Datos biográficos

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Resumen

El interés de este artículo es reinterpretar *La vida en México* (1843) de Madame Calderón de la Barca, con el fin de cuestionar los posibles prejuicios culturales escoceses, británicos o eurocéntricos/anglosajones que pudieron haber marcado el recuento que hizo la autora de su visita a este país de 1839 a 1841. Enfoca, en particular, la descripción que presenta esta obra del bandido como tema recurrente en los libros de viaje británicos sobre México, y analiza si el perjuicio, la exageración, un proceso de tipificación y mitificación resultaron en la presentación de la criminalidad como una característica inherente de la identidad nacional mexicana.

Abstrac

This article is interested in reinterpreting Madame Calderón de la Barca's *Life in Mexico* (1843) questioning the possible Scottish, British or Eurocentric/Anglo-Saxon cultural prejudices that might have intruded upon the author's account of the country she visited and described in 1839-41. It focuses on this work's depiction of the bandit as a recurrent theme in British travelogues about Mexico, and analyses whether prejudice, exaggeration, a process of typification and mythification results in criminality being presented as an inherent Mexican trait.

Palabras clave

Cultural identity issues
British-mexican interperceptions
Imperialism
Travel writing
Bandits
Frances Calderón de la Barca

British Perceptions of Mid-Nineteenth Century Mexican Society: The Topos of the Bandit in Madame Calderón de la Barca's Life in Mexico (1843)[1]

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We have been strongly advised not to attempt this journey, and the stories of robbers and robberies, related by credible persons, are not encouraging. Robbers, bad roads, horrible heat, poisonous animals; many are the difficulties prognosticated to us.
Madame Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico*, p. 298.

Mexico City is evil, underneath.
D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent*, p. 23.

Mexico was something I couldn't shake off, like a state of mind.
Graham Greene, *The Lawless Roads*, p. 148.

INTRODUCTION:

The idea that cultural prejudice has tainted British depictions of Mexico since independence is neither new nor original. Over the last ten to twenty years numerous studies have focussed on the rhetoric of Empire and colonial discourse, and have opened up an entire field of study, in particular with reference to travel writing as a quintessential expression of European imperialism.[2] The repetition and variations of a number of tropes in Western colonial travel writing has attracted the well-deserved

1 A preliminary version of this study was presented as a paper at the Annual SLAS Conference, University of Nottingham, in Panel 8: "Britain and Latin America", 31 March-2 April 2006. I thank Mario Aguilar, Claire Brewster, Catherine Davies, Paul Garner, Chris Hull, Abdiel Oñate, Rory Miller, Edmundo Murray, and Silvestre Villegas Revueltas for their questions, comments, and suggestions. I also thank Claire Lindsay for her insights.

2 See the work of Roland Barthes, Homi Bhabha, Patrick Brantlinger, Mary Louise Pratt, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and David Spurr. For full details see bibliography at the end.

attention of a multi-disciplinary cohort of scholars. To use David Spurr's classification of tropes as a suggestive reminder of those that have operated in Western travelogues, these have invariably included and involved surveillance, appropriation, aestheticization, classification, debasement, negation, affirmation, idealization, insubstantialization, neutralization, eroticization, and even resistance.[3] Regardless of whether the travelogues under scrutiny were written by French, Spanish, British or U.S. travellers, in Algeria, Mexico, India or the Philippines, research has shown that there are distinct parallels between their interpretations. In other words, for the Western writer, regardless of country of origin, building a coherent representation of the different and, at times, incomprehensible reality of non-Western culture, has entailed a common approach.

Notwithstanding this overarching and generalised vision of Western, imperialist, and, by default, British prejudice, some studies have provided a more nuanced analysis that has, in turn, questioned, at times, the broad brush strokes of what could be termed anti-imperialist post-colonial discourse. Elizabeth A. Bohls, for instance, in gendering our understanding of British travel writing between 1716 and 1818, showed that women writers, unlike their male companions, showed a disposition to understand and engage with the foreign countries they visited that subverted masculine disinterested contemplation, exposed male vested interests, and, consequently, embraced the suffering and culture of the "Other". Women writers such as Mary Wortley Montagu, Janet Schaw, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Shelley refused to endorse a masculine imperial aesthetic that kept the Others "at arm's length", and brought the peripheral "world of Others in close".[4]

Accepting that the Western gaze may thus require qualification, taking into consideration issues of gender, and, as will be seen, a more nuanced understanding of cultural identity, of interest here is not how one particular travelogue of the nineteenth-century conformed with a macro Western tradition in imperial travel writing, but how it may be seen to belong to a specific informal British genealogy of travelogues about Mexico. Did its tropes, and in particular the topos of the "Mexican bandit", use and develop ones established in previous British portrayals of Mexico? How did it inform British public opinion? Did its arguable rhetorical debasement of the cultural "Other" elicit potentially aggressive diplomatic policies on the part of the Foreign Office? Or was there within its use of

3 See David Spurr, The Rhetoric of Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

4 Elizabeth A. Bohls, Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

familiar imperial tropes, a subtle female subversion of emergent stereotypes? Did the fact that the author was a Scot, and thus a peripheral writer within the British Empire, result in a more understanding and receptive example of imperial travel writing?

