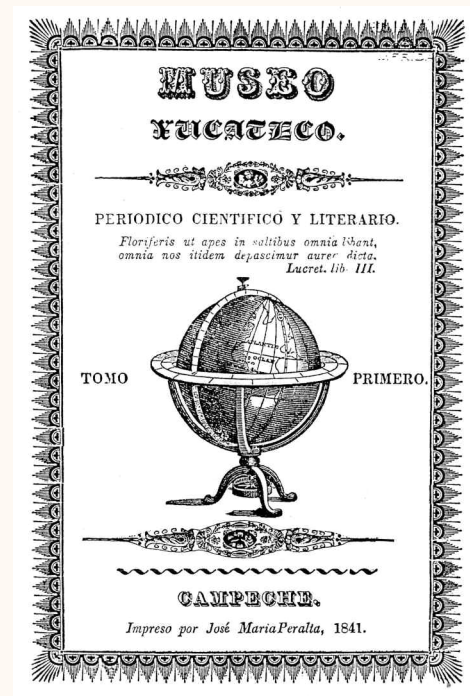


Nineteenth-Century Yucatán Regionalism And the Literary Press *El Museo Yucateco* and *El Registro Yucateco* (1841-1849)

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One of the most characteristic features of the history of nineteenth-century Yucatán is the emergence of a regionalist discourse. Its political expression in the 1840s was the aspiration to independence for the peninsula, and one of its main ideologues was the writer and jurist Justo Sierra O'Reilly. Considered the father of Yucatecan literature, O'Reilly introduced literary journalism to the peninsula when, together with Vicente Calero and Gerónimo Castillo, he founded *El Museo Yucateco* (1841-1842) and *El Registro Yucateco* (1845-1849). As writers, the three subscribed to the literary-political movement called romanticism,¹ which differed from country to country and often even within countries, because its starting point was to conceive of human groups as defined by geographical area, language and historical experience. This idea was not new; it had already been put forward during the Enlightenment. What was new was to think that peoples had a nature that could be explained by their own virtues. Thus, human society was presented as a homeland or nation.²

In that historical context, at the end of the 1830s, newspapers began to come out in Mexico proposing a systematic search for Mexican identity through literature, history and geography.³ It was a cultural undertaking promoting the idea of creating “virtues” to make Mexico a liberal nation with a federalist or centralist republican system. *El Mosaico Mexicano*, then, translated and reprinted articles from abroad, and, as far as was possible, tried to print original articles written by any author who would refer to matters pertaining to Mexico. This vision was surpassed in 1837 with *El Año Nue-*



vo, the official publication of the San Juan de Letrán Academy, which opted for publishing articles exclusively dealing with Mexican issues, written by Mexican authors.⁴

Alonso Sánchez has pointed to the fact that Ignacio Cumplido's 1843 decision to change the name of *Mosaico* to *El Museo Mexicano* meant going from an image made up of little pieces to a space designed to publicly present the sources for the history of Mexico.⁵ Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there is an immediate precedent for this illustrious editor's initiative: two years before, Sierra O'Reilly had launched *El Museo Yucateco*, which turned out to be an example of the kind of journalism that sought to give credence to the existence of a historical memory and a cultural heritage for a

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peripheral region of Mexico like the peninsula of Yucatán. The express objective was the need for a regional identity that could direct its political destiny.

Just like the editors of *El Mosaico Mexicano* and *El Año Nuevo* before them, for Sierra O'Reilly and his collaborators, the starting point was the idea that it was fundamental to undertake a "regeneration" in order to eradicate the "partisan spirit" after the federalist victory in the peninsula and the advent of a new administration that launched into re-defining the peninsula's constitutional and territorial framework based on its autonomy from the central government. This is why these journalists insisted on the need for constructing a Yucatecan identity by defining its "virtues" and promoting its historical, cultural and geographical characteristics. To do that, it was absolutely necessary to gather the geographical, economic and cultural data to be able to define the peninsula's history. They considered that it began with the unknown Mayan civilization, followed by the foundational conquest by Francisco de Montejo in the sixteenth century. Also, they thought that Yucatán's territory should include the entire peninsula, and therefore, the El Petén region of Guatemala.

