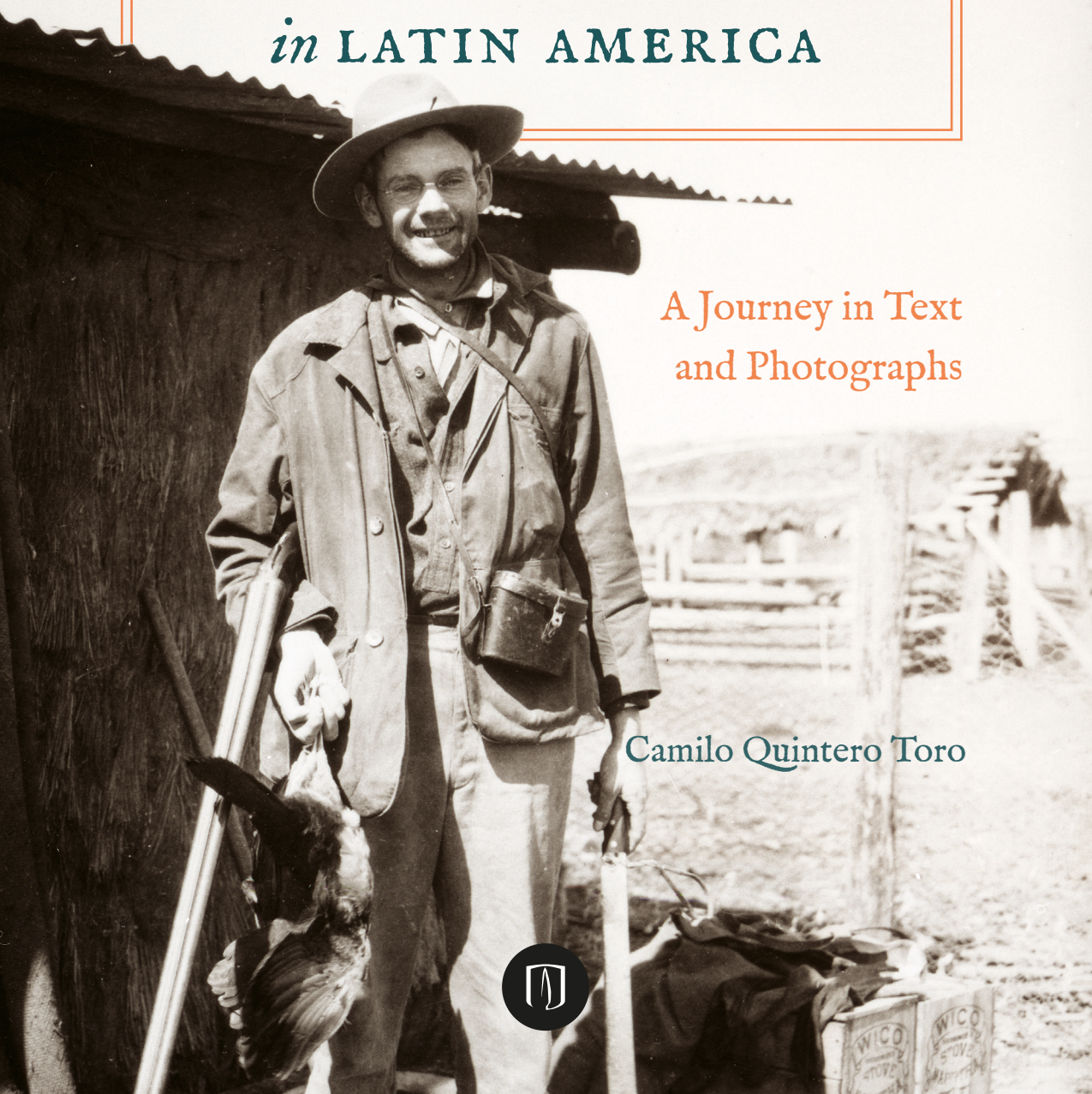
COLECCIÓN **GENERAL**

ALEXANDER WETMORE *and the* SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION *in* LATIN AMERICA



A Journey in Text and Photographs

Camilo Quintero Toro

Alexander Wetmore and the Smithsonian Institution in Latin America

To cite this book:
https://doi.org/10.51573/Andes.9789587989175.9789587989151

Alexander Wetmore and the Smithsonian Institution in Latin America

A Journey in Text and Photographs

Camilo Quintero Toro

Universidad de los Andes
Facultad de Ciencias Sociales
Departamento de Historia y Geografía

Alexander Wetmore in hunting gear, Argentina, 1920.

