Thomas E. Skidmore

Troy, Ohio (22 July 1932) ➔ Westerly, RI (11 June 2016)

Prof. Thomas E. Skidmore was a “giant” among American Brazilianists. He was born in Troy, Ohio on July 22, 1932, but when he was six months old his family moved to Cincinnati where he grew up and completed Wyoming High School. In 1954, he completed his BA at Denison University, majoring in Political Science and Philosophy. He received a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Magdalen College, Oxford University where he completed a second BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (1956) and his MA (1959). While at Oxford, Skidmore met his future wife, Felicity – who was employed at The Urban Institute Press in Washington, DC after they left Madison, Wisconsin in 1986.

He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University (1960) with a dissertation on *The Chancellorship of Caprivi: A Constitutional Study*. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Harvard awarded Skidmore a three-year post-doctoral fellowship to study the Latin American country of his choice and he chose Brazil. Tom quipped – “I am one of Castro’s sons”. This three-year period ended with the Brazilian military coup that toppled Pres. João Goulart on 31st March 1964. The product of this research was a seminal book on Brazil – *Politics in Brazil (1930-64): An Experiment in Democracy*. (1967). The Brazilian translation was *Brasil - De Getúlio [Vargas] a Castelo [Branco]*. This book became required reading for students of Brazil and I read this work in my graduate courses at the University of Florida (Latin American Politics and Brazilian Politics) in the late 1960s.

In 1966, Tom Skidmore joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin in Madison with a major role in its Latin American Studies Program and edited the
Luso-Brazilian Review. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the university housed the Land Tenure Center that studied the problems of land ownership in Latin America. Also, the SDS-Students for a Democratic Society was born at UW-Madison.

I first met Tom in June 1969 when I participated in a conference at the University of Wisconsin. He graciously invited me to his house and we chatted about Brazil for some two hours. I was on my way to Brazil to conduct field research for my doctoral dissertation based at the DCP-UFMG (1969-1971). Since then, we met on many occasions and maintained a long and productive relationship.

After 20 years in Madison, in 1986, he moved to Brown University in Providence, RI as the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes Professor of Modern Latin American History and Professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies. He was Director of Brown’s Center for Latin American Studies until he retired in 1999. After Fernando Henrique Cardoso left the Presidency of Brazil in 2003, he spent five years at Brown as a senior visiting scholar attached to the Watson Institute. In 1989, I visited Brown University at the invitation of Tom Skidmore and prior to my presentation, he asked the audience if I should speak in English or Portuguese. Some 2 or 3 persons said “English” – so my talk was in that language.


Tom was a very active founding member of LASA-Latin American Studies Assn. – a member of the LASA Executive Board (1968-1973) and President (1972-1973). He was also a founder of BRASA-Brazilian Studies Assn. in 1994. During the 8th International BRASA Conference at Vanderbilt University in October 2006, he received the BRASA Lifetime Contribution Award – complete with a video of his life, his accomplishments, and contribution to Brazilian Studies.

http://www.brasa.org/thomas-skidmore/

He was very active in organizing academic opposition to Brazil’s military regime. In 1970 (anos de chumbo) along with three other prominent brazilianists, he drafted an open letter condemning the imprisonment of leading Marxist historian Caio Prado Junior. He also sponsored a LASA resolution condemning the military regime’s systematic repression of Brazilian academics. As a result, the Brazilian government denied him a research visa to teach a seminar at UNICAMP in the
summer of 1970. In the late 1970s and early 1980s – the distensão/abertura final stage of the military regime – Skidmore was granted visas to visit Brazil. Several times he visited our University of Brasilia and lectured to students and faculty. In 1984, he participated in the Roda Viva TV interview program where he criticized the military government. As a result, when he reached Salvador he was taken to the Federal Police HQ where officers read the “Foreigners Law” to him and explained that any repetition of such comments would result in his expulsion from Brazil. These charges were later dropped after many academics, politicians and journalists came to his defense.

Later Roda Viva interviews can be viewed here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M16Xz-l6E0c
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBR7DXT023Y

While visiting one of his three sons in Chicago, their car was hit broadside by another car that ran a red light and Tom suffered serious injuries – broken hip, leg and arm and spent several weeks in hospital. As a result, his mobility was impaired and he was in a wheelchair and later used a cane.


Because he was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, in 2009, Thomas Skidmore was transferred to an assisted care facility in Westerly, RI where he died on 11th June 2016 after suffering a heart attack on 9th June. He was 83.