

The Mexican Character

Joel Poinsett

Today, Joel Roberts Poinsett's chief claim to fame in the United States is as the man who brought home the Mexican "Christmas flower," which came to be called the poinsettia. Despite this innocent association, however, few figures in Mexican history have excited quite such passionate controversy. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, Poinsett (177-1851) first became involved in Latin American affairs in 1811 as special envoy from President James Monroe to Chile. Returning to the United States in 1813, he pursued a political career in the South Carolina legislature and in the U.S. House of Representatives, to which he was elected in 1821. In 1822 he traveled to the Mexico of Agustin Iturbide and authored a short book on the subject, Notes on Mexico. In 1825 he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. He later would serve as Secretary of War in the cabinet of President Martin Van Buren.

From the outset of his tenure as ambassador to Mexico, Poinsett was an outspoken proponent of U.S.-style liberalism: decentralized, constitutional, republican government; anticlericalism; and free trade. A substantial number of influential Mexicans found such activity decidedly pernicious, and their antipathy toward him was exacerbated by the fact that the ambassador advocated extending the southern boundary of the United States to the Rio Grande. Poinsett found like-minded cohorts in the York Rite Masonic Lodge, which he helped to organise in Mexico. The York Rite Masons (or Yorkinos) were rivals of the Scottish Rite Masons (or Escoceses), and the two lodges increasingly emerged as bitter, secretive political clubs. The sub rosa nature of these political organisations was conducive to conspiratorial thinking, and Conservative Escoceses became increasingly convinced that Poinsett was a subversive foreign agent seeking deliberately to weaken and undermine Mexico.

As will be seen from the following excerpt from an 1829 letter to Secretary of State Martin Van Buren, Poinsett had a pessimistic view of the Mexican character and of the nation's potential for progress. Poinsett's generalisations might serve as a compendium of North American stereotypes of Mexicans to this day.

The character of this people cannot be understood, nor the causes of their present condition be fully developed without recurring to the oppression under which they formerly laboured. It would lead you into error to compare them with the free and civilized nations of America and Europe in the Nineteenth Century. They started from a period nearer to the age of Charles the fifth, and it is even a matter of some doubt whether this Nation had advanced one step in knowledge and civilization, from the time of the conquest to the moment of declaring themselves Independent. No portion of the Spanish dominions in America was watched over by the Mother Country with such jealous care as Mexico. Its comparatively dense population, its extensive and fertile territory, its rich and varied productions, and especially its mineral wealth, rendered it a source of great profit to Spain; while the history of the ancient splendour of Mexico, and the glory of its conquest could not fail to enhance the value of its possession in the eyes of that chivalrous people. In order to preserve that possession every precaution was taken that human prudence could devise to prevent the access of strangers to Mexico and to keep the people in profound ignorance of their own

strength and resources as well as of their relative position with regard to other Nations.. ..

The nobility and gentry then as now, inhabited spacious hotels, built after the fashion of those of the mother Country, solid and substantial; but still more destitute of all comfort or convenience. Their style of living was not generous or hospitable, although they sometimes gave costly and ostentatious entertainments. From their absurd pretensions to rank and from their unmeaning jealousy of each other, there never did exist that social intercourse among the higher orders, which in every other Country forms the chief charm of life. Here every man of distinction considered it beneath his dignity to visit his friends or neighbours, and remained in his own house, where in a large gloomy apartment dimly lighted and miserably furnished he received a few visitors of inferior rank who formed his tertulia [social gathering] of every night. It is not to be wondered at therefore that the sons of these men, equally uneducated with themselves, fled from the gloomy mansions of their fathers to the Theatre, the coffee houses or the gambling table; and this circumstance united to the absence of all excitement to industry, from the preference given by the Council of the Indies to Europeans for all appointments, rendered the Aristocracy of Mexico an ignorant and immoral race. The same state of society existed among the higher orders of the clergy and marked their character in the same unfavorable manner. The regular clergy formed from the very dregs of the people, was then and is now disgustingly debauched and ignorant. They have lost the influence they formerly possessed over the common people, and so sensible are they of the universal contempt which they have brought upon themselves by their unworthy conduct, that they would not oppose a thorough reform of their orders if the Government had courage to attempt it.

