

A FORGOTTEN EPISODE OF HISTORY:

THE BATTLE OF LAKE MARACAIBO.

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In December, 1924, there was published in the city of Maracaibo, Venezuela, a small collection of historical essays, which while they are almost unknown at present outside of the country in which they were printed, nevertheless deserve to be much better known and studied. The author of these essays (entitled "Por los Vericuetos de la Historia") is Carlos Medina Chirinos, a lawyer and politician of the same city which gave to the world Rafael Baralt, the greatest historian Latin America has ever produced. Sr. Medina Chirinos has published, previous to this small volume, nine different historical works, and is compiling several biographies and treatises, one of which is to be entitled "A Century of Monroeism." This will be watched for with interest in view of recent developments in our foreign policy which have called into question as never before our attitude toward the other republics of the Western Hemisphere.

The most significant feature of "Por los Vericuetos de la Historia" is the author's description of the naval battle of Maracaibo, which has never been alluded to in most books relating to the great South American struggle for freedom. How many citizens of the United States are aware that that unheralded battle, and not the more celebrated engagement of Carabobo, sealed the independence of the Latin republics? How many are aware that an active part in the winning of that glorious obscure victory, fought on July 24, 1823, was played by Yankee soldiers of fortune who had had previous military experience in our War of 1812? And yet such are the facts which Sr. Medina Chirinos

proves, and his native city has accepted his version to the extent of erecting a memorial arch in commemoration of the centenary of the heroic conflict and holding a splendid celebration in honor of the event.

He has amassed his evidence in unimpeachable array, showing that after Carabobo a Spanish administration still existed in Venezuela, that the entire coastal region was in the power of the enemy, that the seizure of Maracaibo by the Spanish general Morales in 1822 almost destroyed all the work of the great Liberator, Bolivar, in the north and made him desist from his Peruvian campaign in order to return when the unexpected good news of the victory on the lake freed him from his anxiety. He also shows that after Carabobo the royalists still had far more troops under arms in Venezuela than the republicans and that between that action and the battle of Lake Maracaibo there were fought fifty-three sanguinary engagements between the two armies, fourteen of which resulted in the complete rout of the Colombians. He introduces proclamations of the period and despatches of Generals Paez, Soublette, Santander, Urdaneta and Bolivar himself, which sufficiently demonstrate the gravity of the situation and the relief afforded by the battle of the lake. Finally, he points out that the result of Carabobo did not secure foreign recognition for Bolivar while the result of Lake Maracaibo did so (from the United States in September, 1823; from Great Britain on October 10, 1823).

It was on the 7th of September, 1822, that the Spanish general Morales recaptured Maracaibo from the Venezuelan patriots. Consternation followed the news. Immediately Paez, Urdaneta and Montilla all marched against him from various quarters, but Morales held them all at bay, not only resisting all attacks by land, but taking the offensive and driving his adversaries many miles from the city which was

his base of operations. A fourth adversary, however, and the man from whom least was expected, sailed from Cartagena on March 15, 1823, bearing the title of "Supreme Commander of the Colombian Fleet," which consisted of one corvette, three brigantines, three armored schooners and three other tiny sailing vessels. This man was Jose Padilla, born and bred on the shores of the lake, to whom every tiny waterway and inlet was familiar from boyhood. On April 5th he came to the bar which separates the waters of Lake Maracaibo from the Gulf of Venezuela, found the passage swept by the guns of old fort San Carlos, which had been reduced by Morales; he anchored and took counsel as to how to proceed. Two days later he was joined by his close friend and fellow fire-eater René Beluche, a former member of Jean Lafitte's pirate crew which had assisted Andrew Jackson so powerfully in winning his splendid victory at New Orleans. Beluche informed him that the Spanish admiral Laborde was sailing from Puerto Cabello against him with his whole fleet.

Padilla's decision, made upon receipt of this news, was as heroic a resolution as is to be found in any incident which inspires the youth of our country today in reading the exploits of their illustrious forbears. With the open Caribbean behind him and flight made easy he determined to force the bar, risk the treacherous currents of air and water, pass the fortress and shoals, enter the lake, defeat the ships within, capture the city of Maracaibo, and await the Spanish admiral in his native waters. The most remarkable thing about it all is that he actually did it—and destroyed the pride of Spain's navy into the bargain!

