

ADVENTURES WITH DON LUQUITAS: *Exploring Our Obligations as Biographers*

What is our obligation, as biographers or historians, to the people we write about? I ask this question in the context of my own writing of a biography, a project in which I have been engaged for nearly 20 years, that is now, I thank God, drawing to a close. The subject of the book is Lucas Alamán, the nineteenth-century Mexican conservative statesman, historian, and entrepreneur. Born in 1792, he died in 1853, a few months into the last government of perennial president Antonio López de Santa Anna, of whose regime he had been the chief architect and whom he served in its early weeks as chief minister.

Called by one contemporary political opponent a “Metternich among Indians,” Alamán’s reputation as always being the smartest guy in the room, a brilliant if politically tilted writer of history, and one of the great visionaries of Mexican industrialization was overshadowed during his own lifetime, and since then, by a number of negatives. He was, and is, often seen as the author of the alleged judicial murder of independence hero and president Vicente Guerrero, as a conniving monarchist, as a ruthlessly and relentlessly authoritarian centralizer, and—even to some of his former business associates—as a man not averse to cutting corners in financial dealings. While some of this is true, its truth is a matter of degree, and these are not the only truths about him.

When in the spirit of civilized conversation I am asked at dinner parties what I am working on, for a quick answer I often compare Alamán, as José Vasconcelos did, to Alexander Hamilton—to Ron Chernow’s Hamilton, rather than Lin-Manuel Miranda’s.¹ There were a number of similarities between the two men, not only in ideological inclinations and policy prescriptions, but also, oddly, in

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1. Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

character and life circumstances. I will circle back to my writing the biography of Lucas Alamán, in particular, throughout the next few minutes.

Having begun by introducing my own work on Alamán and invoking Chernow's absorbing study of Alexander Hamilton, let me say a word about biography in general, which is really my theme. Where the educated American reading public is concerned, biography seems to be an extremely popular form of history writing; we consume biographies like salted nuts. Walk into any brick-and-mortar bookstore and you are likely to see entire walls of life histories; often, the same historical figures are written about repeatedly. At last count, there are some 15,000 books about Abraham Lincoln or his presidency, many of which, strictly speaking, are biographies. And in my own library, for example, I have no fewer than three massive biographies of T. E. Lawrence, all written within the last three decades.² How much could there be to say about this rather enigmatic figure?

A lot, apparently, and from different points of view at that. In the writing of academic history, however, biography seems to have faded from serious attention for reasons we are all familiar with. While most of us write mini-biographies or abbreviated life histories into our work, full-frontal biography went out of style as social and then cultural history drove other types from the field. I can attest to this from the *curricula vitae* of my colleagues and peers, and from my own experience with doctoral students at UC San Diego, of whom there have been 30 or so over the last 35 years. Had any of them broached the possibility of producing a biography as a doctoral dissertation I would almost certainly have discouraged it, for fear that they would marginalize themselves in the job market.

It may be, however, that this creaky old genre is making a comeback among academic historians, although this is an impression I cannot for the moment support with numbers. In our own field there has always been a dribble of biographies; an avatar of this revival may have been Friedrich Katz's 1998 work on Pancho Villa. To cite just a few other examples from recent years that come immediately to mind, we have Karen Racine's biography of Francisco de Miranda, studies by Linda Hall of Dolores del Río and the Virgin Mary in the Americas (a sort of biography, after all), works by Jürgen Buchenau on Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, Paul Garner's books on Porfirio Díaz and Weetman Pearson, Mílada Bazant's on Laura Méndez de Cuenca, Mary Kay Vaughn's on the painter Pepe Zúñiga, Andrew Paxman's books

2. Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1990); John E. Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T. E. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Korda, *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia* (New York: Harper, 2010).

on business tycoons Emilio Azcárraga and William O. Jenkins, and Francie Chassen-López's ongoing biography of Juana Catarina Romero.³

Why do we write biographies, anyway, and why do people read them? One reason among many is simple curiosity about the lives of the famous and infamous. A biography can be like a good detective story, and while I would not exactly characterize an interest in the details of someone else's life history as morbid, we do love the gossipy aspects. We may know the general shape of the outcome but we hope to experience the *frisson* of revelation at bends in the narrative. Then there is the inherent interest that some people hold—great geniuses or great villains, whose stories are told again and again. Did we really need Walter Isaacson to give us a new biography of Leonardo da Vinci to be convinced of Leonardo's creative genius? Apparently so.

