

1979

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Recommended Citation

Collmer, Robert G. (1979) "Carlyle, Francia, and their Critics," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol14/iss1/10>

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Robert G. Collmer

Carlyle, Francia, and their Critics



Sprinkled throughout history stand giant individuals that can be called bifurcating persons. Dominating, forceful, they breed controversies among following generations. They produce strident opposing camps of interpreters, who from their positions often reveal as much about the critics as about the individuals they claim to explain. One religious group sets itself against its opposite about Luther; another group preempts a political view against its counterpart regarding Bismarck. The controversies waged about such well-known individuals are deeply documented and voluminous repeated. However, antagonisms equally as acerbic often spring from persons neglected by the grand streams of history. Such is the record around one of the strangest persons to appear in the New World--José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1766-1840). Because Thomas Carlyle shortly after Francia's death gave an opinion about this man, who at his height was always referred to as "El Supremo" (The Supreme One), Carlyle has been attacked or defended by writers in Latin America. Views about Carlyle in relation to Francia held by historians and social critics in Paraguay and Argentina offer the substance for my study.

First a word about Paraguay and Francia is necessary. The present frail country with a size of the state of California but a population of barely over two million, having next to the

lowest per capita annual income in the New World, bears little resemblance to the vast territory whose capital, Asunción, was the center of the vice-regency of the Spanish Empire for the south of the Southern American continent. Old maps identify the South Atlantic Ocean as the Ocean of Paraguay. But after engaging in the greatest war among South American countries in the nineteenth century, namely the War of the Triple Alliance, and losing nine-tenths of its able-bodied male population, then deprived of much of its land, it settled into becoming the "Tibet of South America."

Francia was born in Asunción of a father who had probably migrated from Brazil. Having completed his secondary education in the capital, young Francia was sent to the University of Córdoba, Argentina, to further his preparation for admission to the clergy. He received a doctorate in theology, which at that time included large emphasis on canon law. Back in Asunción Francia became first a teacher, then a lawyer. When Paraguay threw off Spanish rule in 1811, Francia became one of the members of the revolutionary junta. In 1814 he was named Supreme Dictator of the Republic of Paraguay. From then until his death he ruled despotically and totally. He closed the borders to all outside contacts, refused to accept, correspond with, or send emissaries. His name was not spoken--only "El Supremo." When he died his name was not spoken either--only "El Difunto" ("The Deceased One"). His spies circulated everywhere, extending into families; executions were summary and frequent. He opposed the powerful and wealthy creoles; in causing their disintegration he prohibited their intermarriages and forced them to marry with the native Guaraní Indian population. Foreign travellers, once admitted to Paraguay, if Francia decreed, never departed. He refashioned the Church, agriculture, and education in his own image. He never married and left no means of preserving the government after his death.¹

In 1843 Carlyle published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* his study, "Dr. Francia," which was based on a survey of the major sources then available concerning the man he called a "Sovereign with bared sword, stern as Rhadamanthus...of iron energy and industry, of great and severe labour."² These works were: A funeral oration delivered in 1840 at Asunción by an Argentine priest; the record by two Swiss surgeon-naturalists, Renger and Longchamp; three works by two Scottish merchants who made (and lost) a great deal of money in Paraguayan trade--the Robertson brothers.

The thrust of Carlyle's argument is that Francia, "this remarkable human individual," in contrast to the "poor South-American emancipators (sic)" like Iturbide, Bolivar, San Martín, O'Higgins, brought order to one place in "The confused South-

American Revolution, and set of revolutions like the South-American Continent itself, [which] is doubtless a great confused phenomenon." The Paraguayan people, "with little speculation in their heads," "absurd somnolent persons, struck broad awake by the subterranean concussion of Civil and Religious liberty," like the Gaucho population in general--"greedy, superstitious, vain"--were unfit for democracy. Carlyle admits the existence of Francia's gallows, whips, spies, guard-houses; however, "All South America raging and ravening like one huge dog-kennel gone rabid, we here in Paraguay have peace, and cultivate our tea-trees." And in a prophetic vision toward the future with the hero as its creator, he speculates: "Who knows but, in unborn centuries, Paragueno men will look back to their lean iron Francia, as men do in such cases to the one veracious person, and institute considerations! Oliver Cromwell, dead two-hundred years, does yet speak; nay, perhaps now first begins to speak." Carlyle's anti-egalitarianism embraced the "Dionysius of Paraguay."