In the middle of the afternoon of the 8th of May, the wind being favorable, Padilla sailed for the entrance. The Spanish garrison of San Carlos, seeing him deliberately turn his back on the open sea and

enter those waters from which no retreat was possible, must have thought him crazed. Four of his largest vessels grounded in the channel; one was abandoned and went up in flames, having received no less than fifteen vulnerable wounds from the guns of the fort; as for the others, Padilla ordered all the artillery and ballast thrown overboard. They floated off again, and he gradually passed beyond range of the enemy's cannon. But before he entered the lake proper and arrived off the city of Maracaibo a whole week was consumed.

There followed a series of engagements with Morales' squadron, which was at length dispersed; then from the 6th to the 16th Padilla and Manrique, advancing from trench to trench (surrounding the city in semicircles) and from street to street, finally captured Maracaibo. Morales was at the time fifty miles distant, pursuing the only republican forces he considered dangerous to his safety. He retreated precipitately to the city, only to find it evacuated by the patriots and all his artillery and supplies transferred to Padilla's ships. He could do nothing now but wait for Laborde to come to his relief; for such was the situation of the country of Zulia (west of the lake) that deserts and mountains made retreat by land impossible, and his boats had been annihilated as completely as the Persian fleet at Salamis.

Laborde sailed from Curacao for Maracaibo on the fourth of July and anchored off San Carlos on the fourteenth. Patriotic and superstitious souls may insist that the conjunction of these famous anniversaries of American and French independence in his horoscope presaged his doom. However, he had little to fear. His force was much superior to Padilla's, he could pass the bar without molestation, and he had San Carlos to protect his rear while Morales and he had Padilla between them. But first he tried diplo-

matic billets-doux, and this delightful interchange of polite "missiles" took place between the two admirals:

From Laborde: "I announce to your Excellency that I am situated here with forces more than sufficient to bring about your total extermination, if such were my desire and intention; but I only wish to see the cessation of the evils of this war and meanwhile avoid any more effusion of blood, particularly where, in cases like the present, no advantage could result to any person so obstinate as to cause it to be needlessly shed. Therefore, and before all else, I propose to your Excellency an honorable capitulation; promising you that as soon as you have turned over to me the vessels now under your command, whose imminent destruction and capture I can announce to you beforehand, I shall transport both your Excellency and your subordinates to a port now under the rule of your government.

Reply of Padilla, sent back by Laborde's own messenger: "I burn to give my reply by my actions, and only regret that the dangerous bar prevents me. Nevertheless I assure your Excellency that I shall not give you the trouble of coming to receive my salutations, but I shall come by the road of glory to meet you very shortly if I do not have to lighten my boats."

For ten days thereafter the two fleets manoeuvred to secure advantageous positions for the inevitable struggle in the dangerous straits which receive the waters of the lake before they pass into the Caribbean. On the morning of the 24th at 10.30 A. M. Padilla gave the signal for the encounter, but it was not until 3.30 P. M., due to the falling of the breeze, that the patriots came abreast of the royalist fleet and the battle began in earnest.

It is unnecessary to describe the fight in detail. On one side fought in thirty-two well-equipped vessels 1650 trained seamen of one of the finest navies in Europe; on the other fought in twenty-two craft of every variety and description 1312 laborers and fisher-

men, many of whom had never sailed before, much less experienced the conditions of naval warfare. But as a great modern soldier has well said, "It is the soul that wins battles." For by five o'clock the republican victory was complete and Laborde was fleeing toward the open sea with the scant remnant of his fleet. The battle had been a terrific hand-to-hand struggle almost from the first, the patriots driving their ships into the midst of the Spanish fleet and boarding the enemy's vessels, armed with pistols and machetes. The carnage was terrible. One vessel was blown up by the Castilian captain rather than surrender it, the explosion spreading destruction everywhere. A thick purple mantle is said to have covered the waters of the straits over a space of ten square miles, while sharks in swarms feasted on the corpses of the dead.

As Sr. Medina Chirinos points out, if the Spanish dominion was routed at Carabobo it was disarmed at Maracaibo. For from that time forward until peace was signed no action of importance was fought in the north. Shortly after the battle Morales was forced to surrender, handing over his forces and all territory in Venezuela occupied by the royalists to the republic of Colombia.