Biographies also help us to make sense of our own lives. They allow us to follow a more or less organized narrative through the stages we may not be able clearly to discern in ourselves, giving us names for them and comparative metrics by which to judge our own advances, accomplishments, or failings. Yet another reason for writing biography lies in its instrumental value: the life story of some extraordinary human being, or of an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances, may reveal how things got to be the way they are, and in some cases even how the curve of the future might be bent in one direction or another.

Biography is also the vehicle of remembrance—a particularly vivid way of not forgetting chunks of the past and thereby impoverishing human experience. And then biographers enter into an implicit pact with their subjects: you render up the story of your life to me, and I will make you famous, or more famous, or more understandable, or even more infamous. What I get out of it is an outlet for my creative energies, public recognition, maybe a Pulitzer Prize and some royalties, and what I owe you is as plausible a portrait of you as I can produce.

3. Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Karen Racine, *Francisco de Miranda: A Transatlantic Life in the Age of Revolution* (Wilmington, DE: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Linda B. Hall, *Dolores del Río: Beauty in Light and Shade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), and *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Jürgen Buchenau, *The Last Caudillo: Álvaro Obregón and the Mexican Revolution* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Paul Garner, *Porfirio Díaz (Profiles in Power)* (New York: Longman, 2001), and *British Lions and Mexican Eagles: Business, Politics, and Empire in the Career of Weetman Pearson in Mexico, 1889–1919* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Milada Bazant, *Laura Méndez de Cuenca: Mexican Feminist, 1853–1928* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018); Mary Kay Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Andrew Paxman and Claudia Fernández, *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2013); and Andrew Paxman, *Jenkins of Mexico: How a Southern Farm Boy Became a Mexican Magnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

This is the symbiotic aspect of writing biography noted by many writers on the genre, generally themselves practitioners.

WHAT WE OWE

The question of what we owe to the people we write about, especially if we are writing biography, troubles me—or perhaps better said, makes me anxious. However, the fact that I have not been able to answer it satisfactorily has not stopped me from producing a 2,000-page manuscript about someone of whom the vast majority of educated people, and even some historians of Latin America, I daresay, have never heard.

What I was really after when I started this project, following my completion of a large book on Mexican independence, was a platform from which to explore interiority—to look at people's internal mental processes, and not only the conscious ones, although I am most emphatically not talking about psychohistory. One route that suggested itself to me was a study of Mexican mental hospitals during the nineteenth century from a sort of psycho-social-medical point of view, focusing on the interior lives of mad people. Another path was the writing of a biography. At that fork in the road, I chose biography, partially because I had always found Alamán an interesting character, and partly because even during the first few weeks of research in the archives of the Castañeda psychiatric hospital in Mexico City, I realized that I had no idea of what I was doing. Thus the choice was made.

In any case, I had told myself at the beginning that my study of Lucas Alamán was first and foremost to be a life history, trailing behind it a study of Mexican political culture during the transition from Spanish imperial colony to republican nation-state. Then the project turned more toward that transitional political culture itself, to the way Mexicans in that period thought about and practiced politics, what they thought were the rules of the game, and what they expected from that game, a study whose pretext was a biography. But I ran across so many beguiling details—beguiling to me, at least—about Lucas Alamán's life that bore no earthly relation to political culture that I confess to having reversed course yet again to write a biography, plain and simple. For example, he was an aficionado of European grand opera (a taste we share), and among the items in his formidable private library I have found opera programs from the early 1830s. He was an accomplished amateur botanist at a time before disciplinary boundaries tightened, and when an educated man could become competent in, if not master, many fields of human knowledge. He invented and patented a process for refining silver ore. As a teenager, he started a music-

publishing business with a friend, and he was a lifelong devotee of the guitar. Fortunately for the project, Alamán was so central to Mexican national life in the first half of the nineteenth century—he was in the late Charles Hale’s words the greatest statesman of the age of Santa Anna, bar none—that his biography drags along with it much of the history of the period in which he played such a key role.⁴

