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Michael P. Costeloe

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Much of the so-called Age of Santa Anna in the history of independent Mexico remains a mystery – no decade is as poorly understood as the years from 1835 to 1846. In 1834, the ruling elite of middle-class *hombres de bien* concluded that a highly centralized republican government was the only solution to the turmoil and factionalism which had characterized the new nation since its emancipation from Spain in 1821. The central republic was thus set up in 1835, but once again civil strife, economic stagnation and military coups prevailed until 1846, when a disastrous war with the United States began, a war in which Mexico was to lose half of its national territory. This study explains the course of events and analyses why centralism failed, the issues and personalities involved and the underlying pressures of economic and social change.

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THE CENTRAL REPUBLIC IN MEXICO, 1835–1846

HOMBRES DE BIEN IN THE AGE OF SANTA ANNA

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Preface

The origins of this book are both personal and academic. In 1975, I published a study of the first federal republic of Mexico which covered the years from 1824, when the republic was founded, to the middle of 1834, when it began to be dismantled. My interest in those years arose from a desire to know what were the politics, issues, personalities and, indeed, the events which had brought Mexico to the verge of political anarchy so soon after emancipation from Spain. After trying to guide undergraduates through the bewildering array of revolts and political factions, it was obvious that the existing literature was inadequate. Basically the same motives brought me to the following decade, from 1834 to 1846. Having tried a monarchist form of government with the short-lived Iturbide empire and then the federal republic, Mexicans chose to create a centralized republic with power firmly vested in national authorities located in the capital. Again, I wanted to know why they did so, who were the political and military leaders who brought about the change, what were their hopes, what pressures and tensions they faced and, in particular, why the chronic instability of the earlier decade continued unabated with the same myriad conflicting ideas, issues, factions and revolts. In short, my objective with the present work has been to write a reasonably detailed account of the centralist decade, a period which Professor Vázquez has correctly labelled recently the 'forgotten years' of Mexican history. Certainly, it has attracted very little scholarly attention, and apart from a handful of monographs by young Mexican historians on very specialized aspects, there has been no attempt to examine and explain the political parties, personalities, events or changes which took place.

My approach has been to provide a largely chronological framework because, as every other historian who has attempted to study these years has discovered, it is the most effective way to make sense of the inherent complexity of the people, issues and events of the time. The focal point is the national government and the problems and pressures it faced. The trend in recent Mexican historiography has been to concentrate on aspects of regional development, especially economic, and while that has provided

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welcome insights into how certain areas and industries developed, it is well not to forget, as is sometimes the case in such studies, that there was also a national government, however unstable and ineffective, and a national political scene. It was largely, although obviously not exclusively, at that level that there was constant conflict over the form of government, its nature and role, economic and commercial policy, the role of institutions such as the Church and army, social policy and a whole range of other issues which are the themes of this work and which I have sought to incorporate within the narrative framework.

Above all, I have placed much emphasis on the people involved in the turmoil. Known as the Age of Santa Anna, the three decades of that notorious Mexican's career from 1821 to 1855 have inevitably been overshadowed by his dominant, and it must be said remarkable, personality. But there were many other personalities who exercised considerable influence and about whom very little is known – men such as Anastasio Bustamante, Manuel Gómez Pedraza, Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga, Miguel Barragán, Gabriel Valencia and Francisco Manuel Sánchez de Tagle. It is with their careers that much of this book is concerned, although Santa Anna can never be, nor has been, neglected.

Finally, one strand which runs through every chapter concerns what was known to contemporaries as the *hombre de bien*, a term I seek to explain in the introduction. With the end of colonial rule in 1821, Mexico's population of 7 million people, composed largely of Indians and mestizos, came under the control of an elite of white, probably mostly creole, families and individuals. Their social and economic status at the pinnacle of wealth and power seemed secure. They hoped to consolidate and improve that control using the opportunities which followed the abolition of the colonial regime of corporate and inherited privilege, discrimination, trade and industry monopolies and the opening of Mexico to the international world of commerce and industrial development. They saw as the vital first step in that process the construction of a political system which would guarantee and protect their own interests. Rightly or wrongly, however, they came to believe that their new-found pre-eminence was tenuous and subject to threat not just from external aggression but also from extremists who attempted to mobilize for their own purposes the impoverished masses with promises of genuine equality, civil rights and the redistribution of wealth. Furthermore, they believed that their personal and religious values, the accepted norms of social conduct and especially the relationship between one class and another were under immense pressure of change from both within and without the country. If the end of Spanish rule had brought them political opportunities, it had also initiated significant social change which jeopardized their status, and this has been one of the central themes incorporated in several chapters.

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Indeed, in many respects, in my view, it is in the field of social change that we must look to find many of the tensions and pressures which brought about much of the turmoil of the Age of Santa Anna in general and of the decade of centralism in particular.

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