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978-1-107-50205-5 - Mexico: A New Spain with Old Friends

J. B. Trend

Excerpt

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

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Modern Mexico has been described in all its aspects. The work has been done partly in Mexico, partly in England, but mainly in the United States; and the best informed American writers have shown that rare sympathy with Mexican things which only comes with real understanding of Mexican aspirations.

I cannot hope or attempt to do better what has already been done in America. I could not, if I tried; while my ever-increasing admiration for the United States, and the innumerable friendly people who live there, would prevent me from intruding on what, after all, is more their concern than mine. Mexico may have been “the New Spain”, *la Nueva España*; but its people are not now Europeans but Americans; whilst I feel myself to be incurably European, and my only qualifications for writing about the New Spain are that I have had more experience than most people of the old one, and can overhear most things that are said in most kinds of Spanish. I have known Spain intimately for twenty years, and have been fortunate enough to make a large number of Spanish friends; and when I think of Spain—of the Spain I knew—of what it has been and what it may be again, the words “Spain” and “Spanish” clearly mean a great deal more to me than they do to most modern writers on Mexico, who have never been in Spain in their lives.

To me, of course, there is “another Spain”, just as (in 1919) we became aware that there was “another France” which was not exactly that of M. Clemenceau; and—as I try to suggest

## 2

## INTRODUCTION

sometimes to those who raise their eyebrows at the rulers of modern England—there is still “another England”: a country which once produced statesmen and administrators, and still produces writers and men of science; a country, above all, of poets—of Promethean poets, to borrow the phrase of a Spanish poet now resident in Mexico—including not only Shakespeare and Keats, but Langland and Milton, Shelley, Byron and Swinburne; men who not only wrote poetry, but who protested in poetry, as well. When I am alone in another country, avoiding English people and English newspapers, enjoying the society of other friends and the intellectual exercise of speaking, thinking and writing in another language, it is the poets whom I most like to think of as English; the poets, and then the eccentric, quixotic Englishmen, the “mad” Englishmen, the type which everyone in other countries has known or heard of, and which may be, after all, the only type of Englishman which anybody in another country can really admire.

It was the “other Spain” which first took me to Mexico. During my long visits to Spain in the early 'twenties, when I discovered that procrastinating in a country was the best way of cementing friendships, I met one or two Mexicans and found them eminently likeable. On my last visit to Spain in 1937, in time of war and invasion, I met other Mexicans and liked them no less than the countrymen of theirs I had met before.

Now Mexicans, as one would naturally expect from their history and temperament, have a clearer vision of recent events in Spain than most other Spanish Americans. Charitable and quixotic citizens of Mexico (like charitable and quixotic people in England, the United States and several other countries) had found homes for some hundreds of homeless Spanish children; and just as my own remote, fenland seminary had looked after some thirty Basque children with a few academic Spanish people and their families, giving them the means of going on with their work which the war in Spain had interrupted, so a few Mexicans had got together and

## INTRODUCTION

3

arranged for some Spanish scholars to come and live in Mexico, and go on with their work under the protection of Mexican hospitality. It was done rather quietly; to do it otherwise would have made things uncomfortable for all concerned. But it was done more thoroughly than had been possible in England or anywhere else. The invitations were issued to men whom the Mexican authorities definitely wished to invite, on account of the particular kind of work they were doing or because of their intellectual distinction. They were to live, according to the old formula of Mexican courtesy, *como en su casa*, as if they were in their own home. They were no longer invited guests, strangers, but old inhabitants, *pobladores*, who were now coming back, like all good Spaniards, to the oldest and most familiar of their homes, to that which their great-great-grandfathers had made the living image of Spain.

By this thoughtful and generous action of a few public-spirited Mexicans, the idea of “the New Spain”, *la Nueva España*, has recovered its old meaning and gained a new one. It was a noble gesture, and one which showed a magnificent spirit: this invitation by a “Spanish House” to a number of the best representatives of that Spain which can never be destroyed, the Spain which is a country of the mind; and it is a lesson which Spaniards—all good Spaniards—will take to heart. Spain is not done for; she will go on and begin again in Spanish America. Spain has been called the mother of beginnings.

So the Mexican *Casa de España* will one day come to be regarded as nothing less than another beginning, a new birth. As with the University in Exile, in New York, a new cultural relationship has been established between the Old World and the New. Like New York, Mexico has set a fine and stimulating example. Mexico has not been alone, either, in its far-sighted plan of assistance to Spanish intellectual exiles. Chile, too, was determined to see what could be done to help; it sent its best poet to Europe on a “crusade of salvation”,

and his activities have already borne fruit. Colombia and other South American republics have generously received Spanish exiles of character and intellect; while Cuba formed a Committee of Assistance, a *Comité de Ayuda a los Intelectuales Expatriados*, to save Spanish culture. From all corners of the continent men came forward to do what was possible to tide the Spanish people over this difficult and disastrous moment of their history. Mexico and Chile had shown the way, and many other Spanish-American countries began to follow them. At this time (December 1938) the war in Spain was not yet over; but it was clear that, in most countries, the cultured and civilized people were uncompromisingly on the side of the Republic.

