josé de alencar

Iracema

IRACEMA

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IRACEMA

A Novel by

JOSÉ DE ALENCAR

Translated from the Portuguese by

CLIFFORD E. LANDERS

WITH A FOREWORD BY NAOMI LINDSTROM
AND AN AFTERWORD BY ALCIDES VILLAÇA

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Series Editors' General Introduction

The Library of Latin America series makes available in translation major nineteenth-century authors whose work has been neglected in the English-speaking world. The titles for the translations from the Spanish and Portuguese were suggested by an editorial committee that included Jean Franco (general editor responsible for works in Spanish), Richard Graham (series editor responsible for works in Portuguese), Tulio Halperín Donghi (at the University of California, Berkeley), Iván Jaksić (at the University of Notre Dame), Naomi Lindstrom (at the University of Texas at Austin), Francine Masiello (at the University of California, Berkeley), and Eduardo Lozano of the Library at the University of Pittsburgh. The late Antonio Cornejo Polar of the University of California, Berkeley, was also one of the founding members of the committee. The translations have been funded thanks to the generosity of the Lampadia Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

During the period of national formation between 1810 and into the early years of the twentieth century, the new nations of Latin America fashioned their identities, drew up constitutions, engaged in bitter struggles over territory, and debated questions of education, government, ethnicity, and culture. This was a

unique period unlike the process of nation formation in Europe and one which should be more familiar than it is to students of comparative politics, history, and literature.

The image of the nation was envisioned by the lettered classes—a minority in countries in which indigenous, mestizo, black, or mulatto peasants and slaves predominated—although there were also alternative nationalisms at the grassroots level. The cultural elite were well educated in European thought and letters, but as statesmen, journalists, poets, and academics, they confronted the problem of the racial and linguistic heterogeneity of the continent and the difficulties of integrating the population into a modern nation-state. Some of the writers whose works will be translated in the Library of Latin America series played leading roles in politics. Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, a friar who translated Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and was one of the most colorful characters of the independence period, was faced with imprisonment and expulsion from Mexico for his heterodox beliefs; on his return, after independence, he was elected to the congress. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, exiled from his native Argentina under the presidency of Rosas, wrote *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie,* a stinging denunciation of that government. He returned after Rosas' overthrow and was elected president in 1868. Andrés Bello was born in Venezuela, lived in London where he published poetry during the independence period, settled in Chile where he founded the University, wrote his grammar of the Spanish language, and drew up the country's legal code.

These post-independence intelligentsia were not simply dreaming castles in the air, but vitally contributed to the founding of nations and the shaping of culture. The advantage of hindsight may make us aware of problems they themselves did not foresee, but this should not affect our assessment of their truly astonishing energies and achievements. It is still surprising that the writing of Andrés Bello, who contributed fundamental works to so many different fields, has never been translated into English. Although there is a recent translation of Sarmiento's celebrated *Facundo,* there is no translation of his memoirs, *Recuerdos de provincia (Provincial Recollections).* The predominance of memoirs in the Library of Latin

America series is no accident—many of these offer entertaining insights into a vast and complex continent.

Nor have we neglected the novel. The series includes new translations of the outstanding Brazilian writer Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis' work, including *Dom Casmurro* and *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas.* There is no reason why other novels and writers who are not so well known outside Latin America—the Peruvian novelist Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido,* Nataniel Aguirre's *Juan de la Rosa,* José de Alencar's *Iracema,* Juana Manuela Gorriti's short stories — should not be read with as much interest as the political novels of Anthony Trollope.

A series on nineteenth-century Latin America cannot, however, be limited to literary genres such as the novel, the poem, and the short story. The literature of independent Latin America was eclectic and strongly influenced by the periodical press newly liberated from scrutiny by colonial authorities and the Inquisition. Newspapers were miscellanies of fiction, essays, poems, and translations from all manners of European writing. The novels written on the eve of Mexican Independence by José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi included disquisitions on secular education and law, and denunciations of the evils of gaming and idleness. Other works, such as a well-known poem by Andrés Bello, "Ode to Tropical Agriculture," and novels such as *Amalia* by José Mármol and the Bolivian Nataniel Aguirre's *Juan de la Rosa,* were openly partisan. By the end of the century, sophisticated scholars were beginning to address the history of their countries, as did João Capistrano de Abreu in his *Capítulos de história colonial.*