It is clear that, as Silvestre Villegas Revueltas has argued recently, British cultural prejudice had a major and not entirely productive impact on British-Mexican relations during the early national period: "la aplicación de políticas incorrectas *y con prejuicios de los ministros plenipotenciarios enviados a México* fueron, a largo plazo, los responsables del daño que progresivamente sufrió la relación entre ambos países".[5] An eloquent example of this cultural prejudice may be seen in a letter written by William Parish Robertson to Lord Malmesbury in 1859, in which he characteristically claimed the Mexicans were quite simply incapable of governing themselves, and as far as the Republic's future was concerned, he stressed that "the only permanent remedy, the only one that can prove the salvation of that rich and fine country, and of the property and everyone in it – namely, its annexation to, or the protectorate of the United States".[6] Notwithstanding the existence of numerous examples of prejudice that support and confirm the view that Robertson's perception of Mexico was both widespread and representative, Madame Calderón de la Barca's travelogue does not contain any judgments that could be seen to endorse such an obvious disdain for the country's people. There is no denying that the expression of her prejudice could well have been more subtle than Robertson's. However, the question remains whether, in fact, it is our own anti-imperial prejudice that has led us to assume there would be prejudice in a text like hers, when, in fact, the absence of overt debasement could be construed as an example of subversion

The interest in studying Madame Calderón de la Barca Life in Mexico (1843) arises, moreover, at a time when the historiography of British-Mexican relations is being significantly revised. Over the last ten years there has been a major shift that has entailed a rejection of the concept of informal empire, and of the view that Britain was indirectly complicit in Latin American under-development. Stephen Haber has gone as far as dismissing dependency theory entirely, whilst Peter Cain and Tony Hopkins, albeit less strident in their views, have nonetheless challenged the concept of "honorary dominion". In other words, Mexico, it has been argued recently, does not fit the paradigm of subjection to British commercial

5 Silvestre Villegas Revueltas, "Deuda y diplomacia. La relación México-Gran Bretaña 1824-1884" (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005), p. 24. My emphasis.

6 Quoted in Michael P. Costeloe, Bonds and Bondholders. British Investors and Mexico's Foreign Debt, 1824-1888 (Westport, CT. and London: Praeger, 2003), p. 209.

and political domination.[7] Similarly, with regard the twentieth century, the notion that British government and companies were unable to understand or adapt to the challenges posed by the economic nationalism of post-war Latin America is also currently being revised.[8] Bearing in mind this recent historiographical trend, does Madame Calderón de la Barca's travel writing confirm, contradict or nuance notions of British imperial and prejudiced interpretations of nineteenth-century Mexico?

Frances Erskine Inglis, most commonly known as Fanny Calderón de la Barca, was the Scottish-born wife of the first Spanish Minister Plenipotentiary to visit Mexico following Spain's long-awaited recognition of Mexican independence in 1836. She resided in Mexico from late 1839 to the autumn of 1841, during which time she wrote a series of letters that would eventually be published in 1843 as a travelogue entitled Life in Mexico.[9] Her vivid account of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico remains a particularly insightful historiographical source, providing an engaging testimony of the people, places and customs she saw. Historians have, in fact, repeatedly used her descriptions and her narrative of the events she witnessed when constructing their own interpretations of the early 1840s without concerning themselves with her possible imperial bias. Reflecting historian Anne Staples' view that, "en [su] criterio podemos confiar debido a su amplia cultura y experiencia docente",[10] doña Fanny's book has become a trusted source for those of us who have attempted to decipher what it was like to live in Mexico at the time. However, as was eloquently demonstrated in an article by Michael P. Costeloe, whilst William Hickling Prescott's History of the Conquest of Mexico, which came out in the same year, was "received with qualified enthusiasm", Life in Mexico "was the subject of hostile reviews and its author much vitriolic, personal abuse". For the Mexican press of the time, "the Scottish traveller" "had insulted Mexicans of all classes." The book was even described as "a poisonous satire against Mexicans".[11]

This article is interested in reinterpreting Life in Mexico questioning the possible Scottish, British or Eurocentric/Anglo-Saxon cultural prejudices that might have intruded upon doña Fanny's account of the country she

7 See the work of John Coatsworth, Peter Cain, Michael P. Costeloe, Paul Garner, Stephen Haber, Tony Hopkins and Carlos Marichal. For full details see bibliography at the end.

8 See the work of Marcelo Abreu, Leslie Bethell, Marshall Eakin, Lorenzo Meyer, and Rory Miller. Rory Miller eloquently made this point in the paper he gave at the SLAS Conference held in Nottingham, 31 March-2 April 2006, on "British Firms and Populist Nationalism in Post-War Latin America". For full details see bibliography at the end.

9 All quotes in this article are taken from Sir Nicolas Cheetham's facsimile edition of Madame Calderón de la Barca, Life in Mexico (London: Century, 1987).

10 Anne Staples, "Las mujeres detrás de la silla presidencial en el siglo XIX," in Will Fowler (ed.), Presidentes mexicanos, vol. 1. (Mexico City: INEHRM, 2004), p. 143.

11 Michael P. Costeloe, "Prescott's History of the Conquest and Calderón de la Barca's Life in Mexico. Mexican Reaction, 1843-1844," The Americas XLVII(3) (January 1991), p. 337.

visited and described in 1839-41.[12] How far is it possible to view Life in Mexico as an obviously British account? What do we learn of British-Mexican interperceptions and translated cultures? It is not an easy line of inquiry to pursue, even if we do recognise that there are "imagined communities", to coin Benedict Anderson's phrase,[13] and that these may have developed active and passive interpretations of who they are, where they come from, and how they differ from "the other".[14]

There are basic problems that would appear to be impossible to resolve. One critical issue concerns our ability to distinguish what is distorted in a particular historical account. The other is whether we can confidently handle such fundamental notions as Mexicanidad and Britishness. Of interest here is Francis Inglis's "pride and prejudice" and how it may be seen to distort her portrait of mid-nineteenth century Mexican society. However, in order to appreciate this it is necessary to accept the idea that there existed an "objective" reality in the first place; something which is quite impossible to prove or demonstrate. Contrasting her vision of mid-nineteenth century Mexico with that of her Mexican contemporaries could be one possible strategy employed to highlight her alleged distortions. However, the Mexican elite's accounts were also distorted. As Anne Staples reminds us when discussing the historical accounts of nineteenth-century Mexican writers and politicians like José María Luis Mora, Carlos María de Bustamante, Lorenzo de Zavala, and Lucas Alamán, they wrote history "como ellos pretendían que se recordara, no como la recreación fiel de un tiempo y un espacio".[15]

Moreover, there is the additional issue of whether Fanny's travelogue may be construed as representative. How can her depiction be presented as characteristically British when she was a fairly unusual Briton? To begin with she was a Scot, born in Edinburgh on 4 December 1804, who, at the age of twenty-seven, following her father's bankruptcy in 1828 and death two years later, found herself moving to Boston, in the United Sta-

12 Several recent studies of Life in Mexico have presented it as markedly prejudiced. As may be seen in Claire Lindsay's overview of these, Julia Tuñón Pablos, Silvia Arrom and Jean Franco, are three scholars who have criticised doña Fanny for her class prejudice, her use of exaggeration, and her condescension, respectively. See Claire Lindsay, "Postcolonial Anxieties: Fetishizing Frances Calderón de la Barca," Women: a cultural review 17:2 (2006), p. 174. Other studies on Life in Mexico include: Hale and Jagoe's pieces. For full details of their and Tuñón Pablos, Arrom and Franco's studies, see Bibliography.