Source: Box 170 album 2, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Name: Quintero Toro, Camilo, autor.

Title: Alexander Wetmore and the Smithsonian Institution in Latin America : A Journey in Text and Photographs / Camilo Quintero.

Description: Bogotá : Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Departamento de Historia y Geografía, Ediciones Uniandes, 2025. | xv, 105 pages : illustrations ; 17 × 24 cm.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789587989175 (paperback) | 9789587989151 (e-book) | 9789587989199 (epub)

Subjects: Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978 | Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978 – Travel – Latin America | Smithsonian Institution | Scientific expeditions – Latin America | Naturalists – United States | Naturalists – Latin America

Classification: CDD 509.2–dc21 SBUA

First edition: November, 2025

Ediciones Uniandes
Carrera 1.ª n.° 18A-12, bloque Tm
Bogotá, D. C., Colombia
Phone number: 601 339 4949, ext. 2133
http://ediciones.uniandes.edu.co
ediciones@uniandes.edu.co

Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales
Carrera 1.ª n.º 18A-12, bloque G-GB, piso 6
Bogotá, D. C., Colombia
Phone number: 601 339 4949, ext. 5567
https://cienciassociales.uniandes.edu.co/ediciones/libros/
publicacionesfaciso@uniandes.edu.co

ISBN: 978-958-798-917-5
ISBN *e-book*: 978-958-798-915-1
ISBN epub: 978-958-798-919-9
DOI: https://doi.org/10.51573/Andes.9789587989175.9789587989151

Copy-editing: Tiziana Laudato
Typesetting: Nancy Cortés
Cover design: Boga Visual
Cover image: Alexander Wetmore in hunting gear, Argentina, 1920. Box 170 album 2, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Printing:
Linotipia Martínez
Carrera 30 n.° 4-23
Phone number: 601 745 2206
Bogotá, D. C., Colombia

Impreso en Colombia – *Printed in Colombia*

This book is endorsed by the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales at Universidad de los Andes and has undergone peer review.

Universidad de los Andes | Vigilada Mineducación. Reconocimiento como universidad: Decreto 1297 del 30 de mayo de 1964. Reconocimiento de personería jurídica: Resolución 28 del 23 de febrero de 1949, Minjusticia. Acreditación institucional de alta calidad, 10 años: Resolución 000194 del 16 de enero del 2025, Mineducación.

Table of Contents

List of Photographs

Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE to express my deepest gratitude to the Universidad de los Andes for its invaluable support throughout the development of this book. I am especially indebted to Claudia Leal, Mauricio Nieto, and Hugo Fazio, whose encouragement, generosity, and thoughtful guidance sustained me at every stage of this project. Their unfailing support made this endeavor possible.

I am also profoundly grateful to the Smithsonian Institution, and particularly the Smithsonian Institution Archives, for their generosity in providing both time and resources that were essential to my research. I wish to extend special thanks to Pamela Henson, whose wise counsel and guidance enriched this project immeasurably, and to Marguerite Roby, whose skillful work digitizing the photographs brought the visual dimensions of this book to life.

A Journey in Text

Introduction

What role has science played in shaping relations between the United States and Latin American? This book uses the life of Alexander Wetmore—a famous American ornithologist and the sixth secretary of the Smithsonian Institution—as a lens to explore that question. Through his work, it offers a case study to examine the role of science in United States-Latin American relations in the twentieth century. Perhaps to a greater extent than any other twentieth-century American scientist, Wetmore built his career around Latin America. His passion for studying the region's birds, the many trips and expeditions he undertook over the decades, and the friendships and connections he formed provide a unique vantage point for examining science, power, and international relations.

Wetmore began his career as a biologist with the Biological Survey, where he worked from 1910 to 1924. In 1924, he accepted a position as Superintendent of the National Zoological Park but soon received an offer to become Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, overseeing the United States National Museum. He held that role from 1925 to 1945, when he was appointed the sixth Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution—a post he held until his retirement in 1952. After retiring, he continued his work as a Research Associate at the Smithsonian, until his death in 1978.[1]

1 P. H. Oehser, "In Memoriam: Alexander Wetmore," *Auk* 97(1980); S. Dillon Ripley and James A. Steed, "Alexander Wetmore, 1886-1978," in *Biographical Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987).

