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The Emancipation of Brazilian Slaves

Lead: The abolition of slavery in Brazil was due in large part to the influence of two courageous but pragmatic rulers.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: Brazil was one of the few Latin American countries to gain peacefully its independence from European rule. During Napoleon's invasion of Portugal in the early 1900s, its rulers fled to their South American colony. When the French were no longer a threat, the Portuguese

monarchs left Prince Pedro in charge. In 1822 he declared the independence of the nation and himself Emperor of Brazil. The stability provided by the monarchy was largely unmatched in the region.

The agricultural economy of Brazil was supported by a population of over a million and a half slaves. The end to slavery came as a result of forces in and out of the country. On the outside, the British were opposed to the slave trade and by 1850 its navy had ended it. This posed a singular problem for the slave holders. The Brazilian slave population, due to high mortality and low birth rates needed regular replenishment. With the slave trade

drying up other sources of labor had to be found.

Inside the country, abolitionists were never able to rally the support of non-slave holders to their cause as did their counterparts in the southern United States before the Civil War, and attempts by slave owners to hold off abolition failed largely in part because of the opposition of two remarkable people, Emperor Pedro II and his daughter Isabel. Both were capable, intelligent, and far more liberal than most Brazilian aristocrats. Pedro tended to be more pragmatic than his daughter, advocating incremental changes rather than radical ones. He would lay the groundwork for change and then go

off on one of his periodic journeys to Europe or the United States. His daughter, acting as regent in his absence, would then sign the legislation. In 1871 the Rio Branco law prevented children from being born into slavery and in 1888, again while her father was out of the country, Isobel completely freed the slaves.

Ironically, one of the greatest casualties of abolition was the monarchy itself. Plantation owners were so angry over abolition that they supported a military coup forcing Pedro and Isabel into abdication and exile. Thereafter, Brazil fell into the familiar Latin American pattern of military rule and serial dictatorship.

**At the University of Richmond, this
is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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