductive—to the students—findings, he often commented to me, “I said that many years ago.” And it was true. We students would go look up the many texts he had written for so many magazines over the years that had been forgotten amidst his vast body of work, and we would find that many of them were still very relevant and would benefit us all by republication.

By contrast, Don Ernesto was very well aware of the new questions that should be asked of the past. That was how he gladly received the new methodologies that allowed us to critically rethink our history. He encouraged us to have broad theoretical horizons, to be up to date in our reading. Of course, he was also interested in our work in the archives. He had so much experience that he knew very well which places were worth visiting and what kind of information we were going to find there. So, every Thursday, after the class, the professor’s lecture and the comments ended, Don Ernesto would stay in his classroom to talk about how our projects were advancing. From the moment we arrived, he took advantage of the time to share his enthusiasm with the rest of the students: so-and-so is studying such-and-such; there are such-and-such new findings in his/her research. Using his experience, he would discourage us from going to certain archives: “You’re not going to find anything there. It’s a complete mess!” He knew a lot, an enormous amount, but he wanted to know more and he encouraged us to move ahead, to find out about more things, to visit other places. For me, his presence was medicine against discouragement, disappointment or weariness. His enthusiasm was a driving force and a certainty for taking specific roads.

When I stopped going to the seminar, I was lucky enough to visit him at the Institute for Historical Research library, and I had the privilege of being received in his home. I was fortunate in having his sup-



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port for the collective research project about the independence in southern Mexico, for whose publication he honored us with a prologue complimenting his students' performance. Then came *La independencia en el norte* (Independence in the North), a project for which he traced fundamental guidelines. He counseled us, gave his opinion, commented and recommended, but above all, he became enthused with the possibility that more data and events of our history would become

known, that there would be pioneering work done on certain topics in certain regions. There is much today that we still do not know and that may change our view of the topic. He would say to us. "I'm so happy to see you so active in the bicentennial preparations!" he said the last time I called to tell him we had put together a final version of the "independence in the north" and to ask him, as we had planned, to write the prologue of this volume, too. And, of course, he was going to. But he was taken from us when we least expected it. Nevertheless, what remains with us forever is his exceptional example as a teacher, his erudite body of work, his great generosity as a human being and his untiring historical curiosity, which led so many generations of students to search the roads of history he had opened up. **MM**