Throughout these years, Wetmore forged deep ties with Latin America. Between 1911 and 1966, he travelled extensively across the continent, conducting nearly forty expeditions in countries like Puerto Rico, Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama. During these trips, he built relationships with a wide range of people—including local scientists, diplomats, field assistants, businessmen, and indigenous populations. He published numerous articles and books on Latin American birds, most notably his monumental four-volume work *The Birds of the Republic of Panama*. He also discovered and named many bird species. To support his research, Wetmore relied heavily on U.S. networks —both military and commercial— and became a leading advocate for Pan-American cooperation, especially in the areas of science and nature conservation.

Most important of all, Wetmore's life is fully documented. The Smithsonian Institution Archives hold his personal and professional papers —carefully organized in 240 boxes, spanning 30.8 linear meters. Throughout his career, Wetmore saved a wealth of materials that shed light on his life, especially his experiences in Latin America— from restaurant menus from the Buenos Aires of the 1920s to classified letters with the War Department during WWII. An avid photographer, he meticulously documented his travels and expeditions, labeling each photo with care. Drawing on the extraordinary richness of Wetmore's archive, this book presents his life as an illustrative case study that reveals how science and the work of scientists became deeply intertwined with U.S.–Latin American relations.

One of the main goals of this text is to highlight what I consider the key variables scholars should keep in mind when researching U.S.-Latin America scientific relations: imperialism, nature appropriation, cooperation, gift-giving practices, power dynamics, the invitation of power relations, Latin America as a laboratory, and the use of U.S. networks and infrastructure in science. In outlining these eight variables, I build on the vast contributions that historians have made in recent years to examine science and medicine within imperial and international contexts. As many authors have demonstrated, science and medicine were important allies in the consolidation of European empires, and in maintaining control over their colonies from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.[2]

2 Studies on the relationship between science and medicine in imperial and international contexts is too numerous to mention here. Some important examples that influenced this study are the following: Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Diego Armus, *La ciudad impura: salud, tuberculosis y cultura en Buenos Aires, 1870-1950* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2007); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State, Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of

Likewise, scientific and medical knowledge contributed to the United States' rise as a superpower in the twentieth century and its influence across Latin America, the Caribbean and the Philippines. These fields were closely tied to the military and commercial networks the United States established throughout these regions. Moreover, scientific knowledge reinforced the sense of superiority many North Americans held towards Latin Americans or Filipinos while the many expeditions, helped Americans collect, classify and appropriate the Latin American natural world.[3]

At the same time, the variables I present also prompt us to consider the complexities involved in the role of science in international relations, particularly in U.S.-Latin America relations. As well as the variables that highlight the many ways in which power and control were intertwined with U.S. scientific exercises in Latin America, other factors like cooperation, gift-giving, and invitations played important roles. Latin American naturalists and physicians

---

California Press, 1993); Harold John Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Roy M. MacLeod, ed. *Nature and Empire: Science and the Colonial Enterprise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Mauricio Nieto Olarte, *Remedios para el imperio: historia natural y la apropiación del Nuevo Mundo* (Bogotá, Colombia: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2000); Diana Obregón Torres, *Batallas contra la lepra: estado, medicina y ciencia en Colombia* (Medellín: Banco de la República de Colombia: Fondo Editorial Universidad EAFIT, 2002); Gyan Prakash, *Another reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Londa L. Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds., *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

3 Over the past two decades, literature on the cultural, scientific, and medical dimensions of US political and economic expansion in the twentieth century has grown significantly. See: Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine and Race Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Marcos Cueto, ed. *Missionaries of Science: the Rockefeller Foundation and Latin America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Mariola Espinosa, *Epidemic Invasions: Yellow Fever and the Limits of Cuban Independence, 1878-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Donato Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Stuart George McCook, *States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Camilo Quintero Toro, *Birds of Empire, Birds of Nation: A History of Science, Economy, and Conservation in United States-Colombia Relations* (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2012); Armando Solorzano Ramos, *¿Fiebre dorada o fiebre amarilla?: la Fundación Rockefeller en México (1911-1924)* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1997); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Ann Laura Stoler, ed. *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

have consistently cooperated with U.S. researchers, inviting their involvement in studies and research, particularly throughout the twentieth century.