13 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1994).

14 For studies on the construction of national identity in Latin America see: Fernando Ainsa, Identidad cultural de Iberoamérica en su narrativa (Madrid: Gredos, 1986); Jorge Larrain, Identity and Modernity in Latin America (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); and Will Fowler and Peter Lambert (eds.), Political Violence and the Construction of National Identity in Latin America (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan 2006).

15 Anne Staples, "Una sociedad superior para una nueva nación," in Anne Staples (ed.), Historia de la vida cotidiana en México. Vol. IV. Bienes y vivencias. El siglo XIX (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica/El Colegio de México, 2005), p. 307.

tes, in 1831, with her mother and seven other female members of the family. Having moved to Staten Island in New York, she met the Spanish minister plenipotentiary to the United States, Ángel Calderón de la Barca, whom she married and lived with thereafter, in the United States, Mexico, France, and eventually in Spain, where she died in 1882, having become the governess of Queen Isabella II's daughter.[16] A highly intelligent and perceptive woman, she was actively interested in, and receptive to, the "Hispanic world". There could not be a more striking contrast between her disposition to actually marry into a Spanish household and the attitudes of those British families she met in Mexico who generally kept "themselves entirely aloof from the Mexicans, live quietly in their own houses, into which they have transplanted as much English comfort as possible, rarely travel, and naturally find Mexico the dullest of cities" (p. 213).What she deemed fascinating may well have proven horrifying or entirely alien to most of her British contemporaries. She certainly warmed to numerous aspects of Mexican society, finding their "graceful cordiality", for instance, "so agreeable a contrast with English and American frigidity" (p. 100). She was clearly distressed by her imminent departure from Mexico: "we are surrounded by friends and by friendly attentions. It will be impossible for us to leave Mexico without regret" (p. 441). She was convinced that all that was required was "a settled government to make it one of the first countries in the world" (p. 441), and was prepared to admit that having resided in the country for two years, she had grown fond of its food and customs, besides confessing that she might have been slightly hasty or premature in her earlier judgements:

> Vera Cruz cookery, which two years ago I thought detestable, now appears to me delicious! What excellent fish! and what incomparable frijoles! [...] how necessary for a traveller to compare his judgments at different periods, and to correct them! First impressions are of great importance, if given only as such; but if laid down as decided opinions, how apt they are to be erroneous! (p. 528).

As she admitted earlier on in her text, "perhaps it is that I am getting accustomed to the Mexican style of face" (p. 291).[17]

She also thought of herself as a Scot, rather than as a Brit. Her text is peppered with Scottish allusions. To note but a few examples, she "fell

16 Sir Nicolas Cheetham, "Introduction," in Calderón de la Barca, Life in Mexico, pp. xix-xxii.
17 It is worthy of note that one of the earliest reviews of Life in Mexico actually picked up on "the very un-English nature of her writing", and noted that the author was "perfectly at home in her adopted land". See Elizabeth Eastlake, "Lady Travellers," Quarterly Review 76 (1845), pp. 98-137, quoted in Lindsay, "Postcolonial Anxieties", p. 171.

asleep at length with my thoughts in Scotland, and wakened in Mexico!" (p. 51); she was appreciative of Señora de G_____a, who went to a fancy ball dressed as Mary, Queen of Scots (p. 81), but critical of a gentleman who attempted to appear like a Highlander, "How I wished that Sir William Cumming, Macleod of Macleod, or some veritable Highland-chieftain could suddenly have appeared to annihilate him, and show the people here what the dress really is!" (p. 82); she drew Scottish rather than British parallels, "Spanish cloak, or Mexican sarape, or Scottish plaid" (p. 92), talking of Mexican families assembling in "the house of the head of the clan" (p. 293); used Scottish expressions, " 'it's a long lane that has no turning,' as we say in Scotland" (p. 467); enjoyed Scottish produce, including "Scotch ale" as well as champagne in her "very magnificent déjeuné a la fourchette" (p. 290); and was eager to spot the Scots who worked in the Real del Monte mine, "one individual, with a shock of fiery red hair and undeniable Scotch twang, I felt the greatest inclination to claim as a countryman" (p. 171), displaying pride of their working ethos, "Nearly all the workmen are British, and of these the Scotch are preferred" (p. 173).[18]

This Scottish slant notwithstanding, Fanny was not critical of the English or their achievements during her Mexican travels. The road the English had cut through the mountains near the Real de Monte mines was "a fine and useful enterprise; the first broad and smooth road I have seen as yet in the republic" (p. 171). At the mines themselves, she admired "all the great works which English energy has established here; the various steam-engines, the buildings for the separation and washing of the ore; the great stores, workshops, offices, etc." (p. 173); and she could not help waxing lyrical about a breakfast she was served at the house of the English minister plenipotentiary in San Ángel, "How consistent everything looks in a good English house! so handsome without being gaudy – the plate so well cleaned, the servants so well trained" (p. 373). Although generous in her praise of the English, she evidently saw herself primarily as a Scot, which prompts the question as to whether her perceptions of Mexico can be claimed to be "typically" British.

