PREFACE

This book has two purposes: to analyze the principal works of Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and to interpret his role in Argentine intellectual history. Although he is Argentina's most important essayist of the twentieth century, he is not well known outside the Hispanic world. Even in his own country relatively little has been written specifically about his work.

Nevertheless, his influence has been deep. In Argentina the intellectual community and the great majority of well-read men and women know who Martínez Estrada was, what he wrote, and what he stood for. His work is recognized now as more significant than it was at the time he wrote it. Like his greatest Hispanic American contemporaries—Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Octavio Paz—Martínez Estrada extended his concern for national problems to a broad vision of universal proportions. In due time he will be recognized as one of the most powerful and sensitive writers of our time.

His central theme, repeated with variations in essays, poetry, and fiction, might be summed up as follows. All men have an ironic quality in common, their solitude. This solitude is not only personal but historical, the logical result of an age that has lost faith in progress and has reconstructed its thinking so as to consider man a victim of his own existence rather than, as formerly, the persistent adventurer in a mysterious world.

Like most prophets, Martínez Estrada was born too late to play the additional role of the reformer, a circumstance that helps explain XII PREFACE

his isolation among his compatriots. He excoriated them for what he thought to be their self-deluding view of Argentine history. Not all, naturally, were pleased by his attacks, but most were impressed, and the more conscientious were incited to begin a reevaluation of the Argentine past and of Hispanic American institutions. His literary mission was to recapitulate the hopes and disappointments of many preceding generations, of imaginative men who from the earliest colonial times to the twentieth century had sought adventure, contentment, and beauty in the open spaces of South America. The disillusionment, violence, and loneliness they found instead, he concludes, produced a collective attitude of permanent resignation. Argentine political life, in steady decline since 1930, and the foreboding spirit that has permeated Argentine literature over the same period do indeed reflect that attitude—notwithstanding the fact that around 1880 Argentina began a substantial rise to prosperity that was to make it the most affluent Hispanic American nation.

But I have no intention of portraying Martínez Estrada as a historian or sociologist. First and last, he was a writer. His numerous readings in history, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy did not diminish his poetic power. Rather, they added substance and energy to his apocalyptic vision. The author of *X-Ray of the Pampa* has joined a distinguished association of intellectual misfits that includes Montaigne, Schopenhauer, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Unamuno, and Kafka.

I should like to acknowledge gratefully the bibliographical assistance of Enrique Espinoza, Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, Sheilah R. Wilson, and Carole Goldman. I owe special thanks to Otis H. Green for his careful reading of the text and his suggestions, and to Agustina M. de Martínez Estrada, the writer's widow, for her generosity and cooperative spirit in allowing me to consult a large amount of unpublished and uncollected material. Finally, I wish to thank the American Philosophical Society for a grant that made possible an indispensable research trip to Buenos Aires and Bahía Blanca.

P. G. E. Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania