The Mystery of Mathew Carey

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Previously we reported how the bibliography of early American Scottish Rite imprints published by Kent Walgren in Heredom opened the door for research into a Spanish translation of Thomas Webb's The Freemason's Monitor published in Philadelphia in 1822, No. 53 on the Walgren non-Louisiana list. (See Heredom, Vol. VI) Several trips from Mexico to Philadelphia and Washington, as well as to London, have advanced understanding of why the book was printed, but new questions have arisen about the publisher, Mathew Carey, and his connections with Masonry and Latin America.

One puzzle was who had translated Webb into Spanish. Various authorities have claimed he was Edward Barry, but before we were done we had to consider no less than eight men of that name, including a grand chaplain of the grand lodge in English who knew Spanish and a sea captain who visited Mexico. The famous scholar Richard H. Shoemaker had attributed the translation to an Edward Barry who lived from 1809 to 1879 and would have been 12 years old when he translated the Monitor!

We now believe that the Edward Barry who was the translator of Webb was the consul of Columbia in Philadelphia, which fits with the fact that Philadelphia firms published at the same time a number of books relating to
Columbia. For example, Carey in 1827 published Notes on Colombia, Taken in the Years 1822-3, by an anonymous United States Army officer. Another Philadelphia firm produced, in 1828, Jose Maria Salazar's Observations on the Political Reforms of Colombia, which specifically states it was translated by Barry. Salazar was the Venezuelan ambassador to the United States and wrote Observations to influence the constitutional convention going on in Columbia.

More books published in Philadelphia in the 1820s with Latin American significance have come to light. One intended to encourage political activity in Peru appeared in 1823, just a year after the Webb book: Manuel Lorenzo de Vidaurre's Plan del Peru: defectos del gobierno espanol antiguo. David Ramsay's biography of Washington was translated by Barry into Spanish as La Vida de Jorge Washington, published by Carey in 1826. And the same year as the Webb Monitor, Carey published The Authentic Key to Freemasonry, translated into Spanish by Barry as Jachin o una Llave Autentica para la Puerta de la Framasoneria; later in the decade there would be other Masonic titles.

All of this argues that Philadelphia was a center in the 1820s for the publishing of controversial Spanish books, as the émigré community took advantage of American freedom of the press to advance the cause of independence from Spain. Carey was a likely ally, himself a firebrand who had come to America after arousing British fury at his Irish nationalism and practically invented the merchandising of books by the use of agents -- including the remarkable Mason Locke Weems, Freemason, Carey's champion bookseller, and author of the apocryphal life of George Washington that popularized the cherry tree legend.

Cary also published the celebrated account of Mexico by Joel Poinsett, first American minister to Mexico and patron of York Rite Masonry there: Notes on Mexico, made in the Autumn of 1822: Accompanied by an historical sketch of the Revolution and Translations of Official Reports on the present state of that country (1824). This suggests the possibility that Poinsett, like Salazar, saw Carey's publishing house as a way by which affairs could be influenced in Mexico and South America, and encouraged publication of Carey's Spanish Masonic titles. But Carey's commercial success with Spanish language books was mixed:

South America was also a field for American enterprise, tho many ventures here appear to have been unsuccessful. The first attempt was made at Buenos Ayres in 1821, but if we may judge from the absence of letters and orders, it
soon proved a failure. A letter from Caracas, June 28 (received August 24), 1822, says that there is a good chance for a bookstore and for the sale of Spanish and French medical books especially. Apparently the Spanish colonists, who were winning their freedom at this period, sought inspiration in the heroes of the American Revolution, for this letter as well as several later ones, contains a large order for framed engravings of American patriots.

Living in Philadelphia while Carey was producing Masonic titles in Spanish were Manuel Torres, sometime Colombian minister to the United States, and Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, Mexican revolutionlary. We wondered if there was any evidence of their interaction with Carey and soon found it. Torres and Teresa de Mier, along with Carey, were involved in a major incident in American church history. This was a protracted struggle, fought in the courts as well as in the pews, over whether the Catholic laity would have the same right of control over local church decisions as did most Protestant congregations.

In 1821 Teresa de Mier published a twelve page pamphlet favoring control by laymen: The opinion of the Rt. Rev. Servandos A. Mier...on certain queries proposed to him by the Rev. William Hogan. And the next year, that same fateful year that he published Webb in Spanish, Carey wrote and published a booklet entitled A desultory examination of the reply of the Rev. W. V. Harold to a Catholic layman's rejoinder, in which he defended the trustees of St. Mary's Church in their assertions of lay control. St. Mary's was an important center of exiles, almost all of whom were opposed to continued Spanish colonial control of their native lands -- and apparently they made common cause with Carey in the controversy.

Carey is a remarkable individual. He took the risk of publishing the Masonic volumes and smuggling them to Mexico, and was involved in many other controversies. Buried in the St. Mary's vault, he was a highly independent-minded Catholic who had published the most widely circulated Catholic Bible of the time, but also published a successful Protestant Bible. His son became an Episcopalian, and his grandson was a Unitarian. It seemed possible with such ecumenical views that he could have been a Mason, and we conducted an extensive search to see if he had ever become one. We had just about concluded that he wasn't, when James N. Green, of the Library Company of Philadelphia and biographer of Carey, directed attention to a letter Carey had written in 1794 to a creditor, Joseph Clarke, that he would honor his debts, remarking "I assure you by the oath of a freemason" and adding that he realized that the two of them "belonged to the same Fraternity" and that he
was "bound to regard you as a Mason."*12 Carey was a man of character so it hardly seems likely that he would hold himself out as a Mason simply to postpone a bill. Our unconfirmed opinion is that he joined in France, where he had fled after his troubles with the British government and before he came to America.

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