Carlyle's fascination with this out-of-the-way dictator occurred during the period when he was formulating his theories on the hero impelled by a God-given mission. In 1841 *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* praised Cromwell and Napoleon as "kings." In 1843 *Past and Present* eulogized the despot who rules in the name of a divine vocation. Incidentally, a similar trust in elitism led Auguste Comte to list Francia in the *Positivist Calendar* in 1849.

In South America Carlyle's reception is dated from Luis M. Drago's translation of "Dr. Francia" in 1885. Drago (1859-1921), the Argentine foreign minister known for his doctrine assailing the forcible collection of international debts through military action, maintained a vigorous cosmopolitanism. He reached out broadly into intellectual circles and included in his skills a sharp command of English. He translated Macaulay's *History* as well as the Carlyle essay. His biographer, Carlos Saavedra Lamas, calls particular attention to the excellence of the latter by claiming that Drago's translation "has been presented in literary methods as a true model."³ In a preface to the translation, Drago asserts that nothing has been added to the bibliography about Francia in any language since Carlyle's essay;⁴ accordingly, Carlyle's essay is the most recent study available. However, Carlyle's work, Drago notes, suffered from "incomplete facts, wrong judgments, hasty generalizations, and great injustices to men and things of these remote boundaries (which) remain explained only by thinking that a very Anglo-Saxon Englishman is writing in our time without leaving his island and trusting the narratives of exaggerating and fanciful travelers in general."⁵

Though Carlyle's essay possesses factual weaknesses, according to Drago, the work has merit. It illustrates a common purpose throughout Carlyle's thought, namely the desire to penetrate to the essence of things, to search for the truth within the totality of facts. Most importantly, it shows that one "must *believe*, whatever might be the object of belief, because the inner direction, the flight of the soul which tries to unriddle the secret of its own existence and of the outside world, redeems everything else."⁶ Carlyle's strength more than once causes him to "absolve the crime itself for the vigor of its motives," and so Francia, "like Cromwell, comes thus to be a hero within the Carlylean theory, a man of truth and austere energy, guide and archetype of men who attempted to model Paraguay to his own likeness."⁷ Though Drago does not agree with Carlyle's philosophy and points out the factual errors within the essay, he is not polemical.

But another Argentine, Federico Tobal, is polemical. His 106-page book, *El Dictador Francia ante Carlyle* (1893), contains the strongest attack from the New World on Carlyle for his Francia opinions. The work, though published in Buenos Aires, carries a dedication to the youth of Paraguay. It is explosive, argumentative, and blunt, as witness the following statement from that dedication:

Carlyle's book is poison because it is the apotheosis of tyranny and of the tyrant. The English author requests that you write the life of the executioner; yes, write it, but for his eternal infamy ask Dante and Michelangelo for the chisel with which they carved out the reprobates.⁸

The major points of Tobal's book follow the theory that the New World and the Old World must be viewed as distinct. According to Tobal, Francia received Carlyle's respect because Francia was a throwback to European patterns of tyranny, not a true product of the vitality of the Western Hemisphere. The European mind is like an "atmosphere laden with heavy vapors" that attaches value to what appears like it. If the "illustrious biographer" Carlyle had examined Francia in the

light of a broader and more humane criterion less limited and less chained by the self-centered dogma of European pride, far from singing of the European tyrant in America, he would have praised the American people of Paraguay who, though silent and hidden among the shadows of their virgin forests, grew with vigor in the past, surprising the world in the modern age,

eclipsing history of heroism and advancing now toward the future with a sure step and with a brave heart.⁹

Not only was Carlyle's perspective incorrect, but his sources, as Drago had also asserted, were error-prone. Tobal claimed that Rengger, Longchamp and the Robertsons were simply businessmen by profession. (Rengger and Longchamp were scientists, truly, but the Robertsons admittedly were Scottish traders.) Tobal averred that the books, like the activities of their authors, were simply means to gain money notwithstanding the damage that would be done to truth.

