Introduction

The articles in this special edition of *Humanities Research* began as papers presented at the Ninth Biennial Conference of the Association of Iberian and Latin American Studies of Australasia in 2010. The conference marked a momentous occasion for those involved in Iberian and Latin American Studies: the bicentenary of independence from Spain for five Latin American countries—Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela. Moreover, 1810 really represented the beginnings of the struggles that led to independence for all of the possessions of Spain and, later, Portugal in the Americas.

The republics of the Americas that began to emerge at this time provided a model for many in the colonial world. Along with the French and American revolutions of the late eighteenth century, Latin American independence stands as a great shift in the political make-up of the modern world. It is easy to look back on these world-changing events with a sense of their inevitability. To those living at the time and taking part in them, however, there was no such certainty. The American Revolution—after a long war—eventually established a constitutional republic. The notions of independence and liberty that this struggle helped to forge were, however, far from triumphant or even well entrenched at this time. Even the French Republic had slid back to a crowned emperor on the throne. A defeat in the great struggles that took place between 1810 and 1825 in Latin America would have seriously weakened what eventually became a global movement: the removal of hereditary monarchy and its replacement with some form of constitutional rule.

In place of vice-royalties governed from the Iberian Peninsula, new nation-states were created—governed, it is true, by local elites. But they were nation-states with the potential—often left unrealised—for eventual broad democratic representation. Along with these nation-states were created various forms of nationalism. While the dream of Simón Bolívar was for a unified state—*Gran Colombia*—rivalry between regional elites made this impossible and the borders of the region, more or less as we know them today, were soon set.

Once such independent states were formed each set out to forge a nationalism to legitimate its existence. This was to be no small effort since they contained people of remarkably diverse backgrounds. Those of Iberian origin often made up the elite. Other Europeans played a part—recalled in the name of the great liberator of Chile: Bernardo O’Higgins. Indigenous people had survived to be numerically predominant in some places. Africans—slaves or their descendents—were also strongly represented. A large *mestizo* population of mixed European and indigenous background was to become the largest group in others. Moreover, the colonial class structure remained intact through the
upheavals, with the newly independent regimes still populated by slave-owners and slaves. Patrician *hacendados* and *latifundistas* kept *campesinos* in serf-like conditions. Simón Bolívar was one of the wealthiest men of the continent when he took up the independence struggle. Joint citizenship alone was not enough to bind these disparate groups together. In many cases, the putative nationalism of the wars of independence defined itself solely against the colonial power, rather than by any broader agreement or common purpose.

Nationalism had to be created in Latin America—largely after the nation-states themselves were born. As Ernst Gellner wrote, ‘Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist’. These new nationalisms were constructed by a political and a cultural process. A historia patria was created and streets and public spaces were adorned with the names of the heroes of independence and of the battles they fought. Literature became a major means for the development and transmission of nationalist themes. The language of politics became—and remains—littered with nationalist references to the processes by which these states were created. President Hugo Chávez has declared Venezuela a Bolivarian Republic. The legacy of José Martí is claimed both by the Cuban Government and by the Cuban exiles in the United States. ‘Ownership’ of nationalist symbols and figures has become part of daily political struggle, for which parties and ideologues vie.

It is easy to forget how modern is this development of nationalism. In the eighteenth century, the term ‘*patria*’ was used in Spanish to refer simply to the locality in which one was born. Until 1884, the *Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy* continued to use the word *nación* only in the sense of a group of inhabitants of a region rather than in the modern sense.

The rulers of states in the past had attempted to command loyalty from their subjects on the basis of a personal allegiance to a noble family house or in obedience to the word of God. The world that was taking shape—and decisively so with Latin American independence—was built on a more abstract idea: an ‘imagined community’, in the words of Benedict Anderson. For the old rulers—such as the Hapsburgs—who sometimes commanded non-contiguous territories of numerous languages and cultures, the question of what nationality they considered themselves to be would have been incomprehensible and probably insulting. For the new rulers in Latin America it was central to their legitimacy.

Independence in Latin America also underlined the long, slow decline of the once great Iberian empires. They, left behind by more economically advanced

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and vigorous European rivals, found some of their American possessions were wealthier than they were. Interestingly, the modern form of nationalism that became established in the Americas had to wait much longer to take root in Spain and Portugal.

