Book Review:

*Colombia es Pasión! The Generation of
Racing Cyclists Who Changed their Nation
and the Tour de France*

by Matt Rendell

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In 2002, Matt Rendell published *Kings of the Mountains* (London: Aurum Press), a book that traced the development of cycling in Colombia from its early beginnings in the mid-twentieth century to Fabio Parra's third place win at the 1987 Tour de France. In the volume under review, he continues this narrative by focusing on the cohort of young cyclists whose achievements since 2005 culminated with Egan Bernal's victory at the 2019 Tour de France. Like their predecessors, these competitors are not the products of a rigorous national sports system. They lack expert coaching, nutritional expertise, and the most modern sporting goods on offer in the marketplace that define the post-industrial world. Instead they have emerged from a highland peasant society that provides them with strong family support "great sporting genes, a wholesome rural diet of fresh food, and a surrounding, everyday culture that understood and supported its cyclists." (p. 325). As teenagers, they hone their skills by competing against each other in local and national races. Rendell concludes that when they compete in European tours as representatives of "Colombia es Pasión!", (the new national image adopted by publicity consultants in 2005), their impressive achievements have gone far to challenging the widely held, negative, international association of Colombia with narcotics and terrorism.

The book presents in detail the careers of Bernal, Nairo Quintana, Rigoberto Uran, Wilmar Andrés, Castro, Juan Ernesto Chamorro, Andrew Anaconda Gómez and Jarlinson Panatono. Rendell emphasizes that all these youths were born into poverty, and that they worked at a variety of hard-scrabble local jobs to support their families, while riding their bicycles and competing in local and national contests. Moreover, inspired by the memory of Ephraim Forero Triviño's victory in the Vuelta a Colombia in 1951 and the triumphs of Martín Emilio Rodríguez "Cochise" in the 1960s, they recognize and take pride in their Indo-American heritage as an essential part of their mestizo peasant culture. Rendell concedes that, in terms of the gap between rich and poor, Colombia is the second most unequal country in Latin America, but he maintains that these peasant cyclists persistently challenge this inequality by triumphing over more well-trained and better-equipped competitors. Extolling their efforts, he writes:

Colombian peasantry is prepared to pursue a strategy as high risk as professional cycling to bridge the gap themselves—and why, even in the absence of good management, Colombian cycling continues to produce so many champion peasant-cyclists. (p. 324)

The book's strength lies in Rendell's vast knowledge of the people of the Colombian highlands. His detailed analysis offers a positive image of peasant life, and the efforts of these young cyclists to surmount the social and cultural barriers that they faced is sure to inspire aficionados of the sport. While not denying this achievement, Colombian historians are likely to question his conclusions, (however much they might wish them to be accurate), for two reasons:

First, by not including a map in his book, Rendell does not explain that the area he is analyzing encompasses only the highland portion of a very large nation that consists of many disparate regions. To be sure, ciclismo is important to the people of the departments of Boyacá, Antioquia, and Cundinamarca, but the sport finds less support among inhabitants of the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, the eastern plains (llanos), and the Amazon forest regions, where popular interest is more aroused by the successes of Colombia's fútbol and baseball teams.

Second, it is somewhat naive to suggest that Colombian victories in stages of the Tour de France, and other European races, will replace the decades-long image of Colombia's ongoing struggle to eradicate drug trafficking and terrorism. It is well and good to pronounce that "Colombia es Pasión!", but in today's era of professional

cycling, Colombians do not compete together as a single team, but as individuals with different European teams that offer them the best chance of success. Certainly, individual cycling victories on the international stage are a stunning demonstration of resilience and courage that provide positive images of Colombians, but they do not supplant the fact that terrorism and drug trafficking remain enduring aspects of life that continue, despite the best efforts of the Colombian government and aid from the United States to bring about their eradication.