It is often in memoirs such as those by Fray Servando Teresa de Mier or Sarmiento that we find the descriptions of everyday life that in Europe were incorporated into the realist novel. Latin American literature at this time was seen largely as a pedagogical tool, a "light" alternative to speeches, sermons, and philosophical tracts—though, in fact, especially in the early part of the century, even the readership for novels was quite small because of the high rate of illiteracy. Nevertheless, the vigorous orally transmitted culture of the gaucho and the urban underclasses became the linguistic repertoire of some of the most interesting nineteenth-

century writers—most notably José Hernández, author of the "gauchesque" poem "Martín Fierro," which enjoyed an unparalleled popularity. But for many writers the task was not to appropriate popular language but to civilize, and their literary works were strongly influenced by the high style of political oratory.

The editorial committee has not attempted to limit its selection to the better-known writers such as Machado de Assis; it has also selected many works that have never appeared in translation or writers whose work has not been translated recently. The series now makes these works available to the English-speaking public.

Because of the preferences of funding organizations, the series initially focuses on writing from Brazil, the Southern Cone, the Andean region, and Mexico. Each of our editions will have an introduction that places the work in its appropriate context and includes explanatory notes.

We owe special thanks to Robert Glynn of the Lampadia Foundation, whose initiative gave the project a jump start, and to Richard Ekman of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which also generously supported the project. We also thank the Rockefeller Foundation for funding the 1996 symposium "Culture and Nation in Iberoamerica," organized by the editorial board of the Library of Latin America. We received substantial institutional support and personal encouragement from the Institute of Latin American Studies of the University of Texas at Austin. The support of Edward Barry of Oxford University Press has been crucial, as has the advice and help of Ellen Chodosh of Oxford University Press. The first volumes of the series were published after the untimely death, on July 3, 1997, of Maria C. Bulle, who, as an associate of the Lampadia Foundation, supported the idea from its beginning.

—Jean Franco
—Richard Graham

Foreword

José Martiniano de Alencar (1829–1877) was born in Mecejana, in the Brazilian state of Ceará, the region that serves as the setting for his 1865 novel *Iracema*. Best known as a novelist, Alencar also composed biographies, works for the theater, political analyses and polemics, meditative journalism, scholarly works, and writings in which he justified his literary and cultural positions and responded to his critics.

Alencar pursued a career in public affairs as well. He occupied the post of Minister of Justice from 1868 to 1870. Aspiring to a senate seat, he received the highest number of votes in the 1869 election, but the Emperor Pedro II, who had been the object of direct criticism from the novelist, did not approve of him for the position. Exercising his constitutional privilege, the Emperor appointed another of the top three finalists. Though his political career met with mixed success, by all accounts Alencar was one of the memorable orators of his day.

This preface concentrates on Alencar's activities that have bearing on the romantic, Indian-theme nationalism

that *Iracema* embodies. It should be noted that, even within the single genre of the novel, Alencar covered a wide scope of themes and of geographical and historical settings. As a writer dedicated to creating Brazilian literature, he appears to have aimed, in his prose fiction, to touch upon every important aspect of the nation. In a notable omission, which Roberto Reis points out, "Blacks do not appear in Alencar's novels."[1]

Iracema is the second in Alencar's cycle of three Indianist novels: *O Guarani* (1857), *Iracema* (1865), and *Ubirajara* (1874). In addition, in 1863 Alencar began to compose a thematically related epic poem, "Os filhos de Tupã" (*The children of Tupã*). (This project remained unfinished, but was published posthumously in 1910 and 1911 in its fragmentary form.) A reader of these works glimpses behind them a complete program of ideas concerning the making of Brazilian literature. Alencar was, indeed, an author with an agenda. In his Indianist novels, he sought to create allegories of the genesis of the Brazilian people. Indian tribes particular to Brazil were useful in illustrating the uniqueness of national history. Stories of the encounters between Indians and early Portuguese settlers were also transformed into mythic narratives of a past shared by all Brazilians. This is especially true in *O Guarani* and *Iracema*; both novels deal not only with the early encounters, but also the profound changes this contact brings to indigenous peoples. *Ubirajara*, Alencar's third Indianist novel, is set in an earlier era. In it, Indians enjoy a changelessly beautiful primeval land before the arrival of the Europeans and the beginning of the nation's history.

