

## The Glorious Revolution of 1844

Guillermo Prieto

Anastasio Bustamante, the president against whom the 1840 rebellion was fought, succumbed to a successful rebellion the following year. This one resulted in the provisional presidency of Antonio López de Santa Anna, Mexico's most durable caudillo. Santa Anna ruled in very intemperate and imperious fashion, disbanding Congress when it tried to pass a constitution guaranteeing human rights and an end to special privileges and monopolies, and granting himself as president, powers that were practically absolute. The rebellion against Santa Anna, declared in 1844, went quickly and smoothly, ending in his arrest and, supposedly, permanent exile (though in fact, he would continue to be a force in Mexican politics for another ten years).

The following excerpt, by one of Santa Anna's many detractors, describes the decadence of Santa Anna's "Court," and celebrates the 1844 rebellion (in the hyperbolic fashion of the time) as one of the purest and noblest in Mexico's history. Guillermo Prieto (1818-1897) was a poet, educator, historian, and political supporter of liberal causes. He would later act as finance minister in the Liberal government of Benito Juárez.

The peculiar conditions that our society inherited from colonial tradition meant that all power and life were centered in Mexico City. The city was the source of jobs and favors, the wellspring of business, the center of entertainment and fashion, the meeting place for wealthy people from all over, and the ledger where civilization recorded its achievements and treasures.

The court of Santa Anna had much lustre, and although discontent and misery reigned in the provinces, around the dictator there were daily dances and banquets, and the meetings in the home of Señora Vallejos in San Angel were among the best and most exclusive ever seen in Mexico. Of course, everything was designed to suit the tastes of the arbiter of the country's destiny.

Were it possible to present a scene which would reveal Mexico at a single glance, it would have to be the Easter week festivities in San Agustín de las Cuevas. There were grand church celebrations, with bells chiming, fireworks, and chamber music. There were taverns, ice-houses, inns, and shops every-

where; dice games and roulette wheels, card games and little colored balls . . . games with all their many complications and tricks. There were banners hung between the rooftops of the *pulquerías* and cantinas bearing announcements of all kinds.

At the outskirts of town, under the trees or among the workers' huts, there were mules, horses, coaches, small canopied carriages and carts, all bearing wanton, angry people. On the sidewalks and in the streets, there were nothing but dense crowds; one would be inundated, as if swimming in a sea of people dressed in all colors, wearing button-down trousers, long overcoats, large hats—the ridged hats of the priests, the round hats of the friars, and the straw hats of the lower-class people.

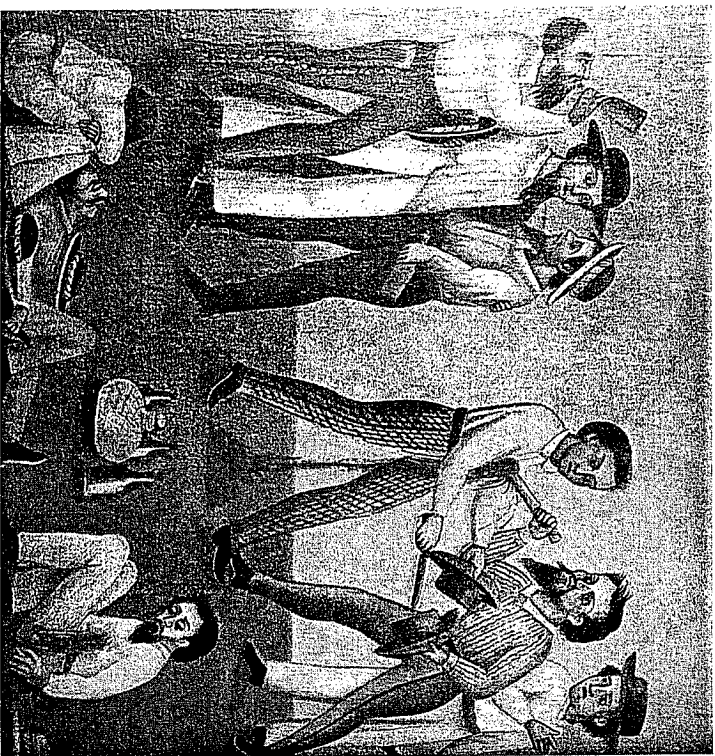
There were games of monte like the one at the Hospicio, where they displayed a large slab of gold weighing many ounces and had a pot of a hundred thousand pesos. The gaming salon opened onto a delightful flower garden, full of leafy fruit trees and exquisite flowers, surrounded by crystalline fountains and enchanting waterspouts. Under the trees were tables with liquors and refreshments, and in the tavern lunches and magnificent meals were always served, along with chocolates, coffee, sweets, and whatever whetted the appetites of the opulent gamblers.