How can we reconcile this contradiction? If power played a key role in U.S. scientific practice in overseas regions, why did Latin Americans, nevertheless, welcome North American scientists into their backyards? The main argument is that only by understanding this apparent contradiction—embodied in the variables mentioned above—can we fully grasp the place of science in United States-Latin America relations. Throughout the twentieth century, U.S. attitudes and actions towards Latin America fluctuated between open U.S. military intervention to great cooperation efforts in different instances and decades. I believe that a study examining the life of Alexander Wetmore, his position at the Smithsonian Institution, and his prolonged connection with Latin Americans, will provide us with valuable insights into the complexities underlying these apparent inconsistencies.

Furthermore, I believe Wetmore's case demonstrates that Latin American scientists were active. As we will see, Wetmore's connections with many naturalists in the south that sent him a wealth of information and specimens, show that science already had a well-established presence in Latin America. Local scientists had their own pursuits and their relationship with Wetmore—although a clearly unbalanced one that also highlights the enormous hardships these naturalists faced in their countries—sheds light on the fact that science is a process in which global and local networks are key.[4]

I structured this text in four different sections. Each section revolves around two of the variables presented above. The first section, analyzes Wetmore´s early experiences in Latin America, particularly his 1911-1912 expedition to Puerto Rico and his 1920-1921 trip to southern South America. These experiences serve to explore U.S. imperialism over Latin America in the early twentieth century, as well as the extensive efforts by museums and institutions to collect, classify, and appropriate Latin America's natural world. The second section examines how Wetmore's approach to Latin America evolved starting in the 1930s and continuing into the 1970s. It highlights how cooperation and gift-giving became common practices in his interactions with Latin American colleagues.

The third section, however, explains that the cooperative atmosphere of this period was also marked by subtle yet pervasive power dynamics. Wetmore and other North American Naturalists often disdained—and even mocked—the work of their Latin American counterparts. Latin Americans, nevertheless,

4 E. Medina, I. da C. Marques & C. Holmes (Eds.) *Beyond Imported Magic: Essays on Science, Technology, and Society in Latin America*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014).

were not mere puppets of North American interests. They had much to gain from relationships with North American scientists and often incorporated these power dynamics into their own research. Finally, the fourth section focuses more closely on Wetmore's experience in Panama to examine how the U.S. used the country as a laboratory, and how military and commercial networks became key factors in the success of Wetmore's scientific enterprise.

The First Encounters (Imperialism and Appropriations of Nature)

Alexander Wetmore fell in love with birds from a very early age. He made some of his first observations and collections in Wisconsin, where he was born on June 18, 1886. His father, a physician, and his mother created a home where books and ideas were often discussed, fostering his strong interest in science—especially biology—as a young boy. In October 1900, at the age of fourteen, he published his first note regarding birds in *Bird Lore*, a magazine devoted to bird studies and observations. Wetmore initially imagined that his interest in science would lead him to study medicine like his father, until he realized he could pursue biology as a profession. He received his B.A. from the University of Kansas in 1912 and his Ph.D. from George Washington University in 1920. According to his colleagues, he was meticulous, calm, and matter-of-fact, with an absence of self-importance—qualities that stayed with him throughout his life and helped him become a renowned ornithologist and scientific administrator.[5]

Wetmore's experience in Latin America began in 1911, when he was twenty-five years old. At the time he was finishing his undergraduate studies at the University of Kansas and had started working for the United States Biological Survey within the Department of Agriculture. That year, Wetmore was appointed to lead an expedition to Puerto Rico to investigate, as Henry Henshaw, chief of the Biological Survey, explained: "the economic status of the birds and mammals

5 S. Dillon Ripley and James A. Steed. "Alexander Wetmore, 1886-1978." In *Biographical Memoirs*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987, pp. 596-626.

of the island… [and] the possibility of introducing into the Island foreign birds from America or elsewhere to aid in the destruction of insect pests."[6] For nearly a year—from December 1911 to September 1912—he travelled throughout Puerto Rico and some neighboring islands collecting and studying birds on behalf of the U.S. government.[7]

