

The Cultural Project of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) in Latin America, 1940-1950

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In August 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, concerned with the defense of the Western Hemisphere and, with Nazi infiltration in the Americas, created the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) and appointed Nelson Rockefeller as coordinator. Rockefeller's particular interest in other American republics "arose from visits and through the activities of enterprises in which he was concerned"¹ particularly in Venezuela (1935), around his interest in modern art, and his familiarity with the health work conducted by the International Division of the Rockefeller Foundation in Latin America. Also, in 1937, he traveled to ten countries to attend to matters connected with the affairs of the Standard Oil Company.² After those trips, he became "further impressed with the social and economic problems of the area."³

To strengthen ties between the United States and Latin America, including Mexico, Nelson Rockefeller implemented several cultural programs, including *Health for the Americas* and *Literacy for the Americas* to teach illiterate rural inhabitants to read and write in Spanish, and to inform them about health, disease prevention, and hygiene. Both programs used educational films as their main teaching tool, and the OIAA hired filmmaker Walt Disney to produce them. The health series included thirteen animated cartoons with an average duration of ten minutes, dubbed in Spanish and Portuguese.⁴ *Literacy for the Americas* included only four animated cartoons with the same characteristics as the health ones. Both programs and their implementation in Mexico and several other Latin American countries included a general plan, testing and reception documents made by the personnel working at the information offices that OIAA had in the "other Americas" as they sometimes called the Latin American countries.⁵ Particularly in the case of Mexico, these four literacy films represented one way to understand the close educational relation between the OIAA and the Mexican Minister of Education during the process of the Disney films' production and screening in Mexican schools (1942-1945).⁶

During my visit in June 2016 at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I started working on the analysis of the importance of OIAA's Cultural Project for Latin American development (not exclusively Mexico) during the 1940s and the type of propaganda the Office used. Focusing on text books, pamphlets and other films directed by individuals other than Walt Disney, I found interesting perspectives

for my research. project. Both printed materials and films familiarized the American public with Latin-American countries.⁷ This report, based on the archival resources I studied, has two sections. First, I will survey the collection of twenty booklets printed by the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and the Commerce Department between 1943-1944, dedicated to promote each country of the “other American republics.” These booklets highlighted the distinct characteristics of each country, but carried a common theme of emphasizing the commercial benefits for the United States of these countries, in the context of WWII. Second, I will review fifteen travelogue films directed by filmmaker Julien Bryan (1899-1974) dedicated to introducing the American people to Latin American countries. These films were to highlight their history and geography, their rural areas and urban population centers, focusing on their lifestyle, education level, health services, as well as their cultural, social, and religious practices, and their cooperation with the United States in the context of the WWII. These travelogues were filmed in seven different Latin-American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela). My goal was to analyze how similar topics, showing the American population the “Other American republics”, were reproduced in two completely different discourses: the written and the audiovisual.

Printed Material: Booklets⁸

Operations of the Press and Publications Division of OIAA, which started in 1940, were “one of the largest components of the OIAA program”⁹. Probably the most important topic was the promotion of an anti-Nazi discourse that encouraged Latin-American governments to cut political relations with the countries of the Axis (Germany, Japan, and Italy) in order to ally with the United States. The agency magazine, *En Guardia*, was the most important publication with these characteristics, and the one that “portrays and dramatizes the defense measures being taken by the United States.”¹⁰ The title reflected the defensive attitude of the hemisphere. The two first issues of *En Guardia* were published in the summer of 1941, composed of texts and photographs in black and white.

There were separate 32-page editions of the same issue in Spanish and in Portuguese for the Brazilian population.¹¹ Some photographs from the RAC collection show Nelson Rockefeller visiting the press office and supervising the printing of *En Guardia*.¹² Besides this magazine produced in USA for Latin-American countries, the OIAA printed material for distribution in the United States. A collection of twenty booklets with descriptions of each of twenty American republics, including Caribbean islands, was printed and made available for distribution. The first one published in March 1943 was dedicated to Brazil and its complete title was *Brazil, Introduction to a Neighbor*; the rest of the series, was completed by the end of 1944 and some of them were reprinted in 1945. “More than 2,000,000 copies were estimated to have been distributed in the United States”.¹³ All of them had the same format and their cover page design included the name of the country with its national emblem and a short subtitle that emphasized some particularity of its economic, political or cultural development. After the first subtitle for Brazil that appears as a general invitation for the reader to introduce an interest in an Latin American “neighbor”, there are more specific titles, like *Bolivia: “Storehouse of Metals”*, *Colombia: “Land of el Dorado”*, *México: “Next Door Neighbor”*, *Venezuela: “Land of Oil”* and *Uruguay: “Vigorous Democracy”*. The back covers had an austere but nationalistic design represented with the flag of each country. Only the cover page and back cover were printed in color, the interior pages with all the maps, engravings, pictures and graphics appear in black and white. Booklets for Brazil, Argentina, Chile and México are the longest, the first one with thirty-two pages and the others twenty-five; then comes Colombia with nineteen; Cuba, Peru and Venezuela with seventeen, Uruguay and Bolivia with thirteen and the rest between eleven and nine pages. The shortest is the one dedicated to *Guatemala, Land of the Trees* with only six pages.