But let us assume for the moment that our goal in writing history or biography is to get things right—that is, to arrive as close as we can to an accurate account of the past, or of a past individual life—to portray “history as it actually happened” in the oft-quoted words of Leopold von Ranke. Here I ask my listeners, especially the younger colleagues among you who may have drunk the Kool-Aid of cultural history, to suspend judgment for a moment and not write me off as a silly old wanker trapped in the amber of nineteenth-century positivism. I will confess, however, that despite having beaten the drum for cultural history myself, not so far beneath the surface I am something of a crypto-positivist, and that my credentials as a cultural historian are forged, or at least questionable. But to wander back to my initial question yet again: when we write history or biography, can we get it right, at least to the degree that we produce a portrait of a person recognizable to the person we write about? Is some sort of approximate accuracy about a life, and the biographical subject’s possible recognition of him or her self in the work the same thing? And is self-recognizability in a biography a plausible criterion for quality?

Certainly, there are genres of history writing that lend themselves more easily than others to the achievement of getting the story straight. I would venture to say that economic history does so. This is not to trivialize economic history as a sub-discipline; doing it is hard work. But personally I am more sanguine about its approach to past reality than some other forms of history writing, especially where its method involves counting stuff. If one looks at a two-century-old will or the inventory of a farmer from a material, quantitative point of view, for example, assuming there has been no pilferage by neighbors or surviving children, or fraud on anyone’s part, or orthographic errors, or any of a dozen other circumstances that might subvert the count, there may be either nine cows or ten cows enumerated in the estate, but there is likely to be little argument about the number. But try to determine the emotional attitude of the farmer toward providing each of his three daughters a modest dowry—whether it was done in each case with joy, or with relatively good grace in one case and ill

4. Charles A. Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821–1853* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

grace in another, or as a matter of cold indifference and grudging conformity to prevailing norms—and you will come up against a wall of subjectivity that is very difficult if not impossible to breach. In this sense biographers—all historians, really—are sappers trying to penetrate the walls, overwhelm the defenders, gain the inner courtyard, and eventually capture the castle keep. While some subjects of biography remain more resistant, or more enigmatic, or more protected after their passing than others—their walls more strongly defended, in other words—no matter: if they are dead when we write about them the success of the biographical enterprise depends almost entirely on what they leave behind in the way of verbal or other expressive artifacts.

Some years ago I asked one of my colleagues in the UC San Diego Department of History, a very accomplished historian of psychoanalysis who had earlier in her career written a dual biography of two European statesmen, whether she thought it moral to write biography, since even with the best of intentions in writing we might traduce the biographical subject. In other words, even assuming no overtly malign intent on our part, we may unintentionally render such an unflattering, distorted, or outright false picture that the subject might not recognize herself or himself. A well-known case is the biography of Woodrow Wilson by the American diplomat William C. Bullitt Jr, in a questionable collaboration with the elderly Sigmund Freud, in which Bullitt was apparently working out his personal animus toward the former president for having dismissed him during the Versailles Treaty talks.⁵ Bullitt, by the way, was at one point married to Louise Bryant, the widow of John Reed, and later engaged for a time to Missy LeHand, FDR's devoted personal secretary. (You can see now, by the way, why my Alamán biography might have run to over 2,000 pages.) Anyway, when I asked my colleague about the morality of writing biography, she looked at me for a moment as if I were an alien who had just dropped down from outer space and then basically fobbed off the question with a friendly but dismissive remark.

Perhaps the moral framework is the wrong idiom with which to seek an answer to this question, since its inherent heaviness can be a bit off-putting. I began my talk asking about our obligation to the people we write about, but maybe responsibility, as from one human being to another, is the correct register in which to seek a resolution. If we pry as deeply into the life of another person as biographers feel themselves entitled to do, often using biographical materials—personal letters and diaries are the classic examples—that were never intended by the biographee to be seen, much less used to write a book about her or his

5. Sigmund Freud and William C. Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: Twenty-Eighth President of the United States; A Psychological Study* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

life, is the subject not owed a particular responsibility of completeness, accuracy, and balance in our portrayal? On the other hand, is this any different from what we owe to groups of people we are studying, rather than individuals, and whose life stories, as opposed to their interactions with each other and with their surroundings, are not of central interest to us? Well, yes, and no. We tend to make general statements about groups of people and particular, more delimited statements about individuals. A general statement about a group is likely to apply more closely to some of its members than to others, with the distribution of “truth” looking something like a Gaussian Curve, but we hope it is justifiable in the aggregate and we go to some lengths to support the claim we are making. In putting forth claims about individuals, it is not only that statements about a person’s life are to be judged either true or untrue, but that such statements apply to a universe of one, tolerate a narrower margin for error, and *may* therefore be tested against a somewhat more exacting standard.