So, in the same way that the nation was being built throughout Mexico, as evidenced in the press from the first half of the nineteenth century, Yucatán also had to visualize its future as a possible "sovereign nation."⁶ So, as businessmen and members of an elite, Sierra O'Reilly and his collaborators thought all projects for change began with communication, and that that was what literary journalism was useful for, an ideal instrument to disseminate the abstract idea of Yucatán as a "country."

In short, an analysis of the content of *El Museo Yucateco* and *El Registro Yucateco* shows how its publishers launched into the "reinvention" of Yucatán recreating the history of the peninsula, both to demand respect for the yearnings for autonomy within the Mexican federalist structure that emerged from the struggle for independence, and to foster the production of proto-nationalist elements of their own, reinforced by the political dynamic in the midst of which independence had been declared in the peninsula in 1821. Therefore, it was indispensable to make the pages of both newspapers "places of memory," that would demonstrate this will to construct politically that identity.⁷

This implied the quest for Yucatán's own historical timeline, based on transcribing colonial documents, publishing geographical chronicles, evoking the biographies of public

Justo Sierra O'Reilly (1817-1861) was born in Tixcaltuyú and died in Mérida, Yucatán. He was a politician, jurist, writer and journalist. He was married to Concepción Méndez Echazarreta, the daughter of the state governor, Santiago Méndez Ibarra. As an editor, he distinguished himself publishing the newspapers *El Espíritu del siglo* (The Spirit of the Century), *El Museo Yucateco* (The Yucatán Museum), *El Registro Yucateco* (The Yucatán Register), *El Fénix* (The Phoenix) and *La Unión liberal* (The Liberal Union). He also published the short novels *El filibustero* (The Filibusterer) and *Doña Felipa Zanabria*; but his main literary works were *Un año en el hospital de San Lázaro* (A Year in Saint Lazarus Hospital) and *La hija del judío* (The Jew's Daughter) and his essay *Los indios de Yucatán. Consideraciones históricas sobre la influencia del elemento indígena en la organización social del país* (The Indians of Yucatán. Historical Considerations about the Influence of the Indigenous in the Country's Social Organization). He translated John L. Stephens' famous book *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. In the field of politics, he was elected several times to be deputy and, above all, represented Yucatán in the accords with Tabasco in 1841, the Treaties with Mexico (1842), and before the United States in 1847, which he wrote about in his *Diario de nuestro viaje a los Estados Unidos* (Journal of Our Trip to the United States). At the end of his life, he wrote a draft Mexican Civil Code (1859-1860).

El Museo Yucateco (The Yucatán Museum) was printed in Campeche by José María Peralta. It stopped coming out because of the political situation created by General Santa Anna's plans to militarily invade the peninsula in the second half of 1842. This led Sierra O'Reilly to accept working together with his father-in-law, Governor Santiago Méndez

El Registro Yucateco (The Yucatán Register) was printed in Mérida by Jerónimo Castillo Lénard, except the last issues, which were printed in Campeche by Joaquín Castillo Peraza. The outbreak of the Caste War in early 1847 interrupted its publication for two years, which meant that the fourth volume was completed in late 1849 with the last issues.

men and asking that monuments be raised in their honor, as well as resorting to the use of legend and peninsular traditions to produce a literature specific to the region. In addition, they promoted the creation of museums to preserve the testimonies of Mayan civilization, considered an element that differentiated the area from the Aztec civilization, which at that time was beginning to be the cornerstone of Mexican nationalism. In short, both newspapers evidence a regionalist pedagogy destined to harmonize among Yucatecans the ideas

underlying their regionalist vision through essays, novels in installments, and poems dealing with a historically concrete, specific people.

