

The Bodleian Libraries Colin Franklin Prize for Book Collecting

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In Search of the Heroic City: Cartagena de Indias, 1821–2021

In order to consult the historical archives in Cartagena, Colombia, you have no choice but to visit the Palace of the Inquisition. You climb a grand colonial staircase, past displays of religious iconography and authentic torture devices, to the only air-conditioned room in the building. There you meet with Don Anibal, the archivist, who invites you to sit in front of a blinking computer screen and describe what you are looking for. Birth certificates, newspaper folios, *fin-de-siècle* magazines, city plans, or revolutionary pamphlets – it makes no difference: Don Anibal can coax almost any resource out of the cumbersome digital database that only he can decipher.

The problem lies in procuring the desired item itself, since it may no longer be available. One of the obstacles to preserving materials in Cartagena is the intense year-round tropical heat and humidity. Onsite documents have suffered the effects of dampness or flooding; various irreplaceable volumes have disintegrated owing to disorder or neglect. Digitisation efforts have not been able to keep up, and many documents of national interest are stored in far-off Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. For all these measures, Cartagena's history and cultural artefacts still feel under-represented in the national archives. This is particularly striking in the case of a place that thrives on myths of itself as 'La Heroica': Cartagena is 'the Heroic City' long celebrated for withstanding centuries of invasion, and it was part of the first province in New Granada to declare independence, in 1811, from Spain.

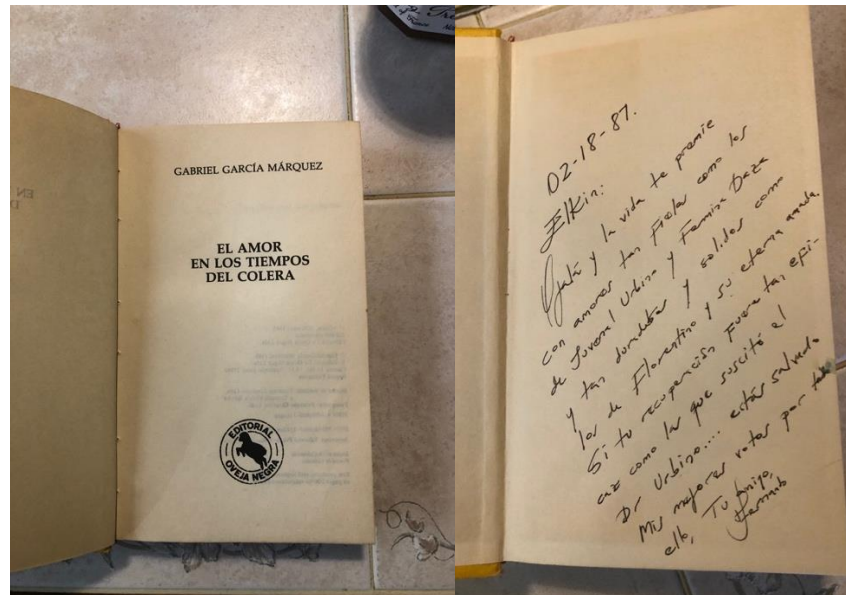
My aim as a collector parallels my research aims as a D.Phil student: to understand how Cartagena managed to survive its century-long stagnation since Independence and become a central inspiration for important works of Spanish American political thought and cultural production. Cartagena always seems to be fading, to be in danger of disappearing from archives and national conversations, to be rotting under the precarious weight of its colonial infrastructure. And yet it is also constantly inviting you to remember its storied past. For this and other reasons, Cartagena remains such a fascinating place – a city so unlike any other in Colombia, yet so 'characteristic' of fortified ports in the Americas. Why does the city's past play such a prominent role in Colombia's myths about liberty and progress? Can we comprehend this romantic colonial city, with all its contemporary crises, without understanding its unique history?

To collect books on Cartagena is a practical necessity, especially because – beyond the Macondo universe, at least – such works are hard to come by. This part of Colombia tends to be neglected in scholarship. The reason my collection keeps expanding – one extra suitcase per visitⁱ – is owing to my desire to develop my D.Phil thesis into a cultural history of the city, one that will not only trace its broader intellectual and literary currents but also incorporate details of its astonishing contradictions and inequalities, while capturing its vibrant whimsy, resilience, and creativity. This book collection is a loving act of resistance against forgetting the history of a city that is not only essential to my intellectual growth but also, I've discovered, a part of my family heritage. Book-collecting itself has long been a compulsion for me, a way of creating a world or a sense of shelter,

but more than anything it is a gesture that I identify with the people I meet. To collect these books is an expression and reminder of friendship and the way it ties you to the stories of a place.

