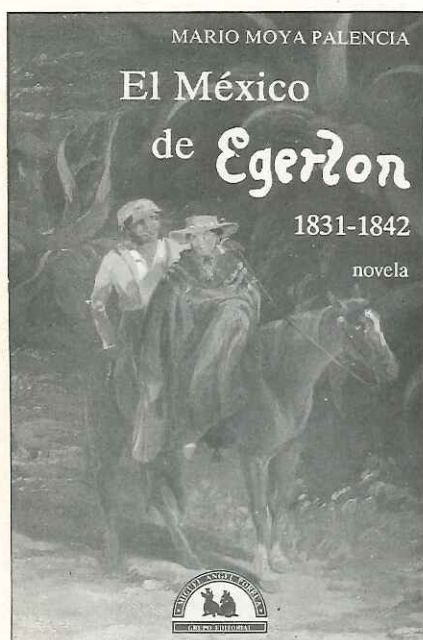


Egerton's Mexico

Mario Moya Palencia
 El México de Egerton
 Miguel Angel Porrúa
 México, 1991



The current surge in the amount of historical fiction in Mexico and in Latin America reflects a growing interest in the past. Recent work, such as novels by Carlos Fuentes (*The Campaign*), Fernando del Paso (*News from the Empire*) and Gabriel García Márquez (*The General in his Labyrinth*) reveal a concern with reconstructing our history, while searching for the essence of our identity as Latin Americans.

As we approach the Quincentennial, the time to "retell" our real history and not to simply review official and academic versions approaches. Historical novels allow us to learn about our past and identify with our heritage in an enjoyable

fashion. The genre demands that authors be historians and poets at the same time, since both knowledge and imagination are essential ingredients for success.

El México de Egerton (Egerton's Mexico) by Mario Moya Palencia examines one of the most mysterious events in nineteenth century Mexico: the brutal murder of the English landscape artist Daniel Thomas Egerton and his mistress, Agnes Edwards, on April 27, 1842. Egerton, author of *Views of Mexico*, lived in Mexico from 1831 to 1836, and upon his return to London he exhibited more than a hundred sanguine drawings he had done in Mexico.

Like Egerton, other artists visited Mexico during that period, such as Claudio Linati, who introduced lithography, Mauricio Ruguendas (or John Stephens), and Catherwood and Baron Friedrichsal, who brought photography to Mexico.

Moya Palencia uses Brian Nissen, a contemporary British artist, as the character who investigates the crime committed by a group of bandits, and meticulously reconstructs its development at *La Pila Vieja* (the old trough) on the way to the village of Nonoalco.

The detailed description of mid-nineteenth century Mexico, in depth research and the author's dry but poetic style make this book an absolute *tour de force* for understanding one of the periods least dealt with by our literature: the Santa Ana dictatorship. The period is unquestionably one of the most conflictive times in our history, rich in political and social significance.

The novel weaves realism, history, suspense and criminal investigation together. *Egerton's*

Mexico places us within the world of espionage in the midst of the Texas rebellion, under the weight of Santa Ana's iron rule, and in the atmosphere in which the double murder of Egerton and his lover, Agnes Edwards, created an enormous scandal.

In 1842 Mexico was an extremely violent place. Travel was threatened continually by bandits, such as those described by Manuel Payno in his novel, *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (The bandits of Río Frío), or Fanny Calderón de la Barca's *Life in Mexico*. Chaos, corruption and poverty were par for the course.

Moya's technique of switching between the present and the past creates a steady sense of counterpoint. He uses details effectively to build his plot: Egerton's astrological chart (Aries-Gemini), the bite mark on Agnes' belly and a guitar found on one of the murderers are a few of the gems he uses.

Egerton's Mexico reconstructs a real incident, speculates politically and develops a historical view, exhibiting the author's literary brilliance and historical knowledge. It might be compared to Fernando del Paso's novel about the period of the French Empire in Mexico or to Carlos Fuentes political novel *The Campaign*. Moya's bibliography is impressive, the evidence of in depth research, a vital component of any good historical novel.

Egerton's Mexico announces the arrival on the scene of a writer who can handle history and prose exquisitely without relinquishing the primary function of the novel, which is to amuse the reader, in the best sense of the word **M**

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