

## —❧ INTER-AMERICAN NOTES ❧—

### IN MEMORIAM

#### Michael Costeloe (1939–2011)

Michael Peter Costeloe, the eminent historian of Mexico, died of pancreatic cancer at home peacefully in Bristol, England, with his wife Eleanor and their daughter Sarah at his side on August 24, 2011, at the age of 72. He was the author of countless seminal articles and eight extraordinary monographs that changed the relevant historiography forever.<sup>1</sup>

He was born in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, in the north of England, on March 12, 1939. He went to King's College Newcastle (then part of the University of Durham) for his undergraduate degree. Although his intention was to read French, he ended up studying Spanish. As well as being a particularly hardworking student, he was a fine cricketer and tennis player. He stayed on in Newcastle, in what after 1963 became the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, where he wrote a doctoral dissertation titled "The Financial Organization, Activities, and Interests of the Church in the Archbishopric of Mexico During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," under the supervision of Dr N. D. Shergold—and became hooked on Mexican history. It was while completing his Ph.D. that he married his lifelong wife Eleanor, whom he had met as an undergraduate, and together they spent significant time in Mexico. Costeloe joined the University of Bristol in 1965 as assistant lecturer, obtaining his doctorate a year later, and remained attached to this institution for his entire career. He became a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1976, Reader the same year at the age of 37, and Professor and Head of Department in 1981.

1. In chronological order: *Church Wealth in Mexico. A Study of the Juzgado de Capellanías in the Archbishopric of Mexico, 1800–1856* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); *La primera república federal de México (1824–1835). Un estudio de los partidos políticos en el México independiente* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975); *Church and State in Independent Mexico: A Study of the Patronage Debate, 1821–1857* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978); *Response to Revolution: Imperial Spain and the Spanish American Revolutions, 1810–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); *The Central Republic in Mexico, 1835–1846. Hombres de Bien in the Age of Santa Anna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *Bonds and Bondholders. British Investors and Mexico's Foreign Debt, 1824–1888* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003); *William Bullock. Connoisseur and Virtuoso of the Egyptian Hall: Picadilly to Mexico (1773–1849)*, (Bristol: HiPLAM Bristol, 2008); *Bubbles and Bonanzas. British Investors and Investments in Mexico, 1821–1840* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011).

As Head of Department, Costeloe displayed tremendous leadership. In a context of Thatcherite cuts in which arts subjects such as modern languages and Latin American studies were under threat, Costeloe defended the interests of the subject and the department with great vigour and skill. It was under his headship, in fact, that the department was awarded a particularly high score in the 1989 national Research Selectivity Exercise (now the Research Assessment Exercise). He went on to serve as elected Dean of Arts from 1993 to 1996 and retired in 1998, although this did not stop him from researching and publishing three further major monographs, or achieving a handicap of 8 playing for the Henbury Golf Club. He was working on a biography of General Mariano Arista when he passed away.

Michael Costeloe was, without doubt, a formidable scholar. His research into the political history of nineteenth-century Mexico, church-state relations, and British investment in the region, as well as Spain's response to the Spanish American Wars of Independence, had a major impact on the relevant historiography. A period of history that was "forgotten," and greatly "unexplored," as Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Eric Van Young have noted,<sup>2</sup> when Costeloe first started to research church activities and interests in Independent Mexico in the 1960s, has become, in great measure thanks to his exertions, far more accessible and intelligible to subsequent generations of historians. Costeloe was one of the leading voices of a small yet truly influential, inspired, and inspiring group of historians who, between 1960 and the present, rescued the Mexican early national period from oblivion. At the same time, he revised and qualified a wide range of misconceptions the historiography had inherited from a one-sided triumphant, liberal/PRI-tinted "official history" and, to a great extent, overcame the fact that, until then, historians had tended to avoid these years in preference for the colonial or the subsequent revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods.

Until Costeloe wrote *La primera república federal* and *The Central Republic* there were, quite simply, no books that offered a thorough chronological analysis of the two decades between 1824 and 1846. Similarly, until he wrote *Bonds and Bondholders* and *Bubbles and Bonanzas* (with William Bullock providing a highly entertaining biography of a British businessman with Mexican interests to accompany these monographs), we had very little knowledge of who in Britain invested in Mexico or why, and of how inaccurate the concept of Britain's "informal empire" in Mexico was. His book on the Spanish response to the independence of most of its American colonies remains, to this day, the only study to have engaged with what Spaniards thought about the Spanish American revolutions and how they responded to the loss of their centuries-old empire. Likewise with church-state relations in Independent Mexico (that is, from Independence in 1821 to the beginning of the mid-century Reform period in 1857), which remains a surprisingly understudied subject to this day. Two texts that remain essential reading are unquestionably his *Church Wealth* and *Church and State*. The first provided

2. Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, "Los años olvidados," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 5:2 (Summer 1989), pp. 313–326; Eric Van Young, "Recent Anglophone Scholarship on Mexico and Central America in the Age of Revolution (1750–1850)," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 65 (1985), pp. 725–743.

an in-depth study of the financial state of the church as evidenced in the organization and lending activities of the Juzgado de Capellanías, whilst the second presented, for the first time, a factually accurate account of the course of the patronage controversy during the years from 1821 to 1857.

