Scholars of Latin American history and culture have lost a giant in the field. Professor Benjamin Keen, emeritus professor of history at Northern Illinois University, passed away on Friday, November 1, 2002, in his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was 89 years old. He is survived by his caring companion, Shirley Barnes, and by his four children—Sarah, Peter, Pat, and Gail. Betty Keen, his wife of 59 years, soul mate, and mother of their children, died suddenly six years earlier.

As a scholar, Ben Keen was perhaps best known for a stimulating and ultimately transformative debate with Lewis Hanke, the distinguished professor of Latin American history at Columbia University, about the nature and consequences of the Spanish conquest. In this exchange, published in the pages of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Ben challenged the then-dominant paradigm of conquest and colonization that emphasized Spain's heroic mission of civilization, which he properly scorned as a "White Legend." Instead, he sought to examine the New World "encounter" from the perspective of the indigenous civilizations that fell victim to Spanish power. In this task, he stressed the often lonely voices of contemporaneous Spanish protest, especially the words and actions of that remarkable defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, who passionately denounced Spain's systematic destruction of indigenous society and culture. For Ben, there was far more historical truth in this so-called "Black Legend" of Spanish cruelty and injustice.

But decisive as this debate may have been in shifting the focus of scholarly inquiry about precolumbian indigenous peoples, the Spanish conquest, and colonization, Ben Keen's contribution to the teaching of Latin American history was greater still and earned him the public recognition of his colleagues, who bestowed upon him the Conference of Latin American History's Distinguished Service Award in 1985. His subtle, nuanced translations of Alonso de Zorita's *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New*
Spain and Fernando Colón's *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* also endeared him to Latin American scholars eager to share their own critical enthusiasm for Spain's colonial past with their monolingual, English-speaking students.

In addition to these translations, Ben Keen was a prolific author of college textbooks and compiler of documentary source materials that have been invaluable to college professors for use with students in Latin American history classes. First published in 1955 by Houghton Mifflin, his collection of primary sources was subsequently reprinted by Westview Press as *Latin American Civilization: History and Society, 1492 to the Present*, which appeared in its seventh edition in 2000. His perennial best-selling textbook, *A History of Latin America*, was in its sixth edition, and, "productive to the very end," he had just finished revisions to the seventh edition before his passing.

Notwithstanding his work on the Black Legend and his emphasis on Latin American colonial land and labor systems, Ben also was known as an astute intellectual historian. His *Aztec Image in Western Thought* painstakingly documents changes in prominent Western intellectuals' perceptions of Aztec peoples and the Spanish conquest over the course of almost five hundred years, a task that his reading proficiency in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian greatly facilitated. Always attentive to shifting historiographical traditions and their correlation with contemporary sociopolitical structures of power, he similarly examined changing Western interpretations of Christopher Columbus and Bartolomé de Las Casas since the fifteenth century. These were published in collections entitled *Essays in the Intellectual History of Colonial Latin America* and *Bartolomé de Las Casas in History*, the latter coedited with Juan Friede.

But Ben Keen, a classically trained pianist and soft-spoken scholar known to his colleagues and graduate students alike as "Gentle Ben," was first and foremost a passionate teacher who inspired even the most bored and disinterested students with his fiery enthusiasm for the history of Latin American peoples and their struggles for social justice. Identifying closely with the liberating rhetoric of his oft-quoted hero Bartolomé de Las Casas, Ben despised tyranny, social inequality, and the systematic abuse of human rights. In the 1950s, when he ran headlong into the McCarthyite juggernaut that destroyed so many lives and reputations, his principled defense of peace and justice almost cost him the teaching career he so dearly loved. For years he was blacklisted and condemned to labor in obscurity as an editor for an East Coast publisher, until he again was recruited to teach Latin American history at Northern Illinois University in 1965. There he remained until his retirement in 1981.

Even in the face of these formative experiences, Ben courageously refused to be intimidated and consistently spoke truth to power. He enthusiastically championed student mobilizations, whether against the U.S. war in Vietnam or in support of quality higher education threatened by budget cuts. He forthrightly denounced the U.S. effort to destabilize and overthrow Salvador Allende, and he energetically brought public awareness to U.S. military aggression against the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, organizing a scholarly conference on the "Central American Cauldron" in 1980 that exposed covert actions in the region.

Ben Keen was everything that a young graduate student could ever hope to find in a mentor. He was a gentle person, a distinguished scholar, an enthusiastic teacher, a disciplined worker, an
outspoken social activist, and a tireless defender of the voiceless. His grace and good humor, his
defiance of injustice, his wit and wisdom—all will be greatly missed in the arcane world of Latin
American scholars, but none will miss him more than I. He was my teacher, my compadre, my
dear friend. ¡Hasta la victoria siempre, mi querido compañero Benjamín!

Selected Works by Benjamin Keen


"The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities," *Hispanic American Historical

"The White Legend Revisited: A Reply to Professor Hanke's 'Modest Proposal,'" *Hispanic


With Juan Friede. *Bartolomé de Las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and


"Main Currents in United States Writings on Colonial Spanish America, 1884-1984," *Hispanic

*Essays in the Intellectual History of Colonial Latin America.* Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press,
1998.


*Latin American Civilization: History and Society, 1492 to the Present.* Boulder, Colo.: Westview
Press, 2000 (seventh rev. ed.).