Among the names of those participating in the battle of the lake on the side of the republicans appear the following:

Renato Beluche	James Black
Nicolas Joly	James Stuart
Walter Davis Chitty	Henry Vermont
Jose de Bellegarde	Clement Cattell
C. R. Mankin	William (Denis) Thomas
Peter Storms	Marcus Mankin
John Mackan	F. Stunard
(<i>Captains of vessels</i>)	Charles Hueck
	Santiago Moreno Stag
	Manuel Cotes
	(<i>Subordinate officials</i>)

While the Frenchmen had probably belonged to Lafitte's gang of Barataria privateersmen (See McMaster IV, pp. 175-190), at least two of the swash-bucklers with Anglo-Saxon names were United States citizens: Storms and Thomas.

The picturesque figure of the former appears many times in the old consulate records at Maracaibo. Medina Chirinos tells graphically how he and Felipe Bautista, in joint command of the "Peacock," boarded the royalist sloop-of-war "Liberal," laying about them with their machetes until they and their men had become masters of the ship. After the victory was won and ships could come and go at will Storms continued for a year or two to make trips back and forth to the United States in command of the brig "Cicero," but he finally settled in Maracaibo in 1827, where he engaged in business until his death, on or about February 26, 1837. A complete inventory of all his effects is contained in Book 62, Page 37, of the consulate inventory, and includes such questionable articles as 13 muskets, 1 bundle case knives, 1 box ditto, 2 gun carriages, a parcel of old blocks and iron, one roll lead. Also two slaves, probably Goajira Indians, valued at \$100.00 each.

Storms was in continual trouble with the authorities for smuggling, particularly powder and ammunition, and was the chief complainant at the consulate of the United States during its first years. At this time the consul was Abram B. Nones of Philadelphia, a great uncle of Dr. Robert H. Nones, a well-known dental surgeon of the city today. In 1829, when the new ambassador to Bogota, Mr. W. P. Moore, passed through Maracaibo on the way to his post, Storms called upon the consul and minister in company with the captain of the American brig "Napoleon" and heaped abuse upon Nones for alleged neglect of duty, undoubtedly to Nones' and Mr. Moore's considerable

embarrassment. Nones, in reporting the incident to the Department of State, refers to Storms as a "low, ignorant man." There is no reason to doubt that he spoke the truth. Storms' chief talents lay in the realm of fighting, and it was his fortune that he fought on the side of progress.

From a passage in Nones' letters dated August 1, 1829, it appears that Storms was a naturalized American citizen of British birth and claimed Sandwich, Mass., as his home. In Maracaibo he lived in the Calle de Comercio in a house which was later owned by Consul William J. Dubs (also a Philadelphian), and then by his son Thomas Santos Dubs; its identity could probably be established by making a thorough search of archives. Storms was probably buried in the Foreign Cemetery at Maracaibo, and in November of 1837 a certain Preserved S. Storms, probably his son, appeared in Maracaibo to claim the estate. Having received it from the hands of the consul, he settled in the city and seems to have followed for a few weeks the trade of sailmaker, but on January 29, 1838, he also died, and an entry on Page 40 of Book 62 above cited states that he was interred on the evening of the day of his death in the Foreign Burial Ground, "next grave on the left of Joseph Abensuer when standing face to the west." It was impossible for the writer to locate either the grave of Peter Storms or that of his heir. On July 20, 1841, one William R. Storms, administrator, succeeded to the estate, which amounted to \$3182.15. It would be interesting to learn what his relationship was to the old fighter, where he resided in the States, and whether the family still survives. It should be noted that Storms left several half-breed descendants in Venezuela, descendants of whom are now numerous.

William Thomas or Dennis Thomas had also mixed in the Venezuela revolution and no sooner had Consul

arrived than Thomas besought his aid in adjusting a claim which he had against the well-known Maracaibo citizen of that day, Juan de Garbiras. This claim was said to rest upon non-receipt of pay for participation in the battle of the lake, which Garbiras apparently assisted in financing, but the consulate records do not go into detail. Nones not only refused to interest himself in Thomas' claim but went a step farther and refused to recognize him as a citizen of the United States any longer because he had taken service under a foreign flag. Nothing further could be learned concerning this man, and he probably returned to the United States shortly afterward.

Two of the combatants with Anglo-Saxon names, then, were American citizens. Is it assuming too much to believe that others were, too?

At any rate, it is a source of some satisfaction to us to know that citizens of our own country played a prominent part in the battle that gave independence to our sister republics of the western world, a conflict unglorified in the pages of history which is eminently worthy of lasting commemoration in the hearts and minds of all lovers of Liberty and Democracy.