The content of these booklets was a lesson for all American readers who were beginners in the general study of Latin American history, geography, and culture. Nevertheless, and not randomly, the emphasis lies on four fundamental facts within the context of WWII: a) the rupture of political relations with the Axis countries, and the subsequent alliance with the United States, b) the natural resources of each country and its potential to strengthen the US economy, c) its health care services, and d) its population’s literacy rate. From this point of

view, the modernization driven by the US was shown as beneficial and as a way of “compensating” each country for its political support and its economic cooperation. Most of these booklets used their first pages to geographically locate the country, using well-designed maps that showed the country’s boundaries, and its means of transportation, mainly by land, with roads and railroad lines, and by sea, with all the sea routes indicated. In this regard, the gradual construction of the Pan-American Highway, which would connect the United States to the farthest regions in Latin American, was also mentioned; the introduction of airplanes and airlines was also pointed out, as part of the modernization process driven by the American partnership.

Ancient history was confined to passages before and after each country’s conquest process during the 16th century (Spanish, Portuguese and French) and then again using time lines, the landmark historical events were noted. Another teaching resource was the use of frames, which pictorially formed a film that synthesized stories of each country, such as the story of Colombian coffee. Following this sort of ahistorical and disruptive geographical/historical presentation, what usually followed was the date when the particular country had broken relations with the Axis. For instance, “Bolivia had broken with the Axis in January, 1942” or in the Uruguay booklet “as she did in WWI she has repudiated the theory of power for the most powerful and has embraced the policies of the democratic nations. She proved this by breaking relations with the Axis on January 25, 1942.” The sum of these references explains to the American reader how the other American republics allied with the United States, which proved that the “neighbor” was helping them to break political relations with “enemy” countries. But even more frequently than these political statements, the booklets showed in detail the great amount of natural resources that were exported to the US. Following the thematic sequence that stands out in most of the booklets, the agricultural, mineral and flora and fauna wealth of the other American republics was introduced after the Axis rupture references. Again, the use of maps and data tables was crucial to graphically indicate each region, its products and the amount that was exported to the United States. Products like Colombian coffee, Mexican rubber, Brazilian and Dominican cacao, Bolivian tin, Venezuelan oil, Chilean nitrate, and Cuban sugar were essential to the US for its economic stability during and after the war. Graphics

and their interpretation occupy a good number of pages throughout these booklets. Other relevant topics were the advances in disease prevention, the state of healthcare and charity institutions, and all that related to the population's education level, which was usually measured by the literacy rate.

Parallel to the publishing and distribution of the booklets, the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) also implemented the previously mentioned programs *Health for the Americas* and *Literacy for the Americas*. This explains why the general references are so positive: these documents showed numerically and graphically the development achieved thanks to the referred programs. For instance, the booklets dedicated to Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela and México mention the fight against malaria and yellow fever, as well as the creation of clinics and health education programs. The booklets included discussion of radio and cinema as educational tools, and showed them as a result of the medical section support that the Rockefeller Foundation provided in these countries. Regarding the educational field, the booklets also mention the state of both basic and higher education promoted by the national governments and the gradual decrease in illiteracy rates.

As part of the educational environment, cultural and intellectual traditions are also evoked, and many famous contemporary poets, writers, musicians, and painters are mentioned in these booklets. Regarding the Mexican scenario, it is comprehensible to find the presence of the muralist movement, led by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. This pictorial movement had a great impact by the late 1920s. Mention of these artists' works reflected their close relationship among Nelson Rockefeller, including Diego Rivera, before the political disagreements that arouse from the mural that the Mexican painted in Rockefeller Center back in 1933. Among these important artists, the name of the actress Dolores del Río stands out, emphasizing the Mexican women's fight for civil rights and their presence in the Red Cross: "Dolores del Río, Hollywood film star, decided that she could do more for the war by going back to México to inaugurate China Relief and Russian Relief than she could in the United States." Photographs at RAC show Nelson Rockefeller and the actress during a trip he made to México in 1943. This confirms that both personalities knew each other and collaborated with Mexican movie producers

who backed the *Health and Literacy for the Americas* initiative and had Mexican actors and actresses starring in educational capsules to promote the Disney films; Dolores del Río was one of the first names on the list.¹⁴