Two hundred years after the dawn of Latin American independence, we now hear predictions of the ‘end of the nation-state’ and claims that the nationalism that accompanies it is increasingly a nostalgic dream of past glories destined to play a minor part in our lives. But as several of the papers in this edition show, nationalism is not something that—once constructed—is put aside. There is a constant process of renewal in multiple fields including literature and politics. Even the celebrations of the bicentenaries are themselves part of the process. All the papers here deal, in different ways, with this process.

The article by Nicola Gilmour, ‘Carme Riera’s En el último azul (1994): An encounter with Spain’s conflicted past’, is a discussion of an attempt at a historical apology through a work of literature. The apology is by Carme Riera to a group of Jews persecuted by the Inquisition in late seventeenth-century Majorca, resulting in the execution of 37 of their number. The expulsion and forced conversion of the Spanish Jews are connected both with Latin America and with the construction of nationalism in several ways. The Edict of Expulsion was issued in 1492—at the same time as Columbus set out to colonise the New World. It was an early attempt to establish the homogeneity that later nation-building projects would require, but in a world in which religious uniformity was still more crucial than secular ideas of nationality. The article also explores the importance of a nation’s past in its own identity and of an apology such as this in undermining ‘fantasies of unified identity’.

Eileen Willingham’s contribution is also about the ways in which literature and history can shape a nation’s vision of itself—in this case, the Ecuadorian historian Juan de Velasco in the late eighteenth century and the writer Juan León Mera in the nineteenth century. Willingham traces the work of both men in creating continuity in Ecuadorian history extending even to pre-Hispanic times. The past is used to validate the creation of an ‘Ecuadorianness’ to serve the interests of the state and local elites.

Tensions in the formation of a nationalist narrative of the creation of the nation are also evident in the article by Benito Cao. Here is developed a historiography of the birth of the Brazilian nation. Central to this is a series of revolts during the colonial period. These are not, however, treated equally in the mainstream—and even some of the progressive—histories. In some cases, relatively small upheavals are accorded primacy of place while actually more significant ones are

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4 See, for example, Ohmae, K. 1995, The End of the Nation State, Harper Collins, London.
relegated to a minor position. Part of the reason for this is that white people—of Portuguese background—emerged as the dominant group in colonial and independent Brazil. The newly emerging national identity was therefore based around those aspects of the colonial experience and transition to nation-statehood in which their role was predominant or could be painted as such. The important part indigenous and African people played in the process is correspondingly, and systematically, marginalised.

Kevin Foster deals with the self-reflection of a nation through its own literature and culture. Rather than the early formation of a national identity through the process that others in this issue have explored, his subject, however, is a fully formed national, indeed imperial, identity— that of Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article explores the relationship between Britain’s view of itself as a superior civilisation, the realities of increasing competition from other emerging imperialisms and the self-doubt and soul-searching that this sometimes produced. Latin America—as a region in which Britain had only very limited formal colonial possessions—afforded British writers the opportunity of ‘an ideal symbolic space, free from the complications of “official” rule, within which narrative fiction might unpack and illuminate the contradictions of imperialist discourse’. Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1902) is analysed as a fascinating example of the battle between civilisation and barbarism played out in an imaginary Latin American territory where, finally, contradictions in the imperial project itself are exposed.

Irene Strodthoff brings the process of the ideological construction of the nation-building project up to date. Her article on the Chilean and Australian bicentenaries illustrates that the national self-image so central to nation building is unfinished business. It investigates the similarities between the way the Australian bicentenary (1988) and the Chilean (2010) dealt with the question of incorporating indigenous people. Nation building in both cases was done through conquest and colonisation of indigenous people: Australian Aboriginal people and the Mapuche and other indigenous groups in Chile. In each case, most of the following years were marked by a virtual exclusion of the indigenes from official representations of the nation. Moreover, whereas the bicentenaries were officially celebrated, many indigenous people often mourned these events as a loss of their own sovereignty.

The final article deals with national identity in a situation of intense contemporary political consequence. First elected to office in 1998, President, Hugo Chávez, has attempted a redefinition of Venezuela as a ‘Bolivarian’ nation. Here, Guy Emerson shows that the battle for national identity can be of enormous political consequence. Chávez has attempted to construct in the popular imagination a recent past—an unjust one ruled over by his political predecessors and current
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opponents—and contrast it with a more distant, but revolutionary one. In this construction, the Bolivarian past is now being reclaimed by a Bolivarian people—a formerly excluded group now taking its rightful place in Venezuela.

We hope these articles will be a significant contribution to continuing discussion of the nation-building project, its flaws and contradictions, in relation to a part of the world that played such an important part in its birth.

Guy Emerson and John Minns