Tobal, furthermore, attacked Carlyle's assertion that political conditions in South America were "confused." Imagine, said Tobal, that Carlyle would apply such a label to the "transcendent and providential Revolution of South America!"¹⁰ This revolution offered "for the first time in the ages of all the world struggling for liberty, for right and not to overthrow or promote corrupt kings and tyrants."¹¹

Carlyle's comments on the hygienic characteristics of South Americans also angered Tobal. Carlyle claimed that Chileans and Paraguayans were uncivilized and dirty. Tobal maintained that since these people had descended from Spaniards who in turn had been influenced by the obsession with cleanliness of the Arabs, though their houses might lack some conveniences, these South Americans would still be spotless.¹²

And so Tobal's book continues--denouncing Carlyle in sprightly language on a variety of scores. According to Tobal, Carlyle was neither a philosopher like the great modern historians nor a judge like the great ancient historians. "His book reminds us," asserted Tobal, "of long-winded stories for the common people by puppeteers of the skills of their marionettes or the long and heavy dissertations of swindlers in public parks or of jugglers in acrobatic circuses."¹³ Carlyle's knowledge about Francia's education, his lineage, the physiognomy of the Paraguayan people, and the once-exalted position of Paraguay in the government of Spanish South America must be recognized as faulty. Francia was a malformation on the noble, brave Paraguayan people. Tobal called him a "ridiculous hero," for whom Carlyle could not cite "one atom of science, of worthiness, of art, of legislation or of custom which from his closed hands the tyrant has poured over this magnanimous land that lay sterile twenty years because of his ignorance and his huge somnolence."¹⁴ Posterity has thrown Francia "with disdain into the hells of history," announced Tobal.¹⁵

Drago and, even more so, Tobal show the usual line of opinion toward Carlyle among non-Paraguayans. The explanation for this pattern is that Francia is almost universally assailed by

critics beyond Paraguay; so if Carlyle defended Francia, he must fall under the same censure as the dictator. Here are some examples. The Carlyle essay, according to the Argentine Guillermo Cabanellas, is "a stain that never can be erased."¹⁶ Similarly a liberal Brazilian Rui Barbosa devotes over sixty pages of *Francia e Rosas* to a point-by-point refutation of Carlyle's argument.¹⁷

Nevertheless, there is another position a non-Paraguayan might take. It is decidedly a minority view and is represented, so far as I have discovered, by only one writer, the Argentine Julio Llanos. In 1907 he asserted that the "Paraguayan people have been the least guilty of peoples in handing over their destiny to a superior being who managed it. All the factors of nature and man have shown them the path of obedience as the only way to walk through life."¹⁸ Llanos recognized the justifiability of Carlyle's belief that Francia embodied the only possible government. Therefore, Carlyle had a motive if not reason behind his approval of Francia.

But what have Paraguayan critics said about the single recognition of a person from their obscure country within European intellectual circles? In 1910 Cecilio Baez, the rector of the Universidad Nacional de Asunción, Paraguay, wrote a long defense of Francia in his book *Ensayo sobre el doctor Francia y la dictadura en Sud-América*. He acknowledged his indebtedness to Carlyle's method of interpreting history, that is, through recording the achievements of great individuals: "The hero conceives something real and positive; he announces it and brings it about."¹⁹ Thus Carlyle respected Francia for creating an island of peace in the middle of a South America of chaos. Baez viewed the attacks on Carlyle's work as the product of the distortion of South American history by Argentines who wished to legitimize the hegemony of their own country over surrounding territories.

In 1937 another Paraguayan, Victor Morínigo, writing an introduction to Drago's translation of the Carlyle essay, rejected the Carlylean hero as the creator of history. Morínigo believed that Carlyle possessed accurate facts about the political and social conditions in South America, but his error lay in his obsession with making history conform to the shadow of giant individuals. For Morínigo, on the other hand, Francia was the "creation of the people, the flowering synthesis of the ancestral trunk bubbling with vital juices, who more than anyone else knew that he was only the evanescent expression of the genius of his people, a messenger of one truth in relation to a specific time and place."²⁰ Morínigo cited the phenomenon that "for no despot since the world has been governed by reason has a population wept as did the people of Asunción when the

Dictator Francia entered into eternity."²¹

In the same year of 1937 the Paraguayan historian Justo Pastor Benítez defended Carlyle's theory of the great man. Though conceding the weaknesses of Carlyle's sources, Pastor Benítez delighted in that the "spectator of history" recognized Francia as "sincere, realistic, silent, the friend of meditation, capable of action."²² Carlyle's fascination for heroes springs from his trust in objective reality and his distaste for hypocrisy. Francia as a man of truth who governed with an iron hand attracted Carlyle. Pastor Benítez ridiculed the objection of Rui Barbosa and insisted that Barbosa, prejudiced in favor of military control, could not accept the strength of a civilian to guide the nation.