The novelistic construction of *Iracema* depends on a flashback. The first chapter depicts a scene set after Iracema has already died. A bereaved European soldier is sailing away from Ceará. The opening does not explain why the protagonist is grieving and why he is sailing the

ocean accompanied only by a small child and a dog. However, the narrator claims to possess an insider's knowledge of what is behind this curious scene. It is a local legend of Ceará, "a story that I was told in the beautiful plains where I was born."

After this first chapter, the narrator takes the reader through a lengthy retrospective. Chapters II through XXXII relate the events from Iracema's meeting with Martim through her death. The thirty-third chapter, resembling an epilogue, takes place four years after the events related in the rest of the novel. The protagonist and his child return from the journey to Portugal that they were seen undertaking in the first chapter. Martim sets to work strengthening Christianity, Indian-European relations, and Portuguese rule in Brazil, and the legend and the novel *Iracema* draw to a close.

Reading *Iracema*, North American readers will be reminded of the way that narratives of Pilgrims and Indians, and especially the story of the first Thanksgiving, have been elaborated to give the diverse U.S. population the sense of possessing a common past. In many respects, *Iracema* embodies the same general type of project underlying the Indian-theme novels of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). Cooper, another writer determined to craft a national literature, felt a similar attraction to the era in which Indians and settlers first came into contact. Indeed, one of the criticisms leveled at *Iracema* when it was first published was that its author was imitating Cooper.

In focusing attention on the Indian component of the nation's heritage, Alencar was developing a tendency that arose during Brazil's push for Independence (1808–1822). Throughout Latin America, advocates and celebrators of Independence had idealized the Indian, not only as a being unique to the New World, but also as a figure of resistance to colonial rule. The sentimental glorification of

native peoples was popularized during the Independence period and fit smoothly into the romanticism that came into fashion during the nineteenth century.

The principles and practices of Indianism in Brazilian literature were the topic of heated public discussion. Before any of his Indianist novels had appeared in print, Alencar was already a prime mover of this debate. In his 1856 comments on an Indianist poem by Domingos Gonçalves de Magalhães, Alencar seized the opportunity to set out his ideas on the topic. His remarks involved many of the nation's literary figures, as well as the Emperor, in a heated discussion of the themes of nationalism, Indianism, and romanticism. This interchange began the first of the great polemics on similar topics into which the author would be drawn.[2] As Alencar's own Indianist prose writings appeared, they in turn drew criticism. Using the passionate rhetoric typical of the romantic era, with its literary diatribes and polemics, Alencar defended his literary program and language. Unable to let his creative work speak for itself, Alencar composed numerous prefaces and afterwords to his novels as well as open letters and statements of his literary credo. His compulsive self-justification produced an extensive body of writing that affords readers a glimpse of the tempestuous literary world of mid- to late-nineteenth-century Brazil.

Alencar's campaign to create a Brazilian literary language was probably his most important contribution as a writer. In his search for elements that could generate a distinctive identity for Brazilian literature, Alencar studied the evolution of the Portuguese language as it was used in Brazilian life. Like many intellectuals of the romantic era, Alencar became a scholar of the orally transmitted folk narratives and beliefs and linguistic phenomena distinctive to his country, believing that the speech, sayings, and legends of the people could lead to a national identity. In his vision, the people included most specifically Brazil's indigenous

communities. Among the many works the prolific Alencar produced is a lexical guide to the *Língua Brasílica.*

Alencar's struggle to forge a Brazilian expression is the basis for the respect he has enjoyed even after his romantic style went out of vogue. His efforts to write a more distinctively Brazilian literary language, however, drew heavy fire during the author's lifetime. The reaction of linguistic purists to Alencar's innovations was so virulent that it left the author embittered. At the same time, Alencar had influential contemporary supporters. The most distinguished of these was Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, who would succeed Alencar as the nation's foremost literary figure. Alencar's struggle toward a Brazilian literary language appears to have also sparked the interest of the avant-gardist Mário de Andrade. Andrade's celebrated novel of 1928, *Macunaíma, O Herói Sem Nenhum Caráter*, mimics the Indianist discourse that Alencar had developed most clearly in his *Iracema.*[3]

