

*Assombrações de um padre regente, Diogo Antônio Feijó (1784 – 1843)*. By MAGDA RICCI. Coleção Várias Histórias, vol. 11. Campinas, Brazil: UNICAMP, 2001. Photographs. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. 497 pp. Cloth.

Diogo Antônio Feijó was and is an enigma: in outlook and behavior made up of what seem to be incompatible, even contradictory assumptions and actions. Like President Floriano Peixoto in 1891 – 94, Feijó was a “strong man” (*homem de ferro*) who in 1831 – 32 saved the Brazilian regime from its foes. In contrast to Floriano (whom death soon removed), Feijó went on to a disastrous term of regent (1835 – 37) and, even though confined to a wheelchair, active involvement in the 1842 rebellion in São Paulo, his native province. A priest and a devout Catholic, Feijó rejected both clerical celibacy and papal supremacy. A fervent believer in liberty, he often acted, when in power, in ways inimical to individual rights. Committed to Brazil’s existence as a nation-state, Feijó identified most strongly with his *pátria*, São Paulo (p. 269). Finally, Feijó was a foundling, the identity of his birth parents uncertain. Similarly, the existence or no of a female partner and offspring is a much contested, and to this day unsettled, question. No wonder Feijó possesses an enduring fascination for historians of Brazil.

In her study, which cannot be termed a biography, Magda Ricci acknowledges and is caught up in this fascination. She came to the project by an unusual route. Having studied the meaning of liberty in the municipality of Itu (where Feijó was long resident) during the independence period, she could find no way of extending that study to a broader area until she hit upon Feijó’s life and thought as the vehicle. The three chapters that form the second part of the book strive to carry out this intent. The first uses Feijó’s sermon at the funeral of fellow priest Jesuino do Monte Carmelo to analyze the mental and physical world of the clerics at Itu in the early 1800s — a curious mixture of idealism, obduracy, intrigue, and moral failings. The second chapter considers Feijó’s treatment of his slaves, freed slaves, and *agregados* to show both that he viewed himself as their “father” — protector and controller — and that his attitude colored his entire conception of society within the public sphere. In the third chapter, Ricci seeks to explain Feijó’s erratic behavior after resigning the regency in 1837. He sought to return to the way of life in São Paulo province he had left on entering national politics in 1822. Various factors thwarted his intent. The world had moved on.

Preceding this section, the heart of the book, are four chapters discussing the evolving historical “memory” of Feijó. More precisely the chapters recount the different treatments of Feijó adopted by 11 or more biographers. In terms of memory, Feijó can quite literally be said to

have been forgotten and found. His long-lost tomb was rediscovered in June 1917. He can be said, *pace* the book's title, to have risen several times from the grave in different guises. The ambiguities in Feijó's outlook and behavior have allowed biographers, as Ricci stresses, to paint Feijó as the precursor and embodiment of whatever cause the biographer favors. For Eugênio Egas, Feijó was the precursor of the Republic; for Osvaldo Orico, he embodied the restless *bandeirante* spirit; for Otavio Tarquinio de Sousa, Feijó exemplified the statesman striving against odds to create functioning nationhood.

The success a book achieves very much depends upon the public reading it. Such may well be the case with *Assombrações de um padre regente*. For readers who have no knowledge of Feijó or little familiarity with Brazil in the nineteenth century, this work may well provide an interesting, if somewhat prolix, introduction to a complex man, his career, and the corpus of historical writing about him. In North America, most readers of this type don't know Portuguese, and those who do may well be defeated by a prose style at once allusive and elusive. For readers versed in the history of imperial Brazil, the writing style — annoying as it is — is the least of the frustrations. The author's lack of understanding concerning national politics in the postindependence period is perhaps excusable in a novice scholar; less forgivable is what amounts to a superficial and quite patronizing treatment of that period. A more fundamental difficulty lies in the author's inability to handle abstract issues — key terms such as *liberty* are rarely defined — or to construct a line of argument. The text zigzags from point to point, loaded with copious information. Finally, the book lacks any clear theoretical and interpretative structure, which Ricci justifies on postmodernist grounds. One would surmise, however, the author resorted to postmodernism less out of conviction than because the scope and complexity of the project, admittedly an extremely challenging task, simply overwhelmed her.

Such is a pity, because the book contains a good deal of excellent material and valuable insights. Above all, Ricci points out for other scholars the potential offered by the concept of memory for the analysis of historical studies.

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