What can be discerned from these considerations is that it would be unwise to present Fanny's Life in Mexico as characteristically British, and that any distortions gleaned may not be entirely the result of a typically mid-nineteenth century or early Victorian British outlook. Thus any conclusions that may be drawn can only be tentative; at times, verging

18 It is interesting in this respect that, according to Evelyn Waugh, the Scots never really identified themselves with the British Empire: "Scotsmen were patriotic about Scotland, not about the British Empire". See Evelyn Waugh, Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson (London: Chapman & Hall, 1939), pp. 263-264.

dangerously on the speculative. Moreover, the challenge of providing a comprehensive study of Madame Calderón de la Barca's portrayal of Mexican society in the early 1840s in a succinct study of this length and nature, increases the difficulty of this exercise. Nevertheless, there is a topos in Fanny's Life in Mexico which is, interestingly, common to almost all British accounts of Mexico, from Henry George Ward's Mexico in 1827 (1828) to the latest Rough Guide: the topos of banditry, robbery, and crime.

Analysing Fanny's depiction of the bandit and her descriptions of and judgements on the matter, may help us to assess whether she can be seen to have gone beyond the purely factual in her account. Is there prejudice, exaggeration, a process of typification and mythification that results in criminality being presented as an inherent Mexican trait? The equation commonly drawn can be easily summarised as follows: Mexico equals bandits, banditry, criminality. It is one that can be seen in nineteenth and twentieth century depictions of Mexico. The titles of two famous travelogues eloquently demonstrate this: Graham Greene's The Lawless Roads (1939); and Evelyn Waugh's Robbery Under the Law. The Mexican Object-Lesson (1939). Whether it is in the often-used image of sombreros, bullets, and guns; whether it applies indiscriminately to petty thieves, revolutionaries, corrupt policemen and politicians; or whether it is how British writers have depicted armed robberies or the 1938 nationalisation of oil; Mexicans have been consistently portrayed as bandits or robbers. Exemplified by D.H. Lawrence's impression of Mexico City: "This city doesn't feel right – feels like a criminal plotting his next rather mean crime",[19] the question is whether Fanny's account conforms with this norm; a norm, which, in turn, has become an intrinsic part of this very specific genre: the British travelogue of Mexico.

THE MEXICAN AS BANDIT. A VERY BRITISH TOPOS:

As noted by historian Desmond Gregory, "Lawlessness was one topic eliciting comment from every [foreign] observer" who travelled to Mexico during the early national period.[20] Furthermore, as discussed by Alfred H. Siemens in his study of Western travellers' accounts of the Veracruz-Perote road:

> Both the rigours of the road and its insecurity became part of the indictment being formulated against not only the tropical lowlands but the

19 Quoted in Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 91.
20 Desmond Gregory, Brute New World. The Rediscovery of Latin America in the Early Nineteenth Century (London and New York: British Academic Press, 1992), p. 144.

> entire country. These were all aspects of disreputability. However, the possibility of an encounter with highwaymen in some desolate place also stimulated romantic sensibilities. And it called forth a certain truculence, which may be seen as the focussing of a common attitude toward the country as a whole and an expression of the policy toward Mexico of the countries from which the travellers came.[21]

Evidently, this was not a theme conjured up out of the imaginary depths and fears of British prejudice. There were bandits in Mexico and they form as much an integral part of the Mexican long nineteenth-century literary and cultural canon as they do of the British travelogues of the country. Two classic nineteenth century novels are precisely about bandits –Manuel Payno's Los bandidos de Río Frío (1891) and Ignacio Altamirano's El Zarco (1901). There is certainly plenty of documentary evidence testifying to the rampancy of assaults and crimes in mid-nineteenth century Mexico. For example, former minister of war and santanista ideologue and writer General José María Tornel did not dare travel from Morelia to Mexico City in 1849 unless the government provided him with an escort of 20 dragoons: "por estar el camino lleno de ladrones".[22] In the Mariano Riva Palacio Archive in Austin, Texas, there is amongst the correspondence of the influential moderate thinker Mariano Otero a particularly harrowing account of an armed robbery he was subjected to on the Puebla-Mexico City road. In Otero's own words, it was not so much the stolen money that traumatised him, but "lo que se sufre estando a discreción de tales gentes".[23]

To this day, Mexicans appear to enjoy swapping horror-stories of muggings, assaults and kidnaps as part of their after-dinner repartee,[24] and according to Fanny, it was no different back then: "Talking of robberies and robbers, [was] rather a fertile theme of conversation" (p. 97). In fact, there are numerous instances in Life in Mexico where we find Fanny becoming uncomfortable "listening to tales of blood and murder" (p. 341): "I walked about in the courtyard after supper, where we had listened to frightful stories of robbers and robberies, [...] [feeling] uncomfortably dreary, and anxious to change our quarters" (p. 325). It is not surpri-

21 Alfred H. Siemens, Between the Summit and the Sea. Central Veracruz in the Nineteenth Century (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), p. 95.

22 Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (henceforth referred to as AHSDN), Exp. XI/III/I-93: General José María Tornel to General Pedro Anaya, Minister of War, Morelia, 30 May 1848.

23 Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin (henceforth referred to as BLAC), Mariano Riva Palacio Archive, No. 3821: Mariano Otero to Mariano Riva Palacio, Mexico City, 6 February 1850.

24 Graham Greene described this particular custom (i.e., to discuss robberies in great detail) as "Mexican small talk" (The Lawless Roads, p. 45).

sing that every time she set off on a trip with her husband to a different part of Mexico, she did so with a sense of foreboding: "So much had been said about robbers, that we were not sure how our next day's journey might terminate" (p. 325); "He seemed to think it extremely probable that we should be robbed, believed, indeed had just heard asserted, that a party of ladrones were looking out for el Señor Ministro" (pp. 40-41); "I expected every moment to be attacked" (p. 139); "we rode on in serried ranks, expecting every moment to hear a bullet whiz over our heads" (p. 322); "We took leave of our friends at the door of the hotel, at one in the morning, [...] in the full expectation of being robbed the following day, a circumstance which has now grown so common, that when the diligence from Puebla arrives in safety, it excites rather more sensation than when it has been stopped" (p. 339). What is difficult to tell is whether her fears were well-founded. Of all the many times she and her husband set off fearing imminent attack, only once did they actually see a band of robbers ride up close to them. Furthermore, these bandits were frightened away before they assaulted their carriage, so that, in fact, Fanny was never once assaulted during her travels in Mexico. This fact alone, contrasted with the constant and repeated assertions of foreboding, begs the question whether these fears were actually irrational and unfounded; the consequence of the paranoia of the upper class Mexicans Fanny and her husband liaised with, or her own prejudice. Siemens rightly notes that: "The stories told of robberies on Mexican roads seem a separate reality. Very few travellers personally experienced robbery – only two or three out of some two dozen who referred to the phenomenon".[25]