From the 1950's to the present Paraguayan critics generally invoke Carlyle with approval. His name is mentioned; his specific statements about Francia are not weighed. Grateful for any recognition of somebody from their country and with the usual Paraguayan fear of Argentine domination, these commentators find consolation in European support. Furthermore, political events in contemporary Paraguay have caused the theory of the "great man" to be approved by the government. If lip service is not given to the current government, the historians leave Paraguay or are silenced. The reason lies in the takeover of the government by General Alfredo Stroessner, who, having seized control by military coup in 1954, has continued as president through the modification of the constitution to permit successive re-elections for five-year terms.

In 1956 Alonso Ibarra offered his attack on the "black legend" about Francia and claimed the support of the "English philosopher" Carlyle.²³ This same author in 1961, the year of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the independence of Paraguay, published his life of Francia with the subtitle "The Supreme Protector of Paraguay." The agnomen was a compliment! Again Carlyle was cited, but now referred to as the "Scottish philosopher."²⁴

A textbook from 1959 written by Victor Natalicio Vasconcellos, *Lecciones de historia paraguaya*, lists Carlyle's essay in the bibliography for Francia.²⁵ Vasconcellos was a professor of history in the National College of Asunción and the Police School in the same city. Similarly the competent Paraguayan historian Julio Cesar Chaves in *El supremo dictador* notes with pride that Francia is one of the few Americans to catch the attention of Europeans.²⁶ This uncritical invocation of a distinguished name comes out clearly in Emilio Saquier Aceval's *El supremo*, which was not only dedicated to General Stroessner but was even printed at the expense of the Ministry of Finance of the Paraguayan government.²⁷ It proclaims the

fame of the "statesman who excited the attention of great European writers of the category of Thomas Carlyle and August Comte."²⁸ Francia's xenophobia and Stroessner's paternalism are related.

In 1974 Paraguay's greatest living author, Augusto Roa Bastos, who resides in Buenos Aires, published his long-announced *Yo el supremo*, the novel on Francia.²⁹ As always, Carlyle appears, albeit briefly.³⁰ The thrust of the novel is anti-Francia, hence, anti-Stroessner. It appears that the philosopher of Chelsea will not be forgotten along the banks of the Paraná River. He will remain a source of contention or contentment so long as Dr. José Gaspar de Francia is dissected.

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NOTES

¹ For background details on Paraguay and a source of bibliography, see Harris Gaylord Warren, *Paraguay: An Informal History* (Norman, 1949).

² The essay can be found in Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (New York, 1904), IV, 261-321; the specific quotation in the text appears on page 320.

³ "...se considera un dechado de perfección, ya que ha sido presentado en medios literarios como un verdadero modelo." Cited in *Diccionario histórico argentino*, III, 216. All translations are mine.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *El doctor Francia*, tr. Luis M. Drago, 3rd ed. (Buenos Aires, 1908), p. vii.

⁵ "Datos incompletos, apreciaciones erróneas, generalizaciones apresuradas y más de una grande injusticia con los hombres y con las cosas de estas remotas 'comarcas,' quedan explicados con sólo pensar que es un inglés muy sajón quien escribe, en época nuestra sin salir de sus isla y valiéndose de las referencias de viajeros exagerados ó fantásticos como son la mayoría." *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁶ "...más que todo hay que *creer*, sea cualquiera el objeto de la creencia, porque el movimiento interior, el vuelo del alma que busca descifrar el secreto de su propia existencia y del mundo exterior, salvan lo demás." *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁷ "...ha llegado á absolver el crimen mismo por el vigor de sus impulsos. Francia viene así, como Cromwell, á ser un héroe dentro de la teoría carlyliana, un hombre de verdad y de austera energía, conductor y arquetipo de hombres, que, trató de modelar el Paraguay á semejanza suya...." *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

⁸ "El libro de Carlyle es un veneno, por que es la apoteosis de la tiranía y del tirano. El escritor inglés pide que escribais la vida del verdugo; sí, escribidla, pero pidiendo á Dante y Miguel Angel, el cincel con que grabaron á los réprobos, para su eterno aprobio." *El dictador Francia ante Carlyle* (Buenos Aires, 1893), p. 5.