The booklets also included references related to the architectural and urban characteristics of most of the described cities in order to compare them with other US cities; Buenos Aires for instance was “like our own large cities, the Argentine capital has expanded into numerous suburbs and satellite towns with all the accompanying manifestations of metropolitan life”; Santiago de Chile’s geographical highlights were “like an elongated California, she stretches for 2,600 miles from the subtropics to the subarctic trip of South America”. The physiognomy of their inhabitants of European origin was also brought to attention. As we shall see below, these differences were exalted in the documentaries that Julien Bryan filmed for the Office of the Inter-American Affairs Coordinator between 1944 and 1945, which together with the mentioned booklets conformed the educational tools to which the US students had access to know more about the Latin and Caribbean countries. Of course, countries with an indigenous population like México, Peru or Bolivia played no role in these comparisons, but their indigenous wealth, was indeed acknowledged by Bryan’s films.

Audio-visual Material: Julien Bryan’s Travelogue Films¹⁵

The American documentary maker Julien Bryan (1899-1974) was a well-known photographer and filmmaker, who during his youth served the American ambulance field service in France in 1917. He photographed scenes of World War I that he later incorporated into a book titled, *Ambulance 464*. He was a traveler who during the world war captured and filmed the attacked population of Siberia, the Soviet Union, and a number of European cities; he later exhibited his work in US movie theaters. During the projections, Bryan talked about some related topics. This dynamic turned him into a specialist of what was later known

as “theater travel lectures”.¹⁶ By early 1940, Bryan also collaborated with the Office of Inter-American Affairs through his film campaign, which supported cultural programs that the Office created for Latin America. In her article “The present as past: Assessing the value of Julien Bryan’s Film as historical evidence” Jane M. Loy analyzed the twenty-three documentaries that Bryan made for the OIAA between 1941 and 1945, the first was titled *Americans All* (1941).¹⁷ During this four year period, Bryan signed two more contracts with the OIAA and, according to Loy, the first contract covered the completion of six documentaries, while the second offered him thirty thousand dollars to film fifteen other pieces, which must “build up a comprehensive and sympathetic picture of Latin American peoples for the United States”.¹⁸ Contrary to the seventeen short films by Walt Disney for *Health for the Americas* and *Literacy for the Americas* that targeted the Latin American audience; Bryan’s documentaries were made for young Americans over 15 years old, as well as for adults.

The RAC preserves fifteen of the twenty-three documentaries by Bryan; the first frame of seven of them shows the legend “Julien Bryan presents the first one in a series of films on the Americas”, titles in this starting frame are: *Argentine Primer* (1942), *Colombia Crossroads* (1942), *Roads South* (1942), *Schools to the South* (1942), *Young Uruguay* (1943), *Housing in Chile* (1943) and *Good Neighbor Family* (1943). The eight remaining documentaries open with the OIAA emblem, followed by Bryan’s name as the producer. Titles are: *The High Plan (Bolivia)* (1943), *La Paz* (1943), *Lima* (1943), *Montevideo Family* (1943), *Lima Family* (1944), *Uruguay* (1945), *Fundo in Chile* (1945), and *South Chile* (1945).¹⁹ Unlike Disney animated cartoons, Bryan’s documentaries are travelogues 10 to 27 minutes long, filmed in situ; the filmmaker traveled with his team of writers, photographers, and musicians to all seven selected countries to shoot. According to Loy, Bryan worked with two teams located in different places; one team shot the documentaries on 35mm, with the OIAA emblem, while the other shot on 16 mm Kodachrome to project during Bryan’s lectures. This explains why some pieces show Bryan as the producer and others have the OIAA emblem. The first contact the filmmaker had with the “other Americas” was during a trip to Mexico he made in 1938 to take pictures and edit a theater lecture entitled *Colorful Mexico*.²⁰ As of today, we have few details about this

theater lecture; nevertheless some sequences captured during this trip, including shots showing President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) among peasants, were included in two of the documentaries Bryan made for the OIAA in 1942: *Schools to the South* and *Roads South*. Two years after his trip to México, Bryan then travelled to the other Latin American countries, this time under command of the Office led by Nelson Rockefeller.