Wetmore's overall impression of Puerto Rico and its people during his travels was not very positive. In the letters he wrote to his parents he frequently described Puerto Ricans as a backward population that still had much to learn in order to become truly civilized. In December 1911, for example, while conducting fieldwork he wrote: "The people out there were certainly primitives. I saw the men working out with nothing but breechclouts much as one would imagine they do in Africa…"[8] His comments on his perceived backward nature of Puerto Ricans was not restricted to laborers or peasants in the countryside. Wetmore's opinion of city dwellers—including those in San Juan, the capital—was not very different. He mentioned San Juan as one of the slowest places in which he had conducted business and after a few months in the field, he even wrote: "I have come to hate the sight of San Juan with its narrow, crowded streets and bare plaza. I can´t do a thing for the government men there."[9]

Perhaps one of the clearest indication of Wetmore's poor impression of the island lies in the comparisons he made between Puerto Rico and two nearby islands, Vieques and Culebra, which came under U.S. jurisdiction in the late nineteenth century. In March 1912, he wrote to his family: "I was told that Vieques was a dirty little hole but I like it very much. The streets are broad and actually have trees growing along them. And the people are different. Nearly everybody speaks English and they don´t stand around and stare as the Porto Ricans do."[10] About a month later, commenting on the possibility that Puerto Rico might be admitted as a U.S. state, he remarked: "There is a whole lot of agitation down here over the matter but they are not ready yet and will not be for ten or fifteen years. Vieques and Culebra are far ahead of the main island, having been in close contact with Americans ever since we acquired them. The people are educated and

6 Henry Henshaw to Alexander Wetmore, November 5, 1911. Folder 3, Box 137, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

7 Alexander Wetmore, "Birds of Porto Rico," *U.S. Dep. Agric. Bull.* 326(1916); Alexander Wetmore, "The birds of Culebra Island, Porto Rico," *Auk* 34(1917).

8 Alexander Wetmore to Nelson Franklin and Emma Amelia Wetmore, December 24, 1911. Folder 15, Box 128, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

9 Alexander Wetmore to Nelson Franklin and Emma Amelia Wetmore, March 17, 1912. Folder 15, Box 128, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

10 Alexander Wetmore to Nelson Franklin and Emma Amelia Wetmore, March 17, 1912. Folder 15, Box 128, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

largely Americanized, but I can´t say much for Porto Rico. The average person is about as ignorant an *hombre* as I ever ran up against... As for the better educated ones, only a few are fit for high offices."[11]

Wetmore´s letters from Puerto Rico reflect a broader historical context of U.S. expansion over Latin America—one that must be considered to fully understand his perspective. In 1898, the United States entered what would become the last war of the Spanish Empire. The Spanish-American War, as it is commonly referred to among academics, brought the U.S. and Spain into direct conflict and led to U.S. control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines—some of Spain's las remaining colonies. The war lasted only a few weeks but clearly demonstrated that the United States was not only a military power in the region, but also that the U.S. government was determined to expand its influence in both the Caribbean and the Pacific.[12]

This expansionist drive was strongly motivated by economic interests. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was producing more manufactured products than its domestic market could absorb. The search for new markets led U.S. leaders and industrialists to turn their attention to Latin America. At the time, Latin American economies were focused on producing and exporting raw material and depended heavily on the importation of manufactured goods. The United States sought to take advantage of this situation by replacing Europe as the region's main economic partner—exporting industrial products to its southern neighbors while importing the raw materials they supplied.[13]

The first decades of the twentieth century also marked the consolidation of U.S. imperial expansion in Latin America. In the decades following the Spanish-American War, the U.S. gained a strong foothold over its neighbors south of the Rio Grande. Increasing loans from private U.S. banks to Latin American governments, along with the growing presence of North American corporations, deepened and solidified the already substantial commercial ties between the two regions. At the same time, U.S. military intervention and support for Panama's independence led to the construction of the Panama Canal and the creation of the Panama Canal Zone.

11 Alexander Wetmore to Nelson Franklin and Emma Amelia Wetmore, April 14, 1912. Folder 15, Box 128, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

12 Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Louis A. Pérez, *The War of 1898: the United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

13 Mark T. Gilderhus, "US-Latin American Relations, 1898-1941: A Historiographical Review," in *A Companion to American Foreign Relations*, ed. Robert D. Schulzinger (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

By 1904, North American imperial ambitions became even more explicit when Theodore Roosevelt established the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. For Roosevelt, Europe's colonial interests over Latin America had to be halted. To prevent further European encroachment, Roosevelt argued, the U.S. had the right to police Latin America and intervene at will. Latin America still had much to learn and the U.S. decided to take over the task of educating and civilizing its southern neighbors. The legacy of "Manifest Destiny," America's supposed natural mission to civilize and democratize the Americas, was still present in the first decades of the twentieth century.[14]