⁹ "...si hubiera meditado y visto á la luz de un criterio más amplio y más humano, ménos restringido y ménos encadenado al dogma hegemónico del orgullo europeo, léjos de haber cantado al pueblo Americano del Paraguay que, silencioso y oculto entre las sombras de sus florestas vírgenes, creció con vigor en el pasado, sorprendió al mundo en lo moderno, eclipsando toda historia de heroísmo y caminando en lo presente hácia lo porvenir con paso seguro y corazón valiente...." *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ "Llama *confusa* á la trascendente y providencial Revolución de Sud-América...." *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ "La grande y épica revolución de Sud-América, que presenta por primera vez en las edades á todo un mundo, batiendo por la libertad, por el derecho, y no por derrocar ó levantar á reyes corrompidos y tiranos...." *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

¹³ "Su libro nos recuerda los relatos vocingleros al público vulgar de los titiriteros sobre las habilidades de sus marionetes, ó las disertaciones largas y pesadas de los embaucadores en las plazas públicas, ó de los juglares en los círcos acrobáticos." *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁴ "...no pudo citar en pró de su héroe ridículo, siquiera un átomo de ciencia, de bien, de arte, de legislación ó de moral, que de sus manos cerradas haya derramado el tirano sobre esa tierra generosa que esterilizó veinte años con su ignorancia y su grandeza somnolienta." *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁵ "La posteridad lo toma hoy de los cabellos á este déspota vulgar, para lanzarlo con desprecio á los infiernos de la historia...." *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁶ "...su producción literaria, una mancha que jamás podrá borrarse." *El dictador del Paraguay: Dr. Francia* (Buenos Aires, 1946), p. 11.

¹⁷ (Rio de Janeiro, 1952), pp. 5-66.

¹⁸ "El pueblo paraguayo ha sido el menos culpable de los pueblos al abandonar su suerte en el ser superior que lo regía. Todos los agentes de la naturaleza y del hombre le habían enseñado el sendero de la obediencia como el único para andar la vida." *El dr. Francia* (Buenos Aires, 1907), p. 57.

¹⁹ "El héroe concibe algo real y positivo, lo proclama y lo realiza." *Ensayo* (Asunción, 1910), p. v.

²⁰ "Creación del pueblo, síntesis floral del tronco ancestral bullente de savia, él sabía más que nadie que no era sino una expresión perecedera del genio de su pueblo, mensajero de una verdad con relación a un lugar y tiempo determinados." Thomas Carlyle, *El dictador Francia*, tr. Luis M. Drago (Asunción, 1937), pp. 34-35.

²¹ "...a ningún déspota, desde que el mundo se encuentra regido por la razón, ha llorado el pueblo como lloró el pueblo de Asunción cuando el Dictador Francia entró en la eternidad." *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²² "Carlyle lo reconoció sincero, realista, silencioso, amigo de la meditación, capacitado para la acción." *La vida solitaria del Dr. José Gaspar de Francia: Dictador del Paraguay* (Buenos Aires, 1937), p. 193.

²³ Short chapter entitled "La leyenda negra" in *Episodios nacionales de la vida política y social del Paraguay de antes y de ahora* (Asunción, 1956), pp. 19-21.

²⁴ "...el filósofo escocés Carlyle le adoptó como uno de sus héroes." *José Gaspar de Francia: El supremo defensor del Paraguay* (Asunción, 1961), p. 114.

²⁵ (Asunción, 1959), p. 127.

²⁶ (Buenos Aires, 1958), p. 14.

²⁷ (Asunción, 1970).

²⁸ "...el estadista que despertó la atención de grandes

escritores europeos de la talla de Tomás Carlyle o Augusto Comte." Ibid., p. 314.

²⁹ (Buenos Aires, 1974).

³⁰ p. 310.