Readers of *Iracema* will find, at the novel's end, Alencar's own statement of his ideas about the making of a Brazilian literary expression. As an afterword to the first edition, he included a letter addressed to his friend Domingos José Nogueira Jaguaribe (1820–1890). Alencar criticizes the use Brazilian romantics had been making of Indian characters, noting in particular their failure to draw upon the resources of the Indian language they have most closely at hand, Tupi. His ideal is the creation of a Brazilian literary medium that would derive full benefit from the author's knowledge of the Indian tongue. Literary borrowing from Indian language would be highly stylized, with esthetic considerations overruling the desire to be faithful to the actual speech of Indians. Alencar hoped to see "realized in it my ideas concerning national literature; and in it there will be an entirely Brazilian poetry, imbibed in the language of the savages." The ideas contained in the "Letter" continue to be of concern for

Brazilian literature. The struggle for a distinctive national identity, whether in the novel or in culture generally, remains a perennial problem.

Not all twentieth-century interest in Alencar has focused on his linguistic innovations, however. His Indianism has never been completely relegated to a bygone age of romanticism. Gilberto Freyre published a sympathetic book-length study of Alencar in 1955. Freyre, who made his name theorizing about racial and cultural identity in Brazil, brings his own central concerns to his reading of Alencar. He appreciates Alencar's focus on Indians as a salutary move away from the "Aryanist" outlook that Freyre associates with an ideal of whiteness, traditional Catholicism, denial of Brazil's diversity, and rigidly conventional bourgeois decorum. According to Freyre, by drawing attention to non-European elements in the making of the nation, Alencar becomes a more suitable Brazilian national writer than Machado de Assis, whom Freyre regarded as a hopeless Eurocentric.[4]

The novel *Iracema* is the story of a doomed amorous relationship between a beautiful young Tabajara Indian woman, Iracema, who is the daughter of a shaman, and a Portuguese soldier named Martim. Following romantic convention, the plot sets several obstacles in the way of their love. Martim is viewed as a menace by many members of the Tabajara tribe, who, according to Alencar's historical preface, were hostile to the Portuguese. Iracema's undisguised interest in Martim arouses the jealousy and enmity of "the great chieftain of the Tabajara nation," the hot-headed, treacherous Irapuã. As a priestess who officiates in Tabajara rituals, Iracema is a sacred virgin who is under vows of chastity. Her elopement with Martim outrages the Tabajaras and makes Iracema an outcast from her family and tribe.

In an additional complication, Iracema is more strongly attached to Martim than he is to her. Martim's inability

to maintain his interest in Iracema soon sends her into a fatal decline from unrequited love. Ill-starred as their relation is, it succeeds in producing an heir of essential significance for the nation's future.

While the story of Iracema and Martim is the central plot, the relations that Martim establishes with both military and religious tribal leaders provide added complexities. Before his encounter with the inland Tabajaras— that is, before the events related in *Iracema*—Martim has already developed excellent relations with their longtime enemies, the Pitiguaras, a coastal tribe favorably disposed to the Portuguese. The Pitiguara chief Poti has become his spiritual brother. While on Tabajara lands, as an intruder and a friend of enemies, Martim is in danger of being killed by the tribe's leader and his men. Initially, he enjoys some protection from Iracema's family, a shamanistic household more concerned with ritual and symbolic matters than with intertribal politics and territorial defense. Though the chivalrous Martim struggles to behave with gentlemanly honor toward the Tabajaras, he ends up harming them. He finds that he has defiled the sacred virgin and is stealing her from her people. Though the shaman never forgives his daughter's defection, Iracema's brother Caubi is unusually sympathetic to her difficult situation.

The narrative is also an allegory for the genesis of Brazilian national culture. Probably many readers have noticed, as did the critic Afrânio Peixoto, that the heroine's name is an anagram of America.[5] Iracema at the outset is a priestess who enjoys a privileged rapport with nature and has supernatural abilities. She entrances Martim with a potion from a sacred tree. Later, her love for the European and consequent isolation from her tribe and homeland place her at a disadvantage and sap her powers. In this way, the Indian protagonist appears weaker as the novel's plot progresses. Though she re-