

REVIEW

## Agnes Gehbald, *A Colonial Book Market: Peruvian Print Culture in the Age of the Enlightenment*

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*A Colonial Book Market* offers an extensively researched social history of the book market, centred in Lima, which served the Andes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Gehbald transforms our understanding of books and their circulation in colonial Lima, both expanding what we know about the import, trade, consumption, use and local production of the book, and shifting how the book and its reception have been framed by prior scholars. Her primary contributions are to demonstrate the extent and diversity of the colonial book market and to describe the buying and selling of books, both locally made and imported, as commodities within colonial Lima and beyond. Simultaneously, Gehbald is interested in thinking about how the colonial print market responded to the Enlightenment, spreading new scientific and philosophical thinking while, crucially, maintaining a significant demand for religious content.

Although the title, *A Colonial Book Market*, at first glance suggests a focus on bound printed volumes containing multiple pages of text, a key aspect of Gehbald's analysis is the decision not to limit her study solely to 'books' as such but also to include other printed and even manuscript material, including broadsheets, pamphlets and single-sheet woodcuts and engravings. As she notes, in colonial archival inventories the category 'Libros' ('Books') often encapsulates just such a wide range of materials; her choice to adopt an expansive and inclusive definition of the 'book' thus reflects this period categorisation (p. 10). This approach allows Gehbald to present a much more comprehensive picture of the colonial market for printed material than a more limited understanding of 'book' might give and results in a richer, more wide-ranging and all-encompassing study.

The book is divided into five sections, with anecdotes at the start of each chapter that draw the reader into the world of the colonial book trade and its consumers. Chapter 1 introduces the colonial society in which the book trade took place, considering literacy rates, legal barriers to printing and importation, and material challenges to the manufacturing of books. Chapter 2 traces the increased supply of books entering the Peruvian market at the end of the colonial period, both imported and locally produced. Chapter 3 describes the numerous and diverse sites of the book trade, in particular illuminating the *cajoneros*, small-scale vendors

who sold out of stalls and offered print material alongside a range of other goods. This chapter also considers the mule trains that distributed books more broadly throughout the viceroyalty, and elaborates on the variety of materials offered for sale at the various book-selling establishments. Chapter 4 addresses the genres that were most popular within the colonial market, emphasising the importance of ‘small jobs’ (such as, for example, invitations), prayer booklets, almanacs and manuals, and stressing the coexistence of religion and science rather than religion’s decline under Enlightenment pressures. Chapter 5 argues for the diversity of print consumers, in terms of gender, profession, finances and racial or ethnic background. As part of this analysis, the chapter also considers further modes of book acquisition, including inheritance, lending and theft, and addresses the way books were displayed, pointing out that books could function as status symbols and expressions of identity even if not read.

Throughout, Gehbald is to be applauded on her extensive archival research which, among other things, provides evidence of the diversity of the colonial book market and its consumers. Although occasionally discrete archival examples are asked to stand in for much larger contexts, in general Gehbald thoughtfully grounds her arguments in a wide array of primary sources, including ship manifests, inventories, wills, lawsuits, contracts and the printed materials themselves. She additionally shows deep familiarity with the secondary literature on print culture and skillfully situates her interventions within this broader context. That being said, a weakness of the research, particularly evident in Chapter 5, is the limited engagement with scholars working on race beyond David Cahill and Olivia Harris. A more serious consideration of these nuances could enhance Gehbald’s discussion of the diversity of book consumers, an oversight which is perhaps reflected in the clumsy phrasing in Chapter 5 where Gehbald introduces the reader to several archivally documented Black book owners, whom she subsequently describes as making ‘the pattern of book owners [...] more “colourful”’ (p. 242).

Although this awkward turn of phrase is in many ways balanced by the compelling archival finds Gehbald presents, it is in other ways characteristic of the book, which contains many instances of unconventional word choices or word confusion, as well as occasional idiosyncratic translations that are at best distracting and at times misleading. These linguistic infelicities could ideally have been corrected by a conscientious copyeditor. The right editor might also have been useful in cutting excess examples, which at times make *A Colonial Book Market* a bit overly dense and erudite for use in the classroom. The wealth of archival finds is one of the book’s strengths, but nonetheless can distract from the important broader points Gehbald is making. As one example of this, Gehbald frequently brings in comparative material from other colonial contexts (primarily the English colonies in North America) and Europe, as well as places farther afield. The intent is to place the Viceroyalty of Peru within an Atlantic World / global framework and to emphasise the interconnectedness of this moment. Often, however, the examples given are more extensive than needed to make a specific point, and as such can lose the reader’s attention. These references, and other similar passages, may have been more successful if restricted to a summarising sentence or relegated to a footnote. Finally, descriptions of printed images often misidentify printing techniques – this is a small point in some ways as otherwise Gehbald gives many valuable

insights into the market for printed images; these points of confusion may, however, lead to misunderstanding on the part of readers.

These points of critique aside, *A Colonial Book Market* is an ambitious volume that makes an important contribution to scholarship. It is replete with exciting moments of archival discovery. *A Colonial Book Market* will appeal to scholars interested in book history, the Enlightenment, and/or the colonial Andes, and will be a key text for all future work on Lima.