The project for the foundation of the *Casa de España* in Mexico had found a warm supporter in President Cárdenas. For Mexico, Spaniards are the most desirable of all immigrants, racially and historically the most closely identified with the Mexican people; and the country has need of such valuable and useful settlers, who come there with no idea of getting rich quick, like so many of their predecessors, but with the hope of living peaceably in a free country and being as useful citizens as they can.

In the case of intellectuals, and others who arrived when the war was over, the Mexican authorities took special care to select the immigrants personally: medical men and men of science, scholars and writers well known in their particular fields, skilled workers and specialists likely to be valuable in the industrial development of the country, agricultural labourers from the arid and sterile uplands of Spain, who would bring their experience and their endurance to the more varied climatic conditions of Mexico. Among the original members of the *Casa de España* were some of my oldest Spanish friends. They included one scholar who had previously been living as a University teacher in Cambridge. It was clear, therefore, that the time had come for me to go to Mexico as well.

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[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

Through the “New Spain” (or the “Other Spain”) I have been able to get into touch with the “New” (or “Other”) Mexico. This is not the Mexico of scare headlines, violent abuse, or the patronizing, philistine attitude of certain European writers. It is not the Mexico of those who come to make propaganda about oil or keep alive the fiction of religious persecution.

My Mexico is not like that; nor is it the Mexico of archaeologists, of students of Indian “folk-ways”, or even of the pressing social problems with which modern America is beset. All these have interested me; but they have been adequately studied, and in most cases admirably studied, in the United States.

My Mexico (if I may call it that) is the Mexico of reasonable Mexican people—of those who, without prejudice, are really and honestly trying to make Mexico a better country for Mexicans to live in; such, for instance, as President Cárdenas, and the parents of my small friend Emma. For Emma is the Mexican Alice in Wonderland, who will one day go through the looking-glass and become the most important person in Mexico—a Mexican citizen.

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## Chapter II

### TRAVELLING TO MEXICO

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Going to Mexico, I found, made me go to school again, to the first school I could remember; and even that, when I thought of it, turned out to be no use. What geography did we do there? I have no recollection whatever. Later on, a preparatory school left somewhat clearer memories of France and South America; but I never remember doing Mexico or Spain or even the United States, though that preparatory school was the best school I ever attended. Like many people, I suppose, I have learned my geography by actually travelling over the countries concerned, in Europe, North Africa and North America; just as I have learned my modern history mainly from the introductions to Baedeker's *Guides*. Mexico presented a geographical problem which had to be taken more seriously.

To begin with: how was I to get there? Was I to go by sea, and enter Mexico at Veracruz, or go overland from New York? Time was short. On my first visit, all I had was a Christmas vacation which, however, was allowed to begin rather early, in the first week of December. I chose the overland route from New York, by St Louis, to San Antonio, Texas; and from there I flew to Brownsville, on the Mexican border, Tampico and Mexico City. The second time I went by sea, from New York to Veracruz.

The first twenty-four hours from New York got me as far as St Louis, where I changed trains. It was dark when we left, and our crossing of the Mississippi and the long journey along the farther bank made no impression. It was different

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[More information](#)

## TRAVELLING TO MEXICO

7

on the way back; ascending the great river on a bright, frosty morning on the last day of the old year, and finding it full of ice. Yet the second morning after leaving New York I was in Texas—"Yes, *sir*: I've been in Texas", said the man in the serial story, tapping his hip-pocket—But all that was years ago. The Texas that I awoke to began with miles upon miles of oil-wells, each with its peculiar, diagrammatic Eiffel Tower; while now and again a well would be alight, sending up an enormous, slowly flickering column of dark, heavy flame. Conrad Aiken has described the whole journey in a memorable fashion in *A Heart for the Gods of Mexico*. Did I, too, see a negro porter, carefully putting his peaked, railwayman's cap into a paper bag as the train left the station? No, that was afterwards, in Mexico; and instead of a paper bag, the cap went into a black cotton one. Was it Little Rock that offered the vision of a colossal Capitol, as large as the one at Washington, and as white and shining as the one at Havana? I remember the building, but have forgotten whether the place was called Little Rock.

I stayed the night at San Antonio, Texas. "You stop at the Blue Bonnet," a friend had said. Imagine a hotel called the Blue Bonnet at San Antonio, Texas! I imagined it: a small pleasant hostelry, with suggestions of the Wild West and the Deep South, in a quaint Spanish-American, or American-Spanish town, surrounding the old Spanish fort of the "Alamo". But San Antonio, Texas, is like a Swedish town in semi-tropics, a large and attractive modern city, well planned and well built, with over 230,000 inhabitants and spread over a very considerable area, with the central blocks carefully arranged to make the most of a narrow, canalized, winding river. While as to the Blue Bonnet hotel (named after the lupin which is the State flower of Texas), it has between seven and ten floors and is one of the most up-to-date hotels—as well as one of the most friendly and comfortable—that I have ever stayed in, anywhere. No less than three taps to the basin in your private bathroom: hot, cold and—iced! I should