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I confess that my life as a collector of Cartagena books began – accidentally and unwittingly! – before I ever learned how to read. In 1985, Gabriel García Márquez published *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* [3], a novel about love and epidemic set in an unnamed Colombian port city whose colonial landmarks and street names recall the layout of Cartagena. That same year, my father underwent the first of several major back surgeries. One of his childhood friends, from Colombia, flew to Los Angeles to pay him a visit in hospital. The gift he brought him was this first edition of the novel. I don't believe my father ever read it. An autodidact who emigrated to America as a young man and founded a small real-estate business, my father pored over several newspapers and magazines a day, but rarely 'had the time' to read literature – though he greatly valued books and ordered them prolifically and ambitiously from various encyclopaedia companies and science catalogues. His copy of *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, lovingly dedicated to him, lived in my bedroom until I went to university. In 1988, the novel was translated by Edith Grossman – a future mentor – as *Love in the Time of Cholera* [4]. The hardcover, with its almost spooky book jacket and matching bookmark, sat on our television set in California for years, until I read it, as a teenager, and didn't realise it was the same book as the novel that I had inherited from my father. As an MFA student, at Columbia, I studied with Grossman – 'Edie' – who taught me to read between two languages and inspired me to translate poetry professionally.



The title page of the first edition of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, with a friendly dedication.

The next item is a group of works by Alexander von Humboldt. At the heart of this 'sub-collection' is *Alexander von Humboldt en Colombia* [6]. This selection of diary entries contains wonderful anecdotes about Cartagena and its environs. In this text, Humboldt quickly dispels a notion, apparently popular at the time, that the only sound a tropical bird could emit was a loud quack. 'Nowhere else in South America', he writes, 'have I heard birds sing so tenderly, or with such deep warbling, as in Cartagena.' This volume, an anniversary gift from my partner, is accompanied by

the most valuable item in my collection, a rare 1848 English edition of Humboldt's *Cosmos* [7]. I treasure this work, purchased, for £50, from a pianist-photographer who manages a train-wagon-turned-bookshop in her garden, with uninterrupted views of a loch, on the Isle of Skye. (On the main road there is a small sign board bearing an unassuming promise of 'BOOKS.')

Though Cartagena figures only briefly in this text, when I first read it, at university, I was deeply moved by Humboldt's erudition and by the way he integrated South America into world history and geography, without resorting to stereotypes popular at the time.

The next few items came into the collection thanks to my friendship with Ibeth, the first person I ever met in Cartagena. Ibeth – we share a name – manages Librería Los Mártires, a famous makeshift bookstall in the archway of the clock tower in the heart of the city. During my fieldwork, I'd visit her on most days and stay for a cup of hot *tinto* under the breezy arches. The selection was incredibly curated and affordable, and I always bought something: first, a set of antique postcards of Cartagena [13] featuring current and destroyed landmarks from the city centre and nearby Getsemaní, then clean copies of the works by the unsung writer Germán Espinosa, the Edouard Glissant of the Colombian Caribbean. Espinosa's *The Crown Weaver* [1] is his forgotten but Nobel-worthy *magnum opus*, a novel that depicts Cartagena during the Enlightenment. His finest work of literary criticism [2] traces the biography and works of the poet Luis Carlos López, described below. Ibeth also introduced me to Ruby Rumié's *Tejiendo Calle/Weaving Streets*, an artbook from a ground-breaking exhibition, at Nohra Haime Gallery, that portrayed fifty of Cartagena's famous Afro-Colombian *palenqueras*, or street vendors, who are depicted in brochures and guidebooks in familiar costumes bearing the colours of the Colombian flag.ⁱⁱ This exhibition called urgent attention to the women's exploitation in a gentrifying city where they are icons of its largest economy.

Another important item purchased under the clock tower was *Crónicas del comercio en Cartagena* [5], a coffee table-sized collection of cultural essays that offers a trove of images from the Fototeca Histórica and the city archives. This treasure of a book, published by the chamber of commerce, contains some of the most insightful cultural histories of Cartagena's printing press and traditional industries (soap, pharmaceuticals, newspaper publishing), as well as essays about its developing urban geography and socioeconomic stratification.