During Fanny's two year stay in Mexico, she had five arguably close encounters with robbers. One night some robbers broke into the kitchen of her house in Mexico City, but were scared away by the shrieks of the servants and the calls of her husband and the two soldiers who resided with them. On one journey their carriage ran into trouble in the vicinity of Santa Clara. The coachman was forced to buy water from some robbers who were willing to sell him a can-full because, according to Fanny, the coachman's servant treated them "like honourable men" (p. 152). On a separate occasion, her husband unwittingly employed a "notorious thief; whom the police had long been in search of" as a servant. However, he was discovered and dismissed him before he had a chance to rob the house (p. 186). In another incident, during their travels in Michoacán, two captured robbers were added to their party, "chained together by the leg, guarded by five of our lancers, and prepared to accompany us on

25 Siemens, Between the Summit and the Sea, p. 110.

foot", affording Fanny the chance to observe the "two disagreeable personages" at close quarters. Finally, on their journey back to the Gulf coast, they were accosted by half a dozen robbers, as mentioned earlier, who rode up close enough to their carriage to reconnoitre them ("I was too sleepy to be frightened, and reconnoitred them in return with only one eye open"), but were then frightened away by their escort (pp. 522-523). Apart from the brief and unsuccessful break in, they were not burgled or attacked during their time in Mexico.

Furthermore, her assumption that the people outside Santa Clara who sold them water were bandits appears somewhat arbitrary and suspicious. How did she know they were robbers? The farmhouse she "examined" from her coach was inhabited by: "Several men, with guns, [who] were walking up and down before the house – sporting-looking characters, but rather dirty – apparently either waiting for some expected game, or going in search of it. Women with rebosos, were carrying water, and walking amongst them. There were also a number of dogs" (p. 152). Is this a case of prejudice, seeing robbers where there were only scruffy foreigners from the lower echelons of society? The idea that they were either waiting for a victim to ride along or were about to set off to find one was created in Fanny's head. Equally bizarre, if these people were indeed bandits, is that they sold them water instead of burgling them.

The anecdote of the butler also raises questions. He was sacked on suspicion of having been a notorious thief, but he did not actually burgle the house. He was dismissed after an English friend claimed to have recognised him as a famous criminal when he had opened the door for her. At a time when there were no photographs of criminals in the press, how did the English friend recognise this notorious thief?

Fanny's grave fears of being assaulted were never actually realised. This she explained with a whole array of imaginative reasons. In one instance, she thought they were lucky, or that they benefited from having a priest with them: "we are probably indebted for our safe return more to 'good luck than good guidance;' or, perhaps, we owed it in part to the padre, for the robbers are shy at attacking either soldiers or priests, the first from fear, and the second from awe" (p. 97). How could Fanny know that thieves stood in awe of members of the Church? As will be seen below, if the léperos were capable of biting off the jewels from the Virgin, why were they going to view a priest with respect? In another case, she speculated that the invisible robbers had either not seen them, robbed enough that day, it being so late, or feared her husband might be armed: "either they had not observed us, or perhaps they thought that C_____n walking so late must have been armed; or perhaps, more charitable construction, they had profited by the solemnities of the day" (p. 140). On another occasion she came to the conclusion that the bandits could

tell that they were tourists and thus carried little of value on them: "the robbers [...] calculated that people who travel for pleasure are not likely to carry any great quantity of superfluous coin. Besides this, they are much [...] afraid of [...] well-armed farm servants" (p. 322). Once, she assumed they had not been assaulted because they travelled at dawn: "The earliness of the hour was probably our salvation" (p. 42). On a separate occasion she endowed the robbers with the supernatural talent of knowing who was worth robbing and who was not, and she was, fortunately, among the latter: "Our chief hope lay in that well-known miraculous knowledge which they possess as to the value of the travellers' luggage, which no doubt not only makes them aware that we are mere pilgrims for pleasure, and not fresh arrivals, laden with European commodities" (p. 339). On a different occasion, she thought that the capture of some robbers before they departed might have acted as a reassuring deterrent: "the fact that some of the robbers had been taken a few hours before, made it very unlikely that they would renew their attempts that day" (p. 342).

The question is not whether these Mexican bandits existed. They obviously did, just as there were robbers, criminals and highwaymen in Victorian Britain and in the United States. The issue at stake is whether Fanny, like her British predecessors and successors, let her fear, fantasy or prejudice overplay or distort the problem of crime and lawlessness in Mexico. The contrast between a reality in which Fanny and her husband were not assaulted and the obsessive account of her fears certainly suggests that she was exaggerating. Whether her exaggerated fear was the result of class or national prejudice is difficult to tell. In order to answer this particular aspect of the question, it is worth analysing how the bandits themselves were depicted, and how Fanny accounted for their prominent (inflated) existence in nineteenth century Mexico. In other words, are the bandits there because post-independent Mexico, or subsequently as developing Mexico, with its high levels of poverty and shocking wealth disparities, provides an environment that is prone to banditry and criminal activity? Or are the bandits there, from a British perspective, because criminality is an inherent Mexican trait, an expression of the country's "great under-drift of squalor and heavy, reptile-like evil", as D.H. Lawrence would have us believe.[26] As Siemens reminds us, "The stories [of robberies] became part of the denigration of all things Mexican".[27]

26 D.H. Lawrence, The Plumed Serpent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 28.
27 Siemens, Between the Summit and the Sea, p. 111.

