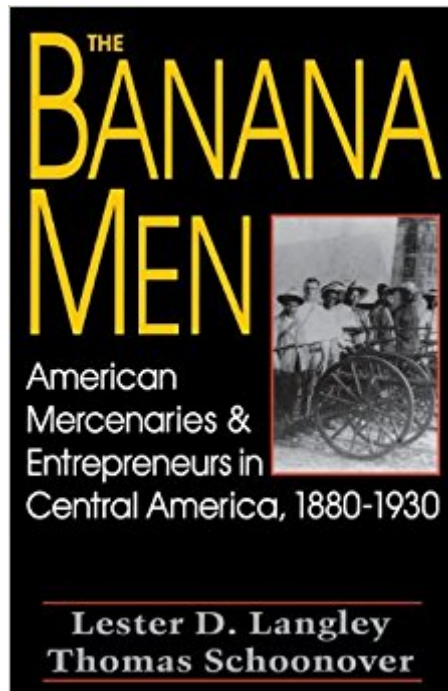


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The Banana Men: American Mercenaries And Entrepreneurs In Central America, 1880-1930



Synopsis

Ambitious entrepreneurs, isthmian politicians, and mercenaries who dramatically altered Central America's political culture, economies, and even its traditional social values populate this lively story of a generation of North and Central Americans and their roles in the transformation of Central America from the late nineteenth century until the onset of the Depression. The Banana Men is a study of modernization, its benefits, and its often frightful costs. The colorful characters in this study are fascinating, if not always admirable. Sam "the Banana Man" Zemurray, a Bessarabian Jewish immigrant, made a fortune in Honduran bananas after he got into the business of "revolutin," and his exploits are now legendary. His hired mercenary Lee Christmas, a bellicose Mississippian, made a reputation in Honduras as a man who could use a weapon. The supporting cast includes Minor Keith, a railroad builder and banana baron; Manuel Bonilla, the Honduran mulatto whose cause Zemurray subsidized; and Jose Santos Zelaya, who ruled Nicaragua from 1893 to 1910. The political and social turmoil of the modern Central America cannot be understood without reference to the fifty-year epoch in which the United States imposed its political and economic influence on vulnerable Central American societies. The predicament of Central Americans today, as isthmian peoples know, is rooted in their past, and North Americans have had a great deal to do with the shaping of their history, for better or worse.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

One of the least appreciated fields of American foreign policy is the role American mercenaries, entrepreneurs and government officials played in the Central American isthmus prior to WWII. The highlight of this time and place is the Panama Canal of course; but there is an entire history

separate from Panama that occurred just to the north in the countries of Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador. This book focuses on the history of these countries in the time frame of 1880 - 1930. Why this time? The answer is that during this time, this area moved out of the influence of Europe and Europeans, and passed under the influence of the USA. It is during this time that the phrase "Banana Republic" becomes common as the events in these countries were driven by the banana industry or those involved in it. The book gives equal attention to both local actors such as Bonilla, Manuel, and Castro (not Fidel), and those from the USA such as Lee Christmas, Guy Molony, and of course higher ups in the White House such as Taft, Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The emphasis is on events in the isthmus itself, and many pages detail the battles and machinations of local officials. The story painted in this book follows the general outline. First, whites discover the feasibility of banana production en masse within Central America. Second, whites from Europe and America move in to make money of the banana business. In doing so, they run into locals and the rivalries that dominate local politics, and are inexplicably drawn in. Washington occasionally tries to force peace with ironclad warships of the coastal cities and battalions of marines and bluejackets. But this only works as long as the soldiers and ships are present, which is some of the time.

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