However, Sierra O'Reilly and his collaborators' romantic influence had its limits, since its main characteristic, idealizing the primitive peoples, was biased by the reality of the peninsular ideology with regard to inter-ethnic relations. Thus, although they dedicated a large number of pages to praising the architectural wonders of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and other Mayan cities and to analyzing their amazing mathematical bases, they ended by defending a historical-degenerative position when they refer to the situation of their indigenous contemporaries. In this view, the "Indians" were not familiar with or had long forgotten the writing and sciences left to them by the great architects of the past. This allowed for the conclusion that they had been enslaved by a Mayan first people who came from outside the peninsula, and for them to be catalogued as an inferior people, which is what they were in the eyes of local hacienda-owners and merchants. That is why since that time, the word "Yucatecans" does not include them, as travelers and foreign scientists of the stature of John L. Stephens and Arthur Morelet would remember. However, for a nation to be viable, it was essential to make the inhabitants homogeneous, at least on the level of discourse. But the bipolarity fostered on the peninsula between "whites" and "Indians" did not permit that.

Parallel to this, events showed that Sierra O'Reilly and his colleagues had to face the social decomposition emerging from the power struggle between the political factions headed up by Santiago Méndez and Miguel Barbachano and, above all, the indigenous irritation over Yucatán leaders' economic and political promises to them to get them to participate in defending their soil from the punitive expedition of Santa Anna's army. In 1847, the Caste War broke out, legitimizing the bipolar ideology, justifying even more the social gap underlying this ethnic bipolarity, at the same time that it put an end to the attempts at separatism by the Yucatán elite, who this time needed support from Mexico City to put down the Mayan rebels.⁸

This situation ended by putting the brakes on the new generation of Yucatecan writers identifying with their elders' project for sovereignty, as would be expressed in the literary newspaper they produced themselves, *Bullebulle* (1847). While they did maintain some of the elements of the regionalist discourse created by *El Museo Yucateco* and *El Registro Yucateco*, they no longer argued for an isolated Yucatán, but



rather for participating in the federalist experiment, and therefore, the construction of the Mexican nation. That would be the role that Justo Sierra Méndez, the son of Sierra O'Reilly, would play at the end of the century. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ Vicente Calero Quintana, "Literatura. Artículo I. Reflexiones sobre la novela," *El Registro Yucateco*, vol. 1 (Mérida: Imprenta de Castillo y Compañía, 1845), pp. 64-70.
- ² Carl Schmitt, *Romanticismo político* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmas Ediciones, 2001), pp. 71-72 and 110-124.
- ³ In 1835, *Revista Mexicana* and *La Oposición* first saw the light of day; in 1836, *El Mosaico Mexicano* and *El Periódico de la Academia Mexicana de Medicina*; in 1837, *El Año Nuevo* and *El Diorama*; and, finally, in 1838, *El Ensayo Literario* and *El Recreo de las Familias*.
- ⁴ "El Museo Mejicano," *Boletín de Anuncios*, year 1, no. 1 (Mérida, Yucatán), November 21, 1843, as cited in Luisa Fernanda Rico Mansard, *Exhibir para educar. Objetos, colecciones y museos de la ciudad de México (1790-1910)* (Barcelona-Mexico City: Ediciones Pomares/INAH, 2004), pp. 190-191.
- ⁵ Magdalena Alonso Sánchez, "Una empresa educativa y cultural de Ignacio Cumplido: *El Museo Mexicano* (1843-1846)," Laura Beatriz Suárez de la Torre, comp., *Empresa y cultura en tinta y papel (1800-1860)* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora/UNAM, 2001), pp. 529-535.
- ⁶ Tomás Pérez Vejo, "La invención de una nación. La imagen de México en la prensa ilustrada de la primera mitad del siglo XIX (1830-1855)," Suárez de la Torre, comp., op. cit.
- ⁷ Nora Pierre, *Les Lieux de Mémoire: I. La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
- ⁸ See *Voices of Mexico* no. 83, particularly the "Museums" section, dedicated to the Museum of the Caste War, briefly explaining the reasons behind the Mayan indigenous movement against the living conditions and exploitation they were subjected to by whites on the peninsula, a war that shook the region for more than five decades. [Editor's Note.]