Finally, the most treasured item obtained from Ibeth's bookshelves is a first edition of Eduardo Lemaitre's landmark four-volume history of Cartagena [8]. This book, critical to my thesis, is the definitive narrative archive of the city, containing vivid accounts that begin with the bay's original pre-Columbian settlements and culminate in the late twentieth century. It is complemented by images from the celebrated historian's private collection, including a reproduction of a letter in which Miguel de Cervantes asks the Spanish Crown to station him in Cartagena, where, if history had been different – or so local lore maintains – he might have ended up writing *Don Quixote*.

My favourite workplace in Cartagena is a bookshop named Ábaco, where the shop-sellers let customers sit for hours with a book and a glass of coffee (or cocktail). There I obtained Ortíz Cassiani's account [12] of the Cartagena railway, a rare work of scholarship that shows how the 'devil train' modernised the city and connected it to the interior metropolitan centre. Another find was Vásquez Zawadzki's valuable anthology of essays and short stories by a new generation of

Cartagena writers [16] and a finely reproduced 1741 map [10] of the Bay of Cartagena that was influential in the work of future cartographers and lent fame to Cartagena's enviable fortification.

One of the most unusual items in my collection is the recent full-length comic *Lezgo* [11], about the blind, one-legged hero who miraculously staved off an invasion by Sir Edward Vernon, who was so confident of a victorious plunder that he had celebratory commemorative coins minted in England ahead of his sea voyage. This book, crowd-sourced and self-published in Spain, calls attention to a nearly-forgotten hero of Spanish America. Part 2 is in the works.

The final two items were gifts from security guards. During my last stop in Bogotá, I visited the Fondo de Cultura Económica arts centre-café, in La Candelaria, and spotted a brightly coloured poster for a colloquium about the Cartagena writer Raúl Gómez Jattín [14], whose work I also discuss in my thesis. To rip the poster off the wall would've gotten me into trouble, but I asked a guard for permission to take it, and he went inside to inquire from the main office. I waited outside for nearly an hour, with a playwright intent on telling me his life story, until the guard came to find me, bearing the poster neatly rolled and tied with an elastic band. A 2019 newspaper insert [9] features what is possibly the clearest street plan I've ever seen of Cartagena's city centre. This was a gift from the guard I greeted every day at the Palace of the Inquisition. One morning, he handed back the Merton College water bottle I'd left behind the day before. On his desk was a newspaper opened to this city map. When I asked if I could study it, he ripped the page out carefully and went back to his crossword puzzle.

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I would love to add the following five books to my collection, in order to make it more inclusive of women and introduce more works of poetry and visual art:

1. López, Luis Carlos. *La Comedia tropical*, ed. Jorge Zalamea. Bogotá: Nueva Prensa, 1962.
2. Grau, Enrique. *El pequeño viaje del barón von Humboldt*. Bogotá: Villegas/Litografía Arcos, 1977/1984.
3. Delmar, Meira. *Pasa el viento. Antología poética: 1942–1998*. Santafé de Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 2000.
4. Acosta de Samper, Soledad. *Los piratas en Cartagena*. Bogotá: Alfaguara, 2000 [?].
5. Porto de Portillo, Raúl. *Plazas y calles de Cartagena*. Cartagena de Indias: Dirección de Educación Pública de Bolívar, Extensión Cultural, 1945.

All five books are out of print but remain available through various online vendors and second-hand sellers in Colombia. The centrepiece would be the first item, *La Comedia tropical*, an oversized three-colour letter-pressed anthology of poetry by Luis Carlos López, the great bard of Cartagena's streets and local history. The poems are specifically arranged to portray Cartagena in relation to the Florence of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* – it is really a poetic atlas of the city and a beautiful portrait of how Cartagena saw itself at mid-century. The second item, *The Short Journey of Baron von*

Humboldt, is by the Colombian painter Enrique Grau, famed for his representations of modern Cartagena. It innovated the artbook genre in Colombia. Grau made two versions of this highly original, whimsical book, which mimics a hybrid botanical-ethnographical sketchbook in its depictions of coastal life. (The aesthetic of the image plates suggests a cross between Goya's Black Paintings, Fernando Botero's portraits, and Humboldt's annotated botanical illustrations.) I made two stressful pandemic-era trips to the British Library in order to pore over all the panels of the earlier (1977) version, which is the subject of a future article, but I'm keen to obtain the 1984 edition, which contains more panels.