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hardly have been surprised if it had been eau-de-cologne, whisky, or some even holier spirit. An excellent dinner in what was called a coffee-shop; while afterwards, in the Lounge (or whatever it is called in Texas) I was accosted by one friendly soul after another, trying to say nice things about England, condoling with its difficulties, hoping that in the end it would be "O.K.", and then excusing themselves by saying that they were of pure English extraction. The interest in England and the sympathy for individual English people—though not necessarily for the Government—was vivid and striking from the moment I landed in New York. English writers and English reviewers are apt to assume that the average American can know no more about Europe than the average Englishman knows about America. Nothing is farther from the truth. In America there is no unofficial censorship, as there was, even in peace-time, in England; the press can print as much of the news as it likes, with the result that a New York taxi-driver may know more about European affairs than many members of London clubs or college combination-rooms.

Next morning I had to be up before sunrise to catch the aeroplane for Brownsville. I left the charming Blue Bonnet soon after six and had coffee in a little stall across the street. The plane was half an hour late at the airport, and one of the air staff invited me to more coffee, with the delightful manners of a hospitable undergraduate. When the plane arrived, it was full of sleeping individuals, reclining in chairs tilted back as if they were at the dentist's. Lights were screened; but the passengers had mostly covered their faces with hats or newspapers. There was, however, a hostess. She won my heart by bringing still more hot coffee, and an excellent map; while presently, after we had been in the air for some minutes, she came back with a card, giving the height, temperature, barometer, force and direction of the wind; and at the bottom, "Hostess: Miss Martinez."

At Brownsville (Tex.), on the Mexican border, there was a

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## TRAVELLING TO MEXICO

9

change of plane and an inspection of papers. Mine were in order; but a special letter to the “Agent of Migration”, saying that I was “a good friend of Mexico and Spain”, certainly made things easier; in fact, the Agent of Migration waved me through.

The first stop in Mexico was Tampico. (Memories of M. W.-J. and an oil company in 1914! Tampico was, through him, the first place in Mexico which ever seemed real to me, and I still have a map he sent me pinned up inside a cupboard at home. M. W.-J. knew enough Spanish to realize that the peons had a case; and as he was, in a small way, a landlord himself at home, he may have thought the titles of an oil company in Mexico rather dubious. On one occasion he rationed the revolutionary forces with bully beef: “. . .how rebel chieftains Shared your beef-tins. . . .” Our letters sometimes dropped into verse, and our verse generally ended in a competition of Thackerayan or super-Thackerayan rhymes. We last saw each other at Roulers, in Belgium, in October 1914, before the Germans blew it to pieces. “What shall it be?” “Clar’t”, said M. W.-J., who knew his Jorrocks. And clar’t it was.)

The plane from Brownsville to Tampico had followed the coast, and seemed to steer by the long, sandy bar or reef, which divides the blue water of the Gulf of Mexico from the turbid water of the lagoon. Travelling in Mexico makes one want to rub up not only the remains of school geography, but also the notions of elementary botany. Geography and botany are the principal keys to what one is seeing. There are history and archaeology, of course: but the history is in many of the books (especially in modern American books) while the archaeology, once studied by an older generation of Englishmen (Maudslay, Joyce, and Thomas Gann) has now become an American subject too (and with “American” I here include Mexican archaeologists as well). Botanical information is not so easy to come by. Yet the things which grow in Mexico are among the objects which most strike a traveller from Europe.

You do not have to go far to look for them; they are always before your eyes.

Now England is not exactly a country devoid of growing things. Even in midwinter, a well-run garden will always have flowers growing outside, in the open air, or at least trees and shrubs with bright red leaves or berries or curiously shaped hanging fruits which show up against a pale grey sky. England, and especially the flatter parts of England (like Cambridge), is a country which makes those who live in it notice little things. People who occasionally take me for country walks seem intensely aware of all sorts of processes going on and things growing up, in every hedge and bush and tree; while a Spanish undergraduate was fascinated by the typical landscape of Cambridge, “because you can see the shapes of the trees against the sky”.

But in England, unlike Mexico, we have seasons very clearly marked off from one another: while in England again (and even in Scotland and Wales) there are only a few hundred feet between the highest level at which things grow, and the lowest. In Mexico, on the other hand, you can never be quite sure what time of year it is; while the supremely important thing is not, “Are you in the North or the South?” but how far are you above the level of the sea. You can, at any rate, by merely looking round, be pretty sure whether you are down in the tropics not far from the sea, or half-way up in the comfortably warm temperate zone, or on the high plateau near Mexico City. You can not only feel the temperature, you can see by the plants.

ZHΣON ΩΣ EN OPEI

(Live—or, perhaps, boil—as on a mountain.)

That is a quotation from Marcus Aurelius, which a former headmaster of mine had inscribed in letters of gold over his fireplace. I asked him once why he had it there; for, as an irreverent schoolboy with a taste for science as well as for languages, I could not believe that his little brass kettle would