The trick was to bet enormous sums, and to greet loss with studied indifference. Thus, stories were told of Manuelito Rodríguez, who one Easter, with his profit from selling a pair of scissors, won two hundred thousand pesos playing *la dobla*; and of Matías Royuela, who once, while chatting away, placed a twenty thousand peso bet; when it was announced that he had lost, he did not for one moment interrupt the interesting tale with which he was regaling his friends.

The most illustrious members of society, eminent figures in the court and the Church, in public affairs and commerce, gave themselves over to the gambler's cult. The shepherds of souls, along with everyone else, gathered round the green felt. So did the fathers of families and merchants jealous of their credit. There was one hacendado who condemned himself to privations for an entire year just so he could award himself the pleasure of losing 40 or 50 thousand pesos at the Easter festivities de San Agustín.

The center of this frantic revel was the plaza, with its large building containing an ice-house, an inn, public and private games, and on the ground floor, the great plaza of fighting cocks where huge sums were ventured.

Santa Anna was the heart and soul of this emporium of disorder and excess. It was something to see him at the fights, surrounded by the money-lending potentates, throwing down his bets, taking other people's money, mingling with minor employees and even with inferior officers, he borrowed money



Drunkness, murder, and mayhem as depicted by an anonymous nineteenth-century Mexican artist. (Detail of a painting, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, collection Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno, Mexico City)

and did not repay it, and the people applauded him as though they were unworthy of such favors. And when the pace flagged, the fairer sex would bestow their smiles and join Santa Anna in his pranks. The cockfights presented the most repugnant of spectacles, full of those lawless *léperos*, provocateurs and cheats, shouting, fighting, and always passing around pitchers and bowls of pulque.

It was there that Santa Anna would preside. He knew the gamecock from Tlaxcalapán and the one from San Antonio el Pelón or Tequixquítapán; he would set the rules for the fight, and check the birds to see that the spurs were fitted right.

There were moments when the emcee's cries, the music, the applause and jeers were overwhelming, when drunkards with roosters under their arms

rubbed elbows with the great Supreme Chief. In such surroundings, Santa Anna would laugh and was truly in his glory. . . .

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ALTHOUGH THESE DAYS were full of political events, neither those events nor the commentaries upon them were matters for serious study or even close attention. Foreigners saw to their businesses and interests, priests and the faithful clung to their beliefs or so-called traditions, exploiting the fear of purgatory; and the carriage rolled on, among political movements of lawyers without clients, idle and diffident people, reckless and vicious mobs, all vying, with greater or lesser success, for the spoils of government jobs, unsunious lending operations, and other contemptible industries, all seeming to say "I will take from you and give to me. . . . You've already eaten, so get out of here, we're hungry."

Thus, whenever someone spoke of politics to J. Valente Baz, he would say: "Bah! Politics! Politics is like a lousy beanery that's been invaded by some audacious customers who threaten the hostess with importunings and insults. At the door to this miserable beanery stands a hungry crowd, who at first watch the diners in silent envy, then grow irritable and agitated, then finally drive the diners out and install themselves in their place, sitting down to satisfy their appetites. But they don't count on the fact that the ones who are before will return after a while, and the same scene is repeated, for all the same reasons."