The third item, *Pasa el viento*, is a comprehensive anthology of the Lebanese-Colombian poet Meira Delmar (the pen name of Olga Chams Eljach). Her poems about Cartagena's history are among her finest and deserve greater recognition beyond the Colombian Caribbean. Next on the list is *Los piratas en Cartagena* (1885), by Soledad Acosta de Samper, Colombia's most prolific nineteenth-century writer. Many pocket pirated editions (no pun intended!) are available online, but I am keen to collect the forgotten Alfaguara edition (2000), with its introduction by the important writer Óscar Collazos. It is easy to draw parallels between the colonial-era invaders of the novel and the country's contemporary political corsairs.

Finally, my collection of Cartagena materials would be incomplete without Raúl Porto de Portillo's enchanting *Plazas y calles de Cartagena*. Reproductions of this book are available in souvenir shops throughout the historic city centre, but the edition I am most interested in is the still-available original 1945 text published by the Department of Bolívar, of which Cartagena is the political seat. Cartagena is known – thanks to García Márquez – for having streets with charmingly allusive and storied names, e.g. the Street of the Ladies (possibly referring to a royal spying expedition) or the Street of the Stone Saints (after a row of large sculptures now kept inside the Cathedral at the corner). These names rarely correspond to official street signage and can change from one block to the next. This classic guidebook traverses the city-centre grid, street by street, listing past and present names alongside photographs, drawings, and morsels of local lore.

The Heroic City is constantly reliving its past. In 2016, it served as the global stage for a televised celebration of the signing of a (soon-rejected) peace treaty between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla group. The fate of this treaty, however, remains uncertain. (As of this writing, Colombia is entering its fourth week of nationwide protests, and the state has sanctioned police brutality against civilians.) I see my work – and this collection – as an expression of optimism. Collecting books about Cartagena is part of an attempt to resist the erasure of the city's past while remaining hopeful about the prospect of peace in Colombia. That optimism is sustained by the friendships that make my collection possible.

Word count: 2500 (not including bibliographies, captions or endnotes)

Described items: 16

Essay Bibliography (not complete collection)

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- [2] —. *Luis Carlos López*. Bogotá: Procultura, 1989.
- [3] García Márquez, Gabriel. *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 1985.
- [4] —. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, trans. by Edith Grossman. New York: Knopf, 1988.
- [5] Gossaín Abdala, Juan and Benjamin Villegas, eds. *Crónicas del Comercio en Cartagena*. Cartagena de Indias: Villegas, 2015.
- [6] von Humboldt, Alexander. *Alexander von Humboldt en Colombia: Extractos de sus diarios*. Bogotá: Academia Colombiana de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales, Biblioteca Luis Arango, 1982.
- [7] —. *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, trans. W.S. Dallas, B.H. Paul, and E.C. Otté. Two vol. London: H.G. Bohn, 1848–58.
- [8] Lemaitre, Eduardo. *Historia general de Cartagena*. 4 vol. Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1983.
- [9] Map, ‘Centro Histórico/Historic Centre.’ In folded insert, ‘Guía Turística de Cartagena.’ *Donde*, September 2019, no pagination.
- [10] Map, Reproduction of ‘Plan du Port de la Ville et des forteresses de Carthagène, Covens et Mortier, 1741.’ Colour laser-print on A2 cardstock. Librería Ábaco, 2019.
- [11] Miranda, Ángel et al. *Lezo, Parte I: La toma de Bocachica*, illus. Guillermo Mogorrón. Madrid: Espadas de Fin del Mundo, 2020.
- [12] Ortiz Cassiani, Javier. *Un diablo al que le llaman tren*. Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018.
- [13] *Antigua Cartagena de Indias*. Boxed set of eighteen postcards, with photographs from the Colección Fototeca de Cartagena and Colección Jaspe, Cartagena. Medellín, Colombia: n.d.
- [14] Poster, ‘El legado poético de Raúl Gómez Jattín, 23 de septiembre al 2 de octubre de 2019.’ Photograph by Juan Diego Duque S., Dukes Fotografía. www.poesiabogota.org
- [15] Rumié, Ruby. *Tejiendo Calle/Weaving Streets*. Cartagena de Indias: Villegas, 2018.
- [16] Vásquez Zawadzki, Carlos, ed. *Cartagena de Indias: Territorio literario*. Madrid: Sial Pígalión, 2016.

SELECTED ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY (not complete collection)

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- ### • Gabriel García Márquez
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