More than a revisionist, Costeloe was a pioneer. He was the first historian to patiently, meticulously, and systematically read every single national newspaper that was published in Mexico from 1821 to 1857. As a result, seminal books such as his *La primera república federal* and *The Central Republic* provided, as no other works had done, a clear sense of what actually happened in Mexico and why. Bearing in mind the frequency with which the government changed hands, the shifting nature of politicians' alliances, and the extraordinary number of *pronunciamientos* that were launched during these years, Costeloe's ability to offer a clear analytical narrative for both the Federal and Central Republics was a major achievement indeed. If prospective students of Independent Mexico had been put off in the past by the fact that it was hard to remember who was in power and when (let alone why), Costeloe's volumes ensured that subsequent generations of students would have a meaningful understanding of the relevant events from the moment they started their research into the period.

The same can be said for his other books. In them, he helped us appreciate past events in ways we had not done before, because until he meticulously scrutinised those primary sources, located with characteristic perseverance and a remarkable detective-like spirit, no one had. His historical accounts were thus characterized, above all, by their originality, level of detail, factual accuracy, and clarity.

On a more personal note, for me to think of Michael Costeloe—Michael, from here on—is to think of a genuinely outstanding scholar, an indefatigable researcher, incredibly meticulous, astoundingly thorough. But it is also to think of a teacher who was incredibly inspiring and engaging, whose breathtaking knowledge paired with his gift with words and his compelling way of telling stories, invariably made the past come alive in his lectures. To think of Michael is to think as well of a very caring and dedicated supervisor and colleague, one who always found time to read his students' (past and present) work and help them with his comments, insights, and suggestions and who listened attentively to his colleagues' concerns and generously offered them his advice and opinion with tact and a certain dose of humour.

I met Michael for the first time in 1985. He was already Professor then, as well as Head of the Department of Hispanic, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies at the University of Bristol. I had come to read Drama and Hispanic Studies and my intention was to work in the theatre one day. Little did I know that by the time I completed my degree four years later, I would have forgotten entirely about my dramatic aspirations and that instead I would be obsessed with Mexican history, keen and eager to embark on a Ph.D. dissertation on an obscure nineteenth-century Mexican general—and all because of Michael. It goes without saying that Michael changed my life, and like mine, he changed the lives of many, as a historian, as a teacher, as a colleague, and as a warm and wonderfully generous friend.

If there was one thing that defined him it was his insatiable curiosity. Underlying his formidable academic career was a remarkable, inquisitive mind. He left no stone unturned. He was constantly asking questions and then finding answers to them by pursuing every possible lead he had, whether this entailed tracking down and visiting the unsuspecting descendants of a particular British investor in the hope that they might have kept his correspondence, or charting the progress of Napoleon's carriage as exhibited by William Bullock from London to Edinburgh via Windsor, Reading, Bristol, Bath, Cheltenham, Worcester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Dublin, Exeter, and Newcastle, or by trawling through every single regional newspaper that was published from 1816 to 1818.

Mexican historian Silvestre Villegas Revueltas once said of Michael that he was a man who had set out to answer all the possible questions one could have ever dreamt of asking, and had actually succeeded in answering them all. True to form, at the end of the last conference he attended in St Andrews in June 2010, he paused and asked: "How far can you ride a horse in one day?" Being Michael the one to have posed the question, it soon became obvious that what appeared initially to be a somewhat incongruous line of inquiry was actually incredibly relevant. Everybody present found themselves, as a result, reflecting rather meaningfully on how travel, logistics, and the state of communications at the time, affected the spread (or not) of insurrectionary activity in nineteenth-century Mexico. It was also his curiosity, paired with the confidence with which he would set out to answer whatever it was that intrigued him, that made him so unique, so special. After all, only Michael would have asked two women sitting next to him in a pub in Northumberland where they were from, just because he had picked up on the fact that they were bilingual and looked like mother and daughter; yet when they spoke in Spanish, the elder of the two spoke with a Peruvian accent and the younger with a Mexican one. His curiosity and ability to act on it would certainly pay off. On this occasion, it turned out that the Peruvian woman's English daughter spoke Spanish with a Mexican accent because she now lived in Mexico and was about to marry none other than a direct descendant of General Santa Anna.

He was also tremendously hardworking. His secret, he once told me, was to make sure he put aside at least two hours a day to dedicate himself to his research. For those of us who had the privilege of getting to know him more closely, he was indeed a wonderful, kind, and charming man. And he was a great teller of anecdotes too, a marvellous raconteur. Over the years, just as he had bumped into the future spouse of one of Santa Anna's descendants in a remote pub in Northumberland, he managed to meet all kinds of people in all kinds of special places. Not long ago, he approached former Spanish president Felipe González in a hotel foyer in Mexico City and ended up enjoying a long cosy chat with him. Mexican presidents and politicians, the King of Spain, Spanish footballers of yesteryear, a whole gallery of famous people bumped into Michael at one point or another; to listen to him recount the circumstances in which these extraordinary encounters had happened, and how they had unfolded, was something I always looked forward to when we met.

Last but not least, to think of Michael is also to think of his wife Eleanor. She was there with him at the very beginning of his long and emotive relationship with Mexico and its past. She accompanied him to conferences and research trips, assisted him, and became one of our merry crowd of itinerant Mexicanists. I think of her and the wonderful life she shared with Michael and can only say that they really made a beautiful couple, a perfect team.

Michael will be remembered fondly, in Britain, in Mexico, all over the world. His works will continue to captivate and inspire current and future generations of scholars. The great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once said about Mexico that she lived in him like a small eagle that had somehow found her way into his veins, and that her wings would go on beating against his heart until the day he died. Mexico certainly found her way into Michael's soul. And he, in turn, found his way into ours: as a historian, as a teacher, as a colleague, and as a friend.

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