

The 2012 Bryce Wood Award Deliberations

by JOHN D. FRENCH | Duke University | jdfrench@duke.edu

LASA's award for "the outstanding book on Latin America in the social sciences and humanities published in English" is named after Dr. Bryce Wood, an outstanding political scientist who studied the rise and fall of the U.S. Good Neighbor Policy. Writing forty years ago, Wood hailed the emergence of "new types of collaborative scholarly relations" including the founding of LASA. "Scholars are often lonely and usually restless," he noted, but have always aspired to an international community of scholarly exchange.¹ In many ways, LASA today—with 7000 members, forty percent of them from the region—mirrors this vision with best book awards for works in English (Bryce Wood) and Latin American languages (*Premio Iberoamericana*) while our outgoing President, Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, is a scholar from Brazil.

Thirty-five books have been honored in the sixteen Bryce Wood competitions through 2012. Selecting those to be honored was difficult even when the award was first offered in 1989, at a time when LASA's membership stood at 3000 (though LASA membership is not required to win the award). The impressive growth in books published in English over the intervening three decades has compounded the challenge. When the submissions process ended for works published between "January 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011," one-hundred and thirty-two scholarly works had been received with history (41 percent) and social sciences (42 percent) virtually tied, with the rest in literature and romance studies (16 percent).

In its earliest years, the Bryce Wood committee was composed of three members although the committee that took up this task in 2011-12 had eight members from five disciplines. In a very real sense, Wood's vision of international scholarly exchange

was exemplified by the fact that our members were from four countries located on three continents. With such a large group, clear procedures and deadlines were essential if we were to maximize the quality and substance of our deliberations while recognizing the limits that all of its members faced in terms of time and energy. To facilitate our deliberations, the committee agreed at the outset to some general guidance: 1) that the book achieves excellence in terms of research; 2) that it demonstrates intellectual sophistication within a given discipline while speaking convincingly to the interdisciplinary field; 3) that it demonstrates creativity, originality, and analytical heft; and 4) that it addresses an issue relevant to LASA's mission statement.

To guarantee a balanced and collaborative process, the committee members were first asked to select the five books they found of greatest interest and wished the committee as a whole to consider. Beyond guaranteeing everyone's input in producing the long list of contenders, this procedure produced a short list of thirty-two books (if the list had been half as large, it would have shown a substantial clustering of opinion around a few key works). The committee's key procedural innovation, however, was the establishment of a private closed Bryce Wood Committee blog in which each book (with its cover) was featured on an individual page with any initial words of nomination by a committee member (reviews, blurbs, and links were also posted).

Rather than a confusing flurry of e-mails and responses, the blog allowed for substantive intellectual exchanges to occur with efficiency and cumulative force. Expertise was shared, ideas were tested, and new insights offered that helped to shape an evolving consensus as to the

work(s) that would be honored above all the other excellent books in contention. Once a consensus became clear, members of the committee were asked to combine elements of the blog comments in the form of a draft prize citation which was edited by the chair and approved by the whole committee. It was just as thrilling as Bryce Wood imagined scholarly exchange to be, and not at all lonely. My thanks to the authors of all of books submitted, to the committee members and to the elected officials of LASA. Latin American Studies is very much alive.

Endnote

¹ Bryce Wood, "Scholarly Exchanges between Latin America and the United States." *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 30, no. 4 (1972): 123. ■