Fanny attributed the high levels of crime in Mexico to the country's political turmoil and instability since independence. As she noted in a particularly telling passage:

> This pestilence of robbers, which infests the republic, has never been eradicated. They are in fact the growth of civil war. Sometimes in the guise of insurgents, taking an active part in the independence, they have independently laid waste the country, and robbed all whom they met. As expellers of the Spaniards, these armed bands infested the roads between Vera Cruz and the capital, ruined all commerce, and without any particular inquiry into political opinions, robbed and murdered in all directions. [...] [W]hatever measures have been taken at different times to eradicate this evil, its causes remain, and the idle and unprincipled will always take advantage of the disorganized state of the country, to obtain by force what they might gain by honest labour (p. 342).

The view that crime and revolutionary activity went hand in hand would be made more than apparent in her account of the pronunciamientos she witnessed first hand in the summers of 1840 and 1841: "the pronunciados, including the principal chiefs, are occupied in destroying everything within the palace – that the general archives and those of the ministers are torn in pieces [...] all united with the most noted robbers and public highwaymen" (p. 243); "The léperos seem to swarm in greater numbers than ever, and last evening two small shops were broken into and robbed" (p. 418).[28]

She was, however, prepared to accept that crime was not just a Mexican problem, and took on board Count ____'s view that "the city of London is full of organized gangs of ruffians, whom the laws cannot reach; and [...] English highwaymen and housebreakers are the most celebrated in the world" (p. 342). Nevertheless, despite her willingness to view crime in Mexico as part of a social rather than a cultural phenomenon, i.e., the effect of civil war and instability, and to accept that crime was also rampant elsewhere, there are two aspects of her portrayal of the bandits which awards them traits that are ostensibly and inherently Mexican. The paradox is that Fanny is capable, on the one hand, of adopting an Orientalist vision that romanticises the Mexican bandit and, on the other, perceiving them as the evil expression of a particular people who, being Mexican,

28 Greene often claims, in similar fashion, that the so-called revolutionaries of the 1910-30 period were nothing but bandits: "revolutionaries ([...] was the polite word for bandits" (The Lawless Roads, p. 45). Evelyn Waugh was no different: "There is always present in Mexico a considerable semi-bandit population who will join in any disturbance" (Robbery Under Law, p. 236).

could be shifty and unreliable, suspicious-looking and prone to criminal activity.

The Orientalist romanticised vision of the Mexican bandit is seen in the manner in which Fanny is quite happy to retell those anecdotes that show them as bizarrely chivalrous and considerate with some of their victims. For instance, as she notes when discussing one such example of Mexican bandit etiquette: "having completely stripped an English gentleman and his servant, and tied them both to a tree, observing that the man appeared particularly distressed at the loss of his master's spurs, they politely returned and laid the spurs beside the gentleman" (p. 343). Equally romantic is the anecdote she tells of how her friend, the Count C_____a took "as his porter the captain of a gang of robbers" after he promised to forgive him in exchange for him handing in all of his former acquaintances. With the deal done, the Count was confident enough to trust the robber to escort his wife back to the hacienda one night, which he did, as a matter of honour, without causing her any harm (p, 86). The idea that the robbers could be courteous with women is also noted as part of this romantic and highly improbable tradition: "C_____n asked him how the robbers treated the women when they were in their power. 'Las saludan', said he" (p. 44). There is no denying that this paradoxical dimension of Fanny's depiction of the Mexican bandit is a common feature in most British travelogues of Mexico. It was precisely this romantic model of the bandit that attracted Mrs. Alec Tweedie to go to Mexico in 1901: "Why did I choose Mexico? [...] was there not a spice of danger and romance yet lurking among its hills and valleys? There, men still carried arms".[29]

As was to be expected, when Fanny did come face to face with a real bandit and murderer, captured, chained and escorted to his execution alongside her carriage, she did not romanticise him. The robber had a "wild and striking figure and countenance. He wore a dark-coloured blanket, and a black hat, the broad leaf of which was slouched over his face, which was the colour of death, while his eyes seemed to belong to a tiger or other beast of prey" (p. 485). Unable to tell what the colour of death is, the choice of word is interesting because of the image it creates, associating the tones of the criminal's skin with his murderous intent. His eyes are not human either and are equated with those of a predator. Evidently we should not overemphasize her portrayal of this particular "real" bandit or imply that he represented in any way Fanny's view of a typical Mexican. If there is a constant in her description of criminal Mexican eyes, these are "suspicious-looking" rather than predator-like. The

29 Mrs. Alec Tweedie, Mexico As I Saw It (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1902), p. 1.

landlord of the inn they stayed at in Perote was one of several "suspicious-looking" and sinister characters they encountered during their travels (p. 40). However, the criminal's costume is distinctively Mexican – the "dark-coloured blanket", and as she argues elsewhere, Mexican clothes were perfectly suited to criminal activity: "sarape and reboso afford for concealing large knives about the person, as also for enveloping both face and figure so as to be scarcely recognizable" (p. 187). The suggestion is evident: either Mexicans purposefully make clothes that assist them with their criminal pursuits, or find ways of using their national costumes to do so.

The association between Mexican identity and crime is more evident in some of Fanny's asides. When she talks of Mexican servants being "an unfailing source of complaint even amongst Mexicans" because of their "addiction to stealing" (p. 183), it is the fact that they are Mexican and addicted to crime that provides us with an insight into her arguable British prejudice. It is worth recalling here, her comment on those well-trained English servants.

In a separate passage, the fact that a Mexican lépero showed no respect even for a sacred object such as the Virgin of Los Remedios, and was adept, even ingenious, at stealing from it, is also suggestive: "On one occasion a crowd of léperos being collected, and the image carried round to be kissed, one of them, affecting intense devotion, bit off the large pearl that adorned her dress in front, and before the theft was discovered, he had mingled with the crowd and escaped" (p. 149). The suggestion is that Mexicans are ingeniously deceptive and criminal by nature, and do not respect anything.

We are certainly given a strong sense in Life in Mexico that the Republic in the early 1840s was a violent society where people had become accustomed to witnessing robberies and murders on a daily basis.[30] Fanny was shocked that bystanders witnessed a murder near her house "with their usual placid smile of indifference", and that "No sensation was excited by this, which is an everyday occurrence". She herself had seen "a dead man lying near the Longa (the Exchange) and nobody took any notice of him" (p. 108). However, the strongest signal that Fanny provides that criminality is a Mexican trait arises not so much from her depiction of the robberies committed by the less privileged, but by her portrayal of the criminal activities indulged in by the more affluent Mexicans.