But what more particularly distinguishes the condition of the people in the Spanish colonies is the character of the labouring classes. That portion of America conquered by Spain was inhabited by a people in a high state of civilization for the age in which they lived. The higher classes fell [as] a sacrifice to the cruelty and rapacity of their Conquerors, and the common people were reduced to a state of the most abject slavery. The existence of this degraded race had a singular effect upon the character of the Spanish Settler. The poorest white man scorned to be placed on a level with the unfortunate Indian. His colour ennobled him, and Spaniards and their descendants would have perished rather than degrade their caste in America by working in the field, or by following any other laborious occupation in which the Indians are habitually employed. Here therefore is wanting that portion of a community which forms the strength of every nation, but especially of a Republic, a free and virtuous peasantry. The Indians cannot as yet be regarded in that light. They are laborious, patient and submissive, but are lamentably ignorant. They are emerging slowly from the wretched state to which they had been reduced; but they must be educated and released from the gross superstition under which they now labour before they can be expected to feel an interest in public affairs. The only political feeling these people now possess is a bitter hatred of the Spaniards or Gachupines as they call them, a hatred which has never ceased to exist, and which has been kept alive both by tradition and by constantly recurring instances of cruelty and oppression. Less attention has been paid by this Government to the establishment of primary schools than in any other part of Spanish America. This has been a lamentable oversight, for not only do the great mass of the population require to be educated in order that the real principles of a representative Government may be

carried fully into operation; but to inspire them with a decent pride and to induce them to more constant labour and to employ their earnings in rendering their habitations comfortable and in purchasing clothing for themselves and their families. At present seven eighths of the population live in wretched hovels destitute of the most ordinary conveniences. Their only furniture a few coarse mats to sit and sleep on, their food indian corn, pepper and pulse,¹ and their clothing miserably coarse and scanty. It is not that the low price of labor prevents them from earning a more comfortable subsistence in spite of the numerous festivals in each year, but they either gamble away their money, or employ it in pageants of the Catholic Church, in which pagan and Christian rites are strangely mingled. All these evils, if not cured entirely, would be greatly mitigated by education. . . .

It appears then that the successful precautions taken by Spain to prevent all intercourse between Mexico and other Countries prevented the light of knowledge from penetrating into this Country. Not only were the Mexicans deprived of the means of keeping pace with the rapid progress of knowledge in other Countries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; but the peculiar circumstances in which they were placed scarcely allowed them to retain the station they occupied at the time of the conquest. The emigrants from Spain who alone were permitted to settle in the Country were among the most ignorant and vicious of that people, who are notoriously a century behind the rest of Christian Europe. They were for the most part the favorites of great men, and came to lord over the creole, to occupy all the offices of honor and emolument and to keep the natives in subjection. As has been already remarked, one mode of effecting this object was to keep them even more ignorant than they were themselves. They were assisted in their efforts to this effect by a variety of causes. The want of means of acquiring knowledge, the absence of all excitement to exertion, the facility of procuring the means of subsistence almost without labour, a mild and enervating climate and their constant intercourse with the aborigines, who were and still are degraded to the very lowest class of human beings, all contributed to render the Mexicans a more ignorant and debauched people than their ancestors had been. Another cause operated still more strongly to produce this effect. The puerile ceremonies of their worship, and the excessive ignorance and shocking profligacy of the clergy. The Creoles were taught from their infancy to revere their pastors as superior beings and it is not therefore surprising that their pernicious example should have produced such melancholy results. When therefore we examine the actual condition of this people, we ought always to bear in mind the point from which they set out. They were in every respect, far behind the mother Country which is notoriously very inferior in moral improvement to all other Nations. They were not even equal to the other Spanish colonies in America, because their comparative importance and their vicinity to the United States rendered Spain more vigilant in preventing all intercourse with foreigners as well as the introduction of all works, which could enlighten their minds and inspire them with liberal ideas.

Note

i. "Pulse" probably refers to *pulque*, a popular beverage made from the fermented juice of the century plant. *Ed.*

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