From the start, these documentaries had a very clear and defined educational purpose, so as soon as they were ready, they were projected in middle schools with the intention of showing young students the Latin American countries. Bryan's experience with the theater travel-lectures reinforced the educational value of his work; while he projected them, he would explain their importance to the students. From the 15 short films reviewed at RAC, the one titled *Argentina Primer* (1942) confirms this dynamic, since the opening frame announces "a talk by Julien Bryan," and the director appears sitting in a classroom in front of students introducing his documentary with the phrase: "the people of Argentina are much as us, probably more than other people in Latin America." Right after this announcement, lights go off and the film starts. This phrase is just one example of the many comparisons Bryan made along the way to show that some Latin American countries like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay had similarities with the United States in terms of physical features, architecture, transport systems, educational and public health institutions, etc. Naturally, these similarities were not mentioned when talking about other countries with indigenous population like Bolivia or Peru. Nevertheless, he does praise, through contrasting images, their deep roots and cultural wealth; the narrator's words clash with the natives' poverty. Clearly, these images strengthened the visual discourse applied to convey a social, economic, and political lag present in some of the countries. Despite everything though, they were portrayed as "good neighbors." willing to cooperate with the United States so they could benefit from its industrial drive and move forward into a more efficient and productive economic and material development.

Apart from the projected images, the narrator's voice-over helped reinforce the discourse that somehow emphasized a characteristic of the country and its people. About Colombia, for instance, the message was that it was "the most

democratic of the ten South American republics” or that “there are more books than restaurants in Bogota, Colombians are highest intellectuals,”²¹ “Uruguay has the highest level of literacy in all Latin America,”²² about the Bolivian natives, it was mentioned that “they were a powerful race,”²³ about the landscapes from the south of Chile, the narrator wonders “and why not? Perhaps one day this can be the Switzerland of America,”²⁴ and about the Peruvian merchants, who closed their businesses in the afternoon, he would point out “one Spanish tradition shows no way to surrender: the siesta time,” seen as a synonym of sloth and lack of production.²⁵ But overall the established differences, one common denominator stood out in Bryan’s discourse, which was present throughout his films, and it was that the neighboring countries needed the US support, so that they could achieve “modernization.”

As already mentioned, Bryan’s films showed the audience the geographical location of the countries and their main cities, like La Paz, Bogotá, Asunción, Lima, Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile, their populations’ physical features, either urban or indigenous, their lifestyles, cultural practices, family traditions, work methods, etc. As accurately noted by Loy, the documentaries showed a Latin American perspective through the visualization of four main institutions: church, family, rural communities, and education.²⁶ This last topic underlies most of the films, but *Schools to the South* best depicts a general view of elementary, secondary and rural education, with emphasis on the last one. A third of the film is composed by scenes of Bryan’s visit to México in 1938, a country that according to him had “taken the lead in systematical national education through plans which function, in spite of the poverty, in all rural communities”.²⁷ While the voice-over repeats this quote, the camera takes the spectator to the backyards of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Secretariat of Public Education) located in Mexico City to show the murals painted by the famed painter Diego Rivera. The next scene transports us from the city to the countryside, showing us President Lázaro Cárdenas, promoter of socialist education, during a public meeting with peasants who talk to him and wait for him to sign some documents. This crucial scene provides an interesting possibility for analysis since it shows an essential phase in México’s education history that very likely Bryan did not know. When the OIAA documentaries were released to the US audience, the Mexican President was General Manuel Ávila

Camacho (1940-1946) whose initial purpose was to dismantle the socialist education model created by his predecessor. This means that American students were exposed to completely de-contextualized information crucial to the historical moment Bryan reconstructed. But he also carries a deeper analysis of the national history, which opens an interesting research area around the teaching of Latin American history in the United States in the 1940s.

Other relevant issues were also considered in the films, such as the economic situation and production capacity of the neighbor countries that were willing to support the warring US and reinforce the Good Neighbor Policy. That is why scenes dedicated to the daily agricultural labor are so recurrent, like potato and quinoa farming among the Bolivian Aymaras, coffee and sugar production in the Colombian plantations, and cattle ranching in Argentina and Uruguay; other scenes show the cattle grazing on the pastures, followed by meat later marketed. But there is a recurrent concern throughout the films, which is related to transportation - how will the products get to the United States? *Roads South* clearly shows US intervention through the upgrade of train cars, the introduction of ocean liners and modern aircrafts, as well as the construction of the Pan-American Highway. The images are eloquent while depicting the alleged transition from the donkey-drawn carts to the modern aircrafts from the Pan American Airways System. This reinforces Bryan's vision and leaves proof of the positive neighborliness of inter-American relations.