Wetmore's initial impressions of Puerto Rico clearly reflected this broader context. Puerto Ricans, in his view, were lazy and less civilized—some even verging on a savage state of existence. At the same time, perhaps Puerto Ricans were fortunate to now be connected to the United States. After all, since the U.S. had taken control of nearby islands, Vieques and Culebra, people had started to flourish. A strong work ethic, broad streets, and the use of English had become part of everyday life. For Wetmore, Puerto Ricans would hopefully emulate this experience to move forward in history.

Wetmore's initial perception of Latin Americans as less civilized—and even childish, at least compared to people in the United States—was by no means limited to his experience in Puerto Rico. In 1920, eight years after his Puerto Rican expedition, a new trip to Latin America—this time to southern South America— further confirmed Wetmore's view that the region was underdeveloped and that its inhabitants still needed several years to catch up with more "civilized" nations like the United States.

The idea to send Wetmore on a new trip to Latin America initiated when, in February 1920, the United States Congress passed Resolution No. 56 stating that it was desirable for the United States to propose treaties with countries in Latin America to protect the migratory birds that travelled from North America to Central and South America. In December 1916, the United States and Great Britain signed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which protected migratory birds between Canada and the United States. By 1920, it was clear that the U.S. government believed this initiative should extend to include Latin American countries.

Unfortunately, little was known about the patterns and habits of migratory birds once they travelled south of North America. In order to investigate matters a little further, the chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey at the time, E. W. Nelson, decided to send Wetmore to South America for twelve months.

14 Some recent biographies that briefly study Roosevelt's international visions are: H. W. Brands, *T. R.: the Last Romantic* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001).

In a letter to Wetmore prior to his departure, he explained: "the Secretary of Agriculture has approved of your being sent to Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, and Chile, for the purpose of investigating the species of migratory birds which visit those regions from the United States, to ascertain the conditions surrounding their sojourn in those countries, and the need and practicality of negotiating treaties covering their protection during their stay."[15] Although Wetmore did not have time to visit Brazil, he made extensive trips to the remaining countries between May 1920 and May 1921.[16]

When Wetmore returned to Washington in 1921, he prepared a report detailing the results of the expedition, along with his comments and suggestions concerning bird protection in the countries he had visited and the possibility of establishing treaties toward that goal. Wetmore argued that there was widespread indifference towards bird protection, as well as a general lack of knowledge about migratory bird movements. As he later stated it in his report: "In general it may be said that the protection of birds in these countries is about at the same stage as in the United States thirty years ago."[17] For Wetmore, once again, Latin Americans still had much to learn from the United States and remained in an earlier stage of development. The possibility of establishing treaties, he explained, should be postponed for a few years when "it will be possible to gauge the education of public opinion with regard to the preservation of game and other birds."[18]

Perceiving Latin America as younger and less civilized was by no means limited to Wetmore or U.S. naturalists. A look at the many ways in which Latin America was portrayed in caricatures at the beginning of the twentieth century reveals that many Americans perceived Latin American countries as young children who, quite often, had to be supervised by the elder and wiser Uncle Sam.[19]

Wetmore´s initial perception of Latin Americans as young was not the only way his early expeditions to Puerto Rico and South America reflected the growing power relations between the United States and Latin America in the early

15 E. W. Nelson to Alexander Wetmore, May 26, 1920. Folder 1, Box 140, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

16 Alexander Wetmore, "Observations on the Birds of Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Chile," *U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull.* 133(1926); Alexander Wetmore, *The Migration of Birds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926); Alexander Wetmore, "Our Migrant Shorebirds in southern South America," *U.S. Dep. Agric. Tech. Bull.* 26(1927).

17 Alexander Wetmore, "Report on an investigation of the present stats of birds that migrate from the United States and Canada to Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile." Folder 4, Box 140, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

18 *Ibid*.