Of course, as the scene changes, so does the decor: On one side are crucifixes and candlesticks, three-cocked hats, counts and marquesses with their retinues of monks, ascetics, confraternities, brotherhoods, etc., etc.; and on the other are the national guardsmen, impromptu heretics, every patriotic booster with his "plan," and every *sans culotte* planning to disembowel monks, kill nuns, clear away the cobwebs of superstition, and declare heaven itself to be national property, exiling the saints, angels and seraphim and converting it into a place of fandangos, drunken sprees, and disorders.

So most people shielded themselves from politics as against a virus carried by the inhabitants of the moon. Ladies and gentlemen of business deemed it to their credit to say that they understood nothing of politics, while government employees and military men, with the utmost cynicism, boasted that they would support whoever paid them, putting aside their conscience and their pride.

There were newspapers, like the *Linna de Vulcano de los Escosaces*, edited by Luis Espino, and *El Mexicano*, by Pablo Sánchez, a military man employed in the Ministry of War . . . ; and yet these were very few, and if one of them

had two hundred subscribers they thought it a marvel, which should give an idea of the trends in opinion and of the attention merited by political events. . . .

In the dark depths of society, fanaticism ruled in close alliance with soldiers and the old *encomenderos*-turned-soldiers. Notions of the sciences and social sciences appeared only intermittently in isolated groups, or rather among separate and undistinguished individuals. They were like buried treasures, or fertile seeds locked up in sterile boxes. Knowledge was like wealth held in gold and silver ingots which were owned by a few powerful people, when what was needed was liquid currency—not a handful of wealthy people, but many people with money to provide for their urgent needs. . . . It was necessary to divulge knowledge, to turn vast wealth into small change.

WHILE THE PEOPLE sought solace, and while the hero [Santa Anna] surrounded himself with noisy merriment, in very hushed voices people would call their Caesar "the fifteen claws," a reference to his love of money. In Congress, unnoticed, a determined and conscientious opposition movement took shape, aiming to vindicate rights and honor, among good patriots who would eventually make the glorious revolution of December 6, [1844]. . . .

The revolution of December 6, which can be called popular *par excellence*, which began in the most obscure neighborhoods and spread to the highest levels of society, was, so to speak, prepared, nurtured, and determined by Santa Anna, by a bloody and ridiculous Caesarism, and by that stupid militarism that gave brute force preponderance over the sacred rights of man.

And the most remarkable thing was the way those who believed themselves to be men of principle would change their colors at a whim. Although this was due in large part to their great ignorance, it was also due to Santa Anna, who was a Proteus, assuming all shapes and enlisting under all banners, now casually joining the men of aristocracy and privilege, now joining the liberals who proclaimed equality, religious toleration, and the ideas of Parias, without ever properly understanding those ideas. The revelry in the palace, the despotism of satraps, the robbery of the money-lender, the whore, the gambler. . . . all helped to determine that celebrated revolution.

Discontent burned in every corner of the country, and the very reticence of the stifled press was like oil that silently ignites a bonfire. [General Valentín] Canalizo, who was Santa Anna's toy soldier [vice-president], authorized all the arbitrary measures, even taking command of the Army in outrageous defiance of the law, ordering that the keys to Congress be confiscated, and demanding that everyone swear obedience to the dictatorial order of November 29, which immediately preceded the coup d'état.

Congress adopted a resolute and praiseworthy attitude. The deputies Alas and Llaca made accusations against Canalizo and Santa Anna.

Agitation spread violently, the Government employees and soldiers leading the revolt. . . . the powerful went through impotent convulsions, and Santa Anna, drunk with power and opulence, persisted in his scorn of the people and in his absurd faith in the use of force.

The most notable and visible personages in that revolution. . . . had already prepared the operation admirably. The newspaper *Siglo XIX* could be considered the protagonist of this glorious moment. . . .

Canalizo had gagged the press and ordered Congress closed; Santa Anna, at the head of the army, issued tyrannical orders, and the most casual happenstance had strong resonance as dawn broke on December 6, the day of the great popular revolution.