30 D.H. Lawrence's depiction of Mexico City in the 1920s in the opening chapters of The Plumed Serpent is certainly one of a menacing and dangerous city. Greene went to the extreme of stressing that Mexican society was violent, uncaring, and full of hate: "childhood was no doubt crippled – in the Mexican way of the pistol shot and the crooked judge and the cock-fight and nobody caring for another's life"; "No hope anywhere: I have never been in a country where you are more aware all the time of hate", The Lawless Roads, pp. 73 and 127, respectively.

THE BANDITS ARE NOT POOR, THEY ARE MEXICAN

In the liberal tradition, criminal activity is generally explained in social and environmental terms. In other words, criminals are not inherently evil, their social context or habitat, or their own personal misfortunes, have made them the way they are. It follows on from this that whilst a liberal society does not and cannot condone crime, its institutions will seek to correct and prevent it by understanding and addressing its causes, and by seeking to help the captured criminal correct his or her erring ways. This outlook will tend to pinpoint the history of deprivation of most criminals as the root of their unlawfulness and deviancy. How can someone with little or no education, who can barely make ends meet or survive in an uncaring and unequal society, become a law-abiding citizen? As long as great wealth disparities exist, and there is an underclass that is forced into social and moral dissolution, robberies and other criminal activities will be common. Crime is thus a social problem that transcends national identities. The deprived and underprivileged, whether it is in Payno's Mexico City or Charles Dickens' London, will resort to crime because there is no other option. However, how does this understanding of crime explain the robberies committed by members of the privileged classes? In the British travelogue of Mexico, the inferred explanation is generally cultural.

Corruption thus becomes a cultural referent. Presidents who embezzle government funds, corrupt officials, la mordida, untrustworthy policemen: the Mexican world that emerges in most British narratives and travelogues is lawless at the core.[31] It is not just a poor country where the deprived resort to robbery to survive. It is a country that, to quote Evelyn Waugh: "has known nothing but pillage, graft and degeneration", "used to misgovernment".[32]

Fanny, unlike Waugh and several other British travellers, does not, at any point, rant about the barbarous nature of the Mexican people. However, she does tell several anecdotes in her travelogue which portray a number of affluent Mexicans as either being prone to criminal activity, or in collusion with criminals. We hear of a judge "engaged with some suspicious-looking individuals", "completely hand in glove" with them (pp. 155-156), and are led to develop a rather critical view of the Mexican legal system, where criminals, lawyers, and judges are all part of the same family, regardless of their different social backgrounds.

31 To quote Greene, once more: "the animal faces of the men – it wasn't like law and order so much as banditry. The police were the lowest of the population: you had to look for honesty on the faces of the men and women waiting to be fined or blackguarded" (The Lawless Roads, p. 117).

32 Evelyn Waugh, Robbery Under Law, p. 76.

We learn of one hacienda administrator who had come to the conclusion after years of fending off robbers, that "he had some thoughts of joining the robbers himself, as they were the only persons in the republic protected by the government" (p. 155). In other words, it is not just the Mexican legal system that protects and participates in criminal activity, it is the government as well.

It is in this vein that Fanny recounts how a former president told his aide-de-camp how he intended to transport a considerable sum of money to Veracruz, concealed in the most obscure of places, and how the next day the "coach was attacked, and, strange to say, the robbers singled out" all the places where the money was hidden. Not surprisingly, she notes that the "captain of the robbers, though somewhat disguised, bore a striking general resemblance to the president's aide-de-camp" (pp. 97-98). The suggestion is that in Mexico you cannot trust anybody, not even your aide-de-camp. It does not matter whether you are dealing with rich or poor Mexicans, they are all robbers at heart. This is a view Waugh would develop forcefully in his 1939 travelogue, stressing a belief in "nationality; not in terms of race or of divine commissions for world conquest, but simply this: [...] organise[d] into communities according to its geographical distribution; [...] sharing a common history develop[ing] common characteristics".[33] In the case of Mexico, its geographical distribution and common history had led to particularly unsavoury criminal characteristics.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS VISION

It is probably too early to propose any firm conclusions. At one level, a study of Fanny's development of the topos of banditry and its exaggerated presence in her travelogue, juxtaposed with her lack of actual encounters, serves to remind us that we need to read her testimony with a pinch of salt. It may be wise, moreover, to extend this wariness regarding her judgement on Mexican crime and criminality to other themes and topoi developed in Life in Mexico. At another level, issues of intertextuality and subsequent influence merit consideration. The tendency of travellers to read travelogues of the countries they visit warrants further study. Waugh had read D.H. Lawrence's The Plumed Serpent (1926) and Graham Greene's The Lawless Roads (1939) before travelling to Mexico, or writing his own travelogue. How many subsequent British travellers disembarked in Veracruz with Fanny's book in their luggage? How did her account affect, inform or mould their view? Did subsequent travellers seek out

33 Ibid, p. 17.

the topos of the bandit because of its prominence in her and other accounts, creating a reiterated theme in all British travelogues of Mexico despite the fact that they were coming from such violent cities as London or Edinburgh, home to Sherlock Holmes, Jack the Ripper, Mrs. Marple, and Detective Inspector John Rebus.

