INTRODUCTION

Life in Mexico, by Fanny Calderón de la Barca, belongs to the accounts of travel and residence by foreigners which have furnished our most informative and perceptive reports on periods and countries. At their best, written by keen observers, endowed with incisive style and humor, they bring the objectivity and comparative point of view—at times the prejudices—of people bred and educated in another country. The foibles and oddities, the peculiarities of the country observed relative to others, stand out clearly as they could not in the observations of a native unless he were truly unusual. In *Life in Mexico*, the splendor, the misery, the political posturing and chronic instability of Mexican politics in 1839–1842 are sketched thoughtfully and incisively. So too are the luxury and crudity of a Mexican life which had not changed greatly from that of the eighteenth century and before which lay the immense changes of the decades to follow.

The author, who placed her name on the title page as Fanny Calderón de la Barca, was born Frances Erskine Inglis in Edinburgh on December 23, 1804, the fifth in what was to be a family of ten children. Her father, William Inglis, a well-to-do landowner, was a Writer to the Signet, in Scotland a special part of the legal profession; her mother, an Erskine, was related to the Earls of Buchan and other noble Scottish families. Frances, or Fanny as she preferred to be called, received a careful education including travel in Italy. In 1828, when her father was forced into bankruptcy, the family removed to Normandy, where in 1830 he died. Thereupon the widowed Mrs. Inglis, four of her daughters, including Fanny, and a number of grandchildren moved to Boston, where they opened a school. Scotland was then a prized source of school teachers, and they were well prepared for the role. The school enjoyed considerable success until it was involved in a scandal involving an anonymous satire on a charity bazaar of which Fanny was supposed to be co-author. Whatever the right of that story, the Inglis family moved in 1835 to the village of New Brighton on Staten Island, then a rural area of stately villas and farms

and a vacation retreat from the tropical summers of Washington, D.C.

On Staten Island, Fanny met her future husband, Angel Calderón de la Barca. Born in 1790 in Buenos Aires to a career Spanish civil servant and educated in England, Don Angel fought for his country against the French invaders of Spain during the Napoleonic Wars and fell prisoner. In 1819, some years after the conclusion of peace and his release, he entered his country's diplomatic service, where despite political upheavals at home he served with distinction and won steady promotion. In 1835 he came to the United States as the Spanish minister. He made the acquaintance of Fanny Inglis some time after his arrival, and on September 24, 1838 the two were married in New York. Don Angel was 48; his bride, 33. The couple spent the winter of 1838–1839 in Washington, and in the following summer began to prepare for Don Angel's new diplomatic assignment as the first Spanish minister to Mexico.

Mexico had declared its independence from Spain in 1821 and maintained it because the mother country was unable to muster the military force for invasion and repression. In 1825 the last fortress held by Spanish forces within Mexico, the island of San Juan de Ulúa in the harbor of Veracruz, surrendered to the Mexicans; but Spanish acceptance of Mexican independence and the establishment of peaceful relations foundered upon the steady refusal of the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, to accept what was clearly an irreversible fact. Upon the death of Ferdinand in 1833 and the accession of his daughter, an infant, to the throne as Isabella II, negotiation became possible. In December 1836 the Spanish Cortes authorized the opening of relations upon the basis of recognition of Mexican independence, and two days after the promulgation of the law the Spanish Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Mexican plenipotentiary to London signed a treaty of peace and amity in Madrid. The following day the Spanish government issued a decree declaring Mexico a friendly nation. Consular relations were established quickly; more formal diplomatic ones waited until 1839.

In those leisurely days, the Calderón de la Barca couple could prepare at some length for the new assignment. One arrangement they made was an agreement to search in Mexico for sources and information for William Hickling Prescott, then known as the author of a well-received life of Ferdinand and Isabella, who was planning a history of the conquest of Mexico. The book, when published, was to make him famous. Don Angel, who knew and admired Prescott, readily placed himself at the disposal of the author and not only located materials for him in Mexico but also served as intermediary in opening relations for Prescott with eminent and knowledgeable Mexicans, such as Lucas Alamán, the administrator of what remained of the Cortés Estate. The relations between Prescott and both Don Angel and Fanny lasted long after the couple left Mexico.

In Mexico, where they arrived in 1839, the new Spanish minister and his wife received a cordial welcome and mixed freely in Mexican society. The tact and good sense of Don Angel earned substantial success for a difficult assignment despite the number and variety of claims by Spanish subjects against the Mexican Republic. The diplomat and his wife were able to travel widely. Fanny recorded travels and events in her letters to her family and in three volumes of journal, of which two are extant.

When Don Angel's assignment in Mexico ended and the couple returned to the United States for reassignment, Prescott, who seems to have read many of the letters, urged Fanny to publish them. *Life in Mexico*, published under the date of 1843 although actually printed in December 1842, and issued with a short preface by Prescott warmly recommending the book, is an edited version of the letters, selecting those of greater interest and deleting passages or comments that Fanny decided most likely to cause serious offence or about which she had changed her mind. In the fashion of the time, people were referred to by the initial letter of their surnames, followed by a blank. No one has much trouble today identifying the people, nor for that matter did knowledgeable people at the time.

The book was issued in American and British editions. That in the United States was an instant success; that in the United Kingdom met a more varied reception, one reviewer even suggesting that the author had never been in Mexico. With time the book won universal favor. Publication in Spanish had a more varied history. Shortly after the appearance of the American edition, the Mexico City newspaper, *El siglo diez y nueve*, began to publish some of the letters. An initial uproar in the form of a bitter editorial in the official government newspaper soon subsided and a number of the letters were printed, although not those sketching in caustic terms General Santa Anna, then president. Publication of a complete translation waited until the twentieth century, when there have been two, in 1920 and 1959. In 1944 the Mexican government reissued in a special series of classics for the Mexican public the letters as they had been made available in *El siglo diez y nueve*. Both in the English-speaking world and in Mexico the book is now recognized as a classic, fixing on paper in sharply etched sketches a society and period now gone.

The life of Don Angel and Fanny after leaving Mexico continued to be notable. Don Angel served again as Spanish minister to the United States and completed his diplomatic career with a short term as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. The fall of the government in July 1854 led to a period of exile in Paris. When the pair returned to Madrid, Don Angel became a senator in the Cortes. He died in 1861. Fanny remained in Spain and at the urgent invitation of Queen Isabella II became tutor and governess of Princess Isabella, then 7. Her service to the royal family continued through the revolution of 1868, which deposed Isabella II, and the restoration of her son as Alfonso XII in 1874. In 1876, in recognition of her services and those of Don Angel, she was created marquesa de Calderón de la Barca in her own right. Unfortunately, the couple had no children to inherit the title. In 1882 after a late supper in the royal palace, for which she had dressed in customary

decolletage, she took cold, rapidly grew worse, and on February 6, died. She was 77.

For the rest, the letters speak for themselves.

Berkeley, California
August 1981

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