The fulfillment of the historian’s responsibility within the symbiotic, factual relationship that I have described, one often commented on by biographical writers, is conditioned in large measure by what the subject of the biography renders up about her or his life; that is, simply put, about how much information the writer has, and how reliable the writer knows or intuits it to be. I shall return to this point in a moment, but first let me address the obvious gap that exists between biographer and subject. This breach is narrower where the life is more completely and intimately documented, wider where it is less so. However wide it may be, the gap is typically filled in with any number of gooey materials exuded by the biographer: fantasy, wishful thinking, speculation, outright lies, and so forth. One of the more interesting of these ectoplasmic substances is transference. This is the unavoidable tendency of a writer in such prolonged and intimate contact with a subject to project onto the biographee positive or negative feelings and identifications displaced from the writer’s own life experience. The ramifications of this are dizzying, rather like looking at the infinite regress of images in two opposing mirrors. And since the subject of the biography is more often dead than not, and thus incapable of speaking back directly to the writer, biography itself becomes an act of ventriloquism.

Then there is what the late Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, the biographer of Hannah Arendt and Anna Freud, once referred to as the “ick” (as in “icky”) factor—whether or not one likes the person one is writing about—and beyond this, if they are likable at all in any normal sense. It is difficult to imagine spending the years it typically requires to write a biography cohabiting with someone you don’t like, or who is a monster. The classic limiting case here is that of the biographers of Hitler, among them Alan Bullock and Ian Kershaw, for example, where predictable revulsion is overridden by the inherent historical importance

of the subject.⁶ Edmund Morris, on the other hand, clearly developed a liking for Theodore Roosevelt in his three-volume biography of the president, despite TR's blustery hyper-machismo, his racist attitudes, his love of slaughtering relatively defenseless animals, and so forth.⁷

A ROSETTA STONE FOR LUCAS ALAMAN

I must confess that in writing Lucas Alamán's biography I have come to appreciate and like him, at least on the basis of what I have been able to recover of his life during 15 years or so of research. I have developed a positive transference to him, in other words, although that may be one of the reasons I chose to study him in the first place. I have encountered much public documentation of his life, by him and by other people, but there is very little on his private, domestic, and internal life from his family, his friends, or even his enemies. Surely, this is not an uncommon problem among biographers, but it is frustrating nonetheless. I have some thoughts on why this may be so but will not belabor your attention with them today. As it must for all biographers of public figures, the question arises as to why one would even want to know much about his background, his childhood, his family life, the way he saw the world, and so forth. The answer is obvious, it seems to me: the public man was shaped not only by circumstances but also by the forces that molded the private man, not by rational political calculation alone, but also by emotion and experience.

Let us take Alamán's conservatism, for example, which famously blossomed into open advocacy of monarchism in the mid 1840s and seems to have crystallized during the American invasion of Mexico. Viewing the same chaotic political situation, in which Mexico teetered on the edge of state failure, other men took a different political road, one that after Alamán's death wound toward a clear liberal ascendancy with the Reforma of the 1850s. Why was he so conservative, and in the view of some people reactionary? To take another example from his life, why did he overextend himself in entrepreneurial investments—silver mines, a hacienda, an enormous textile enterprise—when he was clearly short on funds, and in each case saw the project more or less crash?

6. Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), and *Hitler, 1936–1945* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

7. Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1979); *Colonel Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2001); and *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001).