19 John J. Johnson, *Latin America in Caricature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

twentieth century. The ways in which Wetmore and his colleagues appropriated nature also reveal much about this historical moment. Wetmore´s work on bird migration in southern South America reveals that U.S. naturalists often perceived migratory birds as North American birds that travelled south for the winter. Instead of referring to these birds as migratory species that travelled annually between North and South America, U.S. naturalists often described and wrote about them as birds belonging to the U.S. In Nelson´s letter to Wetmore as chief of the Biological Survey explaining the purpose of his trip to Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile, for example, he wrote that one of his tasks was to secure "detailed information regarding the status of North American birds migrant in southern South America."[20] Similarly, after returning to Washington, Wetmore published an article in the U.S. Department of Agriculture´s *Technical Bulletin*, titled "Our Migrant Shorebirds in southern South America."[21] The fact that both Wetmore and Nelson referred to migratory birds as North American—or as belonging to the United States—offers valuable insight into how these naturalists appropriated nature. Of course, Wetmore and Nelson were not the only naturalists to view migratory birds as inherently North American—birds that simply traveled to more favorable during winter, much like many U.S. socialites of the time. As I have shown elsewhere, this perspective was also common among other naturalists and bird enthusiasts in the first half of the twentieth century.[22]

Finally, Wetmore´s expeditions reveal one last—but significant—way in which naturalists contributed to reinforcing U.S. imperial presence over Latin America during the early decades of the twentieth century. Throughout his travels in Puerto Rico and South America, Wetmore was instructed to collect as many birds as possible and bring them back to enrich natural history collections in Washington D.C. For example, in Henshaw´s letter to Wetmore explaining the purpose of his trip to Puerto Rico he wrote, "it is important to make up skins of the various species which come under your observation for preservation in the Biological Survey collection. This you will forward from time to time as circumstances warrant."[23] The same was also true of Wetmore´s trip to southern South America. On this occasion, E. W. Nelson wrote, "you

20 E. W. Nelson to Alexander Wetmore, May 26, 1920. Folder 1, Box 140, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

21 Wetmore, "Our Migrant Shorebirds in southern South America."

22 See Quintero Toro, *Birds of Empire, Birds of Nation: A History of Science, Economy, and Conservation in United States-Colombia Relations* especially chapter 4.

23 Henry Henshaw to Alexander Wetmore, November 5, 1911. Folder 3, Box 137, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

should take every opportunity to collect representatives of species of the local fauna… Such specimens, properly prepared, should be forwarded direct to the Biological Survey."[24]

The collections Wetmore prepared on these two expeditions were just a part of the many collections that Americans had been gathering in different parts of Latin America and the world since the late nineteenth century. Next to the public expeditions organized by institutions like the Biological Survey or the Smithsonian Institution, the private expeditions of the great natural history museums—including the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, and the Field Museum in Chicago—were gathering vast collections of objects and specimens from all the continents. The dream of collecting, classifying, and housing all the specimens of the world in one place—a dream initially associated only with European imperialism and European naturalists—became the dream of ornithologists, paleontologists, entomologists, and others working in institutions across the United States. North American scientists used North American economic outposts and enclaves to help define their field sites and benefited from private business that had gained prominence overseas. Back in the U.S., these naturalists used North America's growing global network to obtain specimens, compare results, and complement their research. American naturalists gained the power to name and classify natural specimens, forever putting their names in the complex history of taxonomy. Museums, aquariums, and zoos in the United States, just like their European counterparts in the nineteenth century, became monuments to North America's force and worldview.[25]

Wetmore´s collections from Puerto Rico and South America made in the 1910s and early 1920s, along with the articles he published back in the United States based on the study of all these materials, reflected this historical moment in the development of science. Of course, these two initial trips were just the beginning of a life devoted to the study of bird life in Latin America. As we will see in the next sections, from the 1930s until the 1960s, while working at the Smithsonian Institution, Wetmore carried out numerous expeditions and trips to countries like Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, among others.

24 E. W. Nelson to Alexander Wetmore, May 26, 1920. Folder 1, Box 140, Alexander Wetmore Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

25 Robert Kohler, *All Creatures: Naturalists, Collectors, and Biodiversity, 1850-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Camilo Quintero Toro, "Trading in Birds: Imperial Power, National Pride and the Place of Nature in U.S.-Colombia Relations," *Isis* 102, no. 3 (2011); Mary P. Winsor, *Reading the Shape of Nature: Comparative Zoology at the Agassiz Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Throughout his life, the thousands and thousands of birds collected and deposited in government collections in Washington D.C. helped to strengthen—and also reflected—the power relations between United States and Latin America in the twentieth century, as well as the way in which American science expanded far and wide throughout the world.