Bryan's booklets and travelogue films were still circulating in 1945, the same year the OIAA closed. Since their objective was the same, it is easier to find similarities rather than differences between these two educational tools. Rather than questioning this, what needs to be outlined is the fact that the films were available longer and got a better reception. According to Jane M. Loy, the documentaries were still used in classrooms twenty years later as a useful teaching tool that could be watched and analyzed in hindsight. A line from *Schools to the South* pretty much summarizes what the OIAA wanted to achieve through its educational initiative from Latin America to the United States: "they are Americans, these children are moving toward a future that is also ours, as they grow to a manhood and womanhood, all of us in this hemisphere: men, women and children are moving."

¹ Reich, Cary. *The life of Nelson Rockefeller. Worlds to conquer, 1908-1958*, Volume 1.

² *Ibidem*, p. 6

³ *ibidem*

⁴ Gudiño Cejudo, María Rosa. "Disney Health film in Mexico", in: *Latin America History. Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. Subject: History of Mexico, 1910–1945, Science, Technology, and Health Online Publication Date: Jul 2016 DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.318 <http://latinamericanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-318?rskey=t5G7Z5&result=1>

⁵ NR Projects, Series L FA 348, Box 66, Folder 632,

⁶ Gudiño Cejudo, María Rosa. "Eulalia Guzmán and Walt Disney Educational films. A pedagogical proposal for Literacy for the Americas in Mexico, (1942-1944)", in: *Journal of Educational Media. Memory and Society* (JEMMS), 2016, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 61-77. ISSN 2041-6938 (Print), ISSN 2041-6946 (Online).

<http://www.berghahnjournals.com/abstract/journals/jemms/8/1/jemms080104.xml>. This article was result of my research job in RAC in August 2015.

⁷ Margaret Snyder was the archivist who assisted me with my research. And from the beginning she suggested several sources for the objectives of my project.

⁸ For printed propaganda, there are also about 6 boxes of files related to Nelson Rockefeller's work with OIAA. Additionally, there are bound volumes (with some pamphlets and other publications) including 3 boxes of propaganda literature. For instance, (NAR, RG 4, Subseries 1, box 16) that includes a book for each Latin-American country. Those books were written, illustrated and printed by the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs Commerce Department Building in 1945. Also, Margaret suggested the copy on-site of *Our American Neighbors*, a publication by the Office of Inter-American Affairs that was originally published as a series of pamphlets, and *La Guerra y las Americas*, also published by the OIAA.

⁹ Rowland, Donald. *A History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*, 1946, RAC classification: 351.89 UNI, p. 45

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 46

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 48

¹² The photographs I refer here are at: NAR Photographs Rockefeller Family Office, FA455, Series 2, Box 11, folder 156.

¹³ Nelson A. Rockefeller, Personal Files. Record Group 4, Box 16, Folders 116,118, CIAA. Washington Publications and Printed Material. Propaganda Literature.

¹⁴ "On a trip to Mexico in 1943 Nelson Rockefeller discusses the arts with (left to right) movie actress Dolores del Río, gallery manager Inés Amor and singer Marian Anderson". NAR Photographs Rockefeller Family Office, FA455, Series 2, Box 31, folder 465.

¹⁵ Travelogue means a speech, movie, or piece of writing about someone's experiences while traveling

¹⁶ For travel lecture film, see Jeffrey Ruoff, "Around the world in eighty minutes, the travel lecture film", <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/ruoff.html#1>

¹⁷ Loy, Jane M., "The present as past: Assessing the value of Julien Bryan's Film as historical evidence", In: *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3, (1977), pp. 103-128.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 107

¹⁹ Other title films quoted by Jane M. Loy are: *Americans all* (1942), *Venezuela moves ahead* (1942), *Children for the Americas* (1943), *Atacama Desert* (1943), *Central Chile* (1943), *Bolivia* (1945), *Paraguay* (1945) and *Perú* (1945). Some of them are now available on Youtube.

²⁰ M. Loy, *op cit*, p. 107

²¹ Literal phrases from, *Colombia: Crossroads of the Americas* (1942)

²² Literal phrase from *Young Uruguay* (1943)

²³ Literal phrase from *La Paz* (1943)

²⁴ Literal phrase from *South Chile* (1945)

²⁵ Literal phrase from *Lima* (1944)

²⁶ Loy, *op cit*, p. 114

²⁷ Literal phrase from *Schools to the South* (1942)