In making my way through a very large collection of Alamán's papers, I encountered a little-known document that I think throws a good deal of light on the formation of the private man, and therefore the actions and thinking of the public man. In my view, this document helps to narrow the gap into which my wilder exudations might have oozed. It is an unfinished memoir that Alamán began to write while he was in hiding in Mexico City during 1833–34 to evade prosecution for his role in the judicial murder of Vicente Guerrero early in 1831, as well as accusations related to other actions he had taken as chief minister in the government of Anastasio Bustamante.⁸

Now, this was a period in which the practice of memoir-writing in the Hispanophone world was weak. The ever-ebullient Carlos María de Bustamante kept a diary, but it was anything but intimate, while Guillermo Prieto's two-volume memoir, although a valuable document of the age, is not very self-exposing.⁹ Alamán wrote that his *memorias* were not intended for publication, so they constitute a sort of message in a bottle to his heirs and general posterity. There is no reason to think he was being disingenuous about this. Over the course of the next 15 years, this autobiographical fragment morphed into the history of Mexican independence for which he is known, perhaps the greatest monument in nineteenth-century Mexican historiography. Initially, however, he meant to write of the Guanajuato of his youth, his childhood, his own family, the great mining families of Mexico more generally, and the customs of late colonial Mexico. He got only so far with this agenda, then either changed his mind or ran out of time and never completed the memoirs. His only other biographer, the writer José Valadés, used the same document but never drilled very deeply into it.¹⁰

This autobiographical fragment seems to me to be a kind of Rosetta Stone with which to make sense of some of Lucas Alamán's behavior. The tone of the text is elegiac, rather melancholy, nostalgic. In it he recounts the decline of the family fortune, including the extinction of a noble title based upon wealth taken from the silver mines of Guanajuato as so many other great colonial fortunes were, but lost through carelessness, bad luck, and excessive reproductive vitality over several generations. At several points later in his life, in published writings or in correspondence, he remarked ruefully that at various times he had let a fortune

8. Lucas Alamán, *Memorias de Don Lucas Alamán*, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México Carso (formerly Condumex), Fondo DCLXXIV, 1840.

9. Carlos María de Bustamante, *Diario histórico de México, 1822–1848, del licenciado Carlos María de Bustamante*, Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Héctor Cuahtémoc Hernández Silva, eds. (Mexico City: Colegio de México/CIESAS, 2001), 2 CD-ROMs; Guillermo Prieto, *Memorias de mis tiempos*, 2 vols. (Paris and Mexico City: Vda. de C. Bouret, 1906).

10. José C. Valadés, *Alamán: estadista e historiador* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977 [1938]).

through his fingers. Certainly, when he died in 1853 he was a considerably poorer man than he had been 15 years or even a decade earlier.

It is my view that despite his clear and even prescient thinking as a political economist, in his private investments he was not only pursuing immediate material gain, as other men of his time did, but was also trying to compensate for the sense of loss he had experienced in the decline of his family from his grandparents' time to his own. Alamán was even willing to over-leverage himself, as we would call it today, by assuming economic risks he could not cover and leaving others to hold the bag, although the debt overhang from his last project plagued him for the last decade of his life. No less a figure than Father José María Luis Mora, when consulted in the early 1840s for his legal opinion by an angry investor who felt he had been bilked in the failed Cocolapan textile factory of which Alamán had been managing partner, wrote that Alamán had been guilty of fraud "*de hecho, si no de derecho*"—in fact, if not in law. Yet, as far as I can tell, Lucas Alamán was an honest official who never took bribes and never used his position as an insider to make a profit on government business.

So, what to make of all this? How do the general quandaries of writing biography and the specific gaps and absences in the information about Lucas Alamán's life bear on the question of what I owe him as his biographer? The answer will have been obvious to my listeners from the start. I can never hope to portray him as he would have portrayed himself had he written a complete and relatively honest autobiography, nor should I. It is not that his self-representation would necessarily be wrong, but it might well be several degrees askew from how other people, including me, have seen him. We are often surprised, after all, to find that the impressions that other people have of us are quite different from our own. So his ability to recognize himself completely in what I write of him cannot be the measure of success.

What I owe to Alamán is to try to see him in 360 degrees, the bad with the good; to be sympathetic toward him but not indulgent; to look at evidence about his life with caution but not with skepticism; to try to triangulate on major aspects of his character and activities that might be in dispute; and to try as hard as I can to see the times in which he lived, through his eyes. If I fail in this program I doubt he will come back to hold me accountable, although book reviewers might. And if I succeed even a bit by all these standards I will have fulfilled my obligation to him in large measure.

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