Needless to say, the attraction of any genre is its familiarity, the expected repetition of a number of tropes and rhetorical devices. The reader seeking texts that belong to a specific genre is invariably seeking the confirmation with variations of a well-known pattern. In the case of the romance genre, this will entail for instance, looking for a story in which a couple eventually end up together after overcoming a problem or a series of obstacles. Travel writing as a genre can also be seen to be formulaic. In the particular case of the British travelogue of Mexico, it is a genre that has come to include beyond the framework of an exotic and often uncomfortable journey in which the author is expected to offer general philosophical considerations as well as engaging observations of "the other", a number of recognisable topoi, namely: bandits, corrupt politicians, poor health and unhygienic settings, and political instability. Dismissive summaries of the country's history, a paradoxical approach towards the country's ruins and the indigenous past, and a propensity to highlight the quirkier aspects of the Republic's customs are also common traits of this very specific genre. Given the expectations any genre elicits and bearing in mind that the average reader seeks to see these satisfied (rather than subverted), it becomes obvious that once a genre has become established, the need to satisfy the expectation may take precedence over the desirability of presenting an honest account of the visited location. Once a particular topos has become an intrinsic element of a particular genre it will be hard to dispense with it, even if times have changed and the topos has ceased to exist or be important. It is impossible to know whether Fanny included so many references to banditry because the genre in itself elicited from her, consciously or not, a need to broach the subject. It was probably too early for the Mexican travelogue to have acquired an obvious generic formula. Nevertheless, it remains the case that she satisfied the genre-induced expectation of the existence of lawlessness and danger, and thus conformed with the common topoi that have consistently featured in that genealogy of British travel writing about Mexico.

One obvious consequence of this reiterated topos in British accounts of Mexican society may have been a propensity on the part of the Foreign Office, (if only we could prove that its decision-makers were influenced by reading these accounts), to advocate gunboat diplomacy, mano dura, and support authoritarian governments and proposals in the region. Lord Palmerston famously said in 1850 referring to China, Portugal and South America: "these half civilised governments [...] all require a dressing

down every eight to ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive any impression that will last longer than some such period and warning is of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the stick but actually feel it on their shoulders".[34]

If you cannot trust the Mexicans because they are all thieves – they are born that way – then you need to treat them like you treat criminals – punishing them, disciplining them, telling them what to do because they cannot be left to their own devices.

CONCLUSION

It would be wrong, however, to argue that Fanny was in favour of promoting British military intervention in Mexico. What is more, although her exaggerated treatment of banditry and her occasional endorsement of an essentialist view that equated criminality with Mexican identity conformed with the norms found in the majority of British travel writing about Mexico, there are important passages in her text that arguably actually subvert these expectations, and in so doing, nuance our expectation of finding blunt imperial prejudice in her work. As noted earlier, the longer Fanny stayed in Mexico, the fonder she became of the country and its people, and the more subtle and perceptive became her observations of Mexican society. Perhaps more importantly, given what has been said so far about her treatment of the topos of the bandit, she actually came close to recognising that there might have been an element of paranoia in her pervasive fear of bandits, when she admitted that following the failed break in into her house, the maids were constantly hearing and seeing thieves: "for one real attempt to enter the house, invariably gives rise to a thousand imaginary attacks and fanciful alarms" (p. 146). Although she and her husband hired two soldiers "to keep off the more ordinary robbers", she did recognise that many of the "alarms and rumours in our house concerning robbers" were if not "wholly false", certainly "exaggerated" (p. 111).

Worthy of note is that this recognition would be echoed in other travelogues written by women, hinting at the fact that a number of British travellers were aware that their hypersensitivity towards the question of banditry was, to a certain degree, unsubstantiated or excessive. Mrs Alec Tweedie, for instance, admitted as much when she laughed at herself for not having been able to get to sleep for fear of being attacked: "It was close

34 Quoted in Rory Miller, Britain and Latin America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (London and New York: Longman, 1993), p. 51.

on midnight, there was not even a moon, and everything looked so black and strange that visions of dusky Mexican Indians with stiletto knives, pistols, long swords and umbrella-like hats – all of which I had noticed on the station platform – rose before me. Almost ashamed to own my fear – I was afraid, for the croaking of those millions of crickets".[35]

Fanny's propensity, like that of so many other British travellers, to overplay her depictions of criminal behaviour, in part because it makes for a more exciting or dramatic text, probably did have sinister consequences. At one level she conformed with a prejudiced tradition, repeated the expected mantra, and in so doing perpetuated an understanding of Mexican society that was mistrustful of its perceived innate criminal tendencies. And yet, on the other hand, she distanced herself from a distinctly British overview through her Scottish references, came to stress a profound affection for the Republic, and eventually admitted that not only had her first impressions been hasty and consequently inaccurate and misleading, but that the rumours of banditry were generally exaggerated, imaginary or fanciful. It is this paradoxical and ambivalent aspect of her travelogue that deserves further thought as it hints at the problems of embracing too generalised an understanding of Western travel writing. Not all Britons who went to or wrote about Mexico saw the country in terms of filth, defilement and immorality. Some were capable of questioning their prejudiced generic judgements even as they formulated them and, in so doing, recognised that there was prejudice, that the tendency to debase Mexican culture was misguided as well as ill-informed, and that were Mexico to enjoy a period of peace and stability, its people would no longer have to resort to crime to survive.

This essay may not have proven that Fanny's view was as prejudiced as might have been expected, or as characteristically British as may have been thought. Neither has it demonstrated that her travelogue was devoid of prejudice or transparently subversive. However, it has, in muddying the waters, shown that her account of Mexico in the early 1840s was more nuanced and subtle than could have been originally thought, and in so doing, leaves open the question as to whether there were other similar receptive British portrayals of their Mexican others.[36] Much in the way that Fanny found that her first impressions of Mexico were quite plainly wrong, the reader of her travelogue is left with the thought that

35 Tweedie, Mexico As I Saw It, p. 19.

36 It is interesting that in Claire Lindsay's recent article on Life in Mexico she also comes to the conclusion that Fanny's writing defies easy categorisation because she: "occupies a complex subject position in which she effectively traverses or transgresses several boundaries at once: in terms of her gender and national identity as a Scottish woman travelling in postcolonial Mexico as well as in terms of class and national identity through her betrothal to her Spanish ambassador husband". See Lindsay, "Postcolonial Anxieties", p. 182.

he or she was perhaps too hasty in assuming that it would provide a straightforward example of British imperial prejudice. To conclude with Fanny's own words: "It is like judging of individuals by their physiognomy and manners, without having had time to study their character. We all do so more or less, but how frequently we find ourselves deceived!" (p. 528).

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