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## [Schaefer on Van Young, 'A Life Together: Lucas Alamán and Mexico, 1792-1853'](#)

Review published on Thursday, October 27, 2022

**Eric Van Young.** *A Life Together: Lucas Alamán and Mexico, 1792-1853.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. 848 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-300-23391-9](#). 

**Reviewed by** Timo Schaefer (University of Edinburgh) **Published on** H-LatAm (October, 2022)  
**Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56775>

Eric Van Young's biography of Lucas Alamán spreads its intricate, 715-page-thick canopy (excluding notes and bibliography) over a historiographical hollow but sparsely populated by other anglophone growth. Recent scholarship on early republican Mexico has largely examined the experiences of people occupying the lower and middle rungs of the social ladder; has paid more (if by no means exclusive) attention to liberal than conservative ideas and political programs; and has eschewed biographical approaches to its varied social, political, or intellectual interests (Will Fowler's splendid 2007 biography of Antonio López de Santa Anna, *Santa Anna of Mexico*, being perhaps the principal exception). Van Young's approach, however, is as biographical as they come. It does not simply "use" Alamán as the focal point of a more broadly conceived study of Mexican conservatism—in the style of Charles Hale's classic study of Alamán's liberal foe, José María Luis Mora, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821-1853* (1968)—but is instead expressly the biography of a man who was as fierce in his conservatism as he was fiercely protective of his elite status. To follow Van Young into this hollow is to leave behind the tangle of competing paradigms, arguments, and thematic variations one finds in more populated historiographical corners—shoots, twigs, and branches jostling for sunlight—and to settle in the shade thrown by one life meticulously reconstructed.

So why this particular life? The answer is alluded to in the book's title. Alamán and Mexico, Van Young argues, were more than contemporaries. They were companions in youth who (neither too gracefully nor always harmoniously) grew old together. "The arc of [Alamán's] career shadowed that of Mexico itself—from youthful promise, optimism, and experimentation following independence from Spain to a chaotic adulthood corresponding to the early decades of the young republic and then to crisis and near death as he exited the scene" (p. 3). Nor was this "shadowing" of the life of man and of country a mere coincidence. Van Young argues that Alamán's fall from optimism, and into a fight against chaos, was at least partly caused by his country's chaotic political situation and halting economic development. The entanglement of Alamán's life with that of the nation is of course all the more interesting for happening to one of the principal thinkers (and almost certainly the principal historian) of this period of Mexican history, thus becoming incidental fodder for a deeply disenchanted but often penetrating commentary on the country's public affairs.

A growing disillusionment and even despair at the political and economic trajectory of his country was a prominent feature of Alamán's life and inevitably colored his worldview. Certain aspects of that

worldview nevertheless held fast throughout his adult life. Alamán was a life-long anti-democrat, a position Van Young attributes less to any trauma he may have sustained from living through the War of Independence (and more particularly from witnessing the sack of Guanajuato as a youth) than to his upbringing as the scion of one of Guanajuato's wealthiest families: "His wealthy, socially privileged background in a society highly stratified by race appears to have led him to form negative, or at least disdainful, attitudes as a child and adolescent toward the people of color he saw all around him every day—the drawers of water and hewers of wood, the mine laborers, muleteers, street vendors, and especially indigenous people" (pp. 53-54). In spite of this basic philosophical orientation, however, Van Young still detects an ideological flexibility in the young Alamán that, after about 1830, went entirely absent. During the first year and a half of the liberal Guadalupe Victoria administration (1824-29), Alamán held the important cabinet post of Minister of Interior and Exterior Relations, in spite of fundamentally disagreeing with the political direction of the government in which he served. But by 1830 he had developed what Van Young describes as "an increasingly apocalyptic view of Mexican public life," causing him to fight for his political creed tooth and nail, by means fair when possible and foul when (in his judgment) necessary (p. 357). The foulest of those means, the judicial murder of captured rebel, independence hero, and recently ousted president Vicente Guerrero, in which Alamán was immediately rumored to have been involved, sullied the statesman's reputation in and beyond his own life and forced him to spend more than a year in hiding when a liberal administration returned to power. Van Young dissects the murky episode with a characteristic mixture of investigative patience and analytical brio, concluding that Alamán was probably present at the meeting when the decision to execute Guerrero was taken but, more likely than not, vainly voted against it as too politically risky.

If Alamán's participation in his country's political life caused him a good amount of personal distress, his economic undertakings were also a source of acute disappointment. Furthermore, in this sphere, too, Alamán had reason to feel that his own misfortunes were closely tied up with those of the nation. By investing in mining in the 1820s and textile production in the early 1840s, he wished not only to enrich himself but also, as he put it in a letter to Santa Anna, to build "enterprises ... to which the nation will owe its prosperity" (p. 522). Alamán hoped, in other words, conveniently but not insincerely, that his personal enrichment would engender that of the country. But his ventures quickly folded, and that failure as a businessman contributed further to his political frustration—and to his hankering for a political order capable of providing the stable conditions in which big businesses such as his might more easily prosper.

There is good reason, then, out of the mass of political and intellectual figures crowding the history of Mexico's early republic, to choose this particular man for a biographical subject. There is, furthermore, one final motive that I suspect made Van Young want to write about Alamán, a motive that had nothing to do with historiographical lacunae. Van Young states that Alamán's literary output was characterized by "attention to detail, not inconsiderable mastery of technology, breadth of historical and comparative reference, theoretical grasp of political economy, and depth of vision"; by "an adamant prose tending much toward an elaborate but never florid style, the ability to employ sarcasm sparingly but to good effect, and the capacity to cut to the heart of the matter, even if with some prolixity"; and by a "combination of logical acuity, wide-ranging historical, classical, and other references, occasional sharpness of tone and even sarcasm, prolixity, and baroque elaboration" (pp. 99, 114, 86). Minus the sarcasm, those words may well describe Van Young's own style as a historian, at least as evidenced in this latest installment of his oeuvre. I thus left the book with the impression

that not the least of the things that nudged Van Young toward the writing of an Alamán biography was a notable intellectual sympathy—a sympathy, however, for Alamán's style as a thinker more than the substance of his thought, as Van Young is unsparing about the limitations of Alamán's political vision.

Much more could be said about this biography, which owes its heft not only to Van Young's Alamán-like prolixity but also to the wide range of topics it covers, from the minutiae of Mexico's early republican political struggles, foreign policy, and developmentalist efforts to elite Mexicans' social mores and material culture. Van Young has given us a fascinating exploration of the relationship between personal life, politics, and ideology, as well as what may be the most fine-grained and erudite study to date of Mexican conservatism in the immediate post-independence period. To rest in the shade of his book is a pleasure, and well worth the excursion off the beaten historiographical track.

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