As soon as he heard of the rebellion, Canalizo, who was bold and reckless, ordered an attack on the [Congressional] Palace, an order that was not carried out thanks to the efficacious mediation of an army officer called Falcón, who, at great risk to his own life, lent a very valuable service.

The response inside the [Congressional] Palace was tumultuous. In the immense atrium of San Francisco, men gathered, armed with rifles, fire-locks, pistols, and sabers, assuming a warlike attitude. . . . Currents of people swelled by the moment till they covered the ground, swinging to and fro on the street-light poles. Impudent, wild eyes, bloodthirsty howls and rowdy laughs, straw hats and sparks flying through the air, disheveled hair, indescribable noises, all surging violently amid a moving forest of clubs, rifles, swords, hammers, and who knows what else.

Deputies and senators followed, bearing. The rabid crowd went to the theater and quickly demolished the plaster statue erected to Santa Anna. They ran furiously to the Pantheon of Santa Paula and with savage ferocity exhumed Santa Anna's leg, playing games with it and making it an object of ridicule; then they turned toward the Alameda, and when the gatekeeper stubbornly refused to open the gate, they tore the iron gates up from their foundations and bent them like tree branches felled by a mighty storm. Somehow they toppled the statue of Santa Anna in the Plaza del Volador off of its high column, smashing it on the ground.

Around four in the afternoon, in the midst of that inexpressable deluge, deputies and senators began a parade from San Francisco to the [Congressional] Palace. People stood on rooftops and balconies, others ran through the streets, among horses and carriages, steering a course through that turbulent river and drawing near to the fathers of the nation, shouting their names, waving their hats in the air, throwing down flowers.

"Look, that pale skinny guy, it's Laca." ... "Long live Laca!" ... "That guy who's walking half scooped over, who is he?" ... "He's the great Pedraza." ... "And him?" ... "Don Luis de la Rosa." ... "Long live Alas!"

The retinue arrived at the Palace. The crowd scattered in all directions, and an enormous group entered the Chamber, where the deputies and senators took their seats. The people wanted to tear up a large painting depicting Barradas's surrender in Tampico,<sup>1</sup> a work by the painter París, which featured General Santa Anna in the foreground. Laca opposed this because the painting was a national glory, and the people, with enchanting docility, obeyed and followed him, meek and genial as a fiery horse when it feels its owner's hand caress its neck.

At night there were cockfights and parties, unmarred by robberies, fights, and disorder. From Querétaro, Santa Anna cursed the rebels, even while the new Government in Mexico received a hail of letters pledging support.

#### Note

1. A reference to Santa Anna's defeat of the Spanish, who invaded Tampico under General Isidro Barradas in July 1829. *Et.*

## Décimas Dedicated to Santa Anna's Leg

### Anonymous

The ornate funeral ceremonies that General Santa Anna ordered performed in 1842 for his leg, which was lost fighting the French at the Battle of Veracruz in 1838, are often seen as the culmination of that caudillo's vainglory and megalomania. After being amputated, the leg spent four years buried at Santa Anna's hacienda, Manga de Clavo, in the state of Veracruz. When Santa Anna resumed the presidency in late 1841, he had the limb dug up, placed in a crystal vase, and taken amid a full military dress parade to Mexico City, where it was buried beneath an elaborate monument in the cemetery of Santa Paula. The funeral involved cannon salves, speeches, and poems in the general's honor. As recounted by Guillermo Prieto in the previous selection, irreverent crowds in 1844 demolished the monument, dug up the leg, and played games with it.

Such events provided grist for broadsides known as *décimas*, predecessors of the popular topical ballads known as *corridos*. *Décimas* were often satirical in tone, and they represented a variety of viewpoints. The following *décimas* present divergent viewpoints on the matter of Santa Anna's leg.

*Why should anyone criticize  
If a funeral is performed  
for the foot, arm, or hair  
of an illustrious General?*

*Passions always tarnish  
merit with malevolence  
and really do not wish  
true merit celebrated;  
So answer quickly  
and with confidence:  
Why should we not honor  
merit in the lifeless limb*