

William Davis Robinson: Trader, Agent, and Defender of Spanish American Independence, 1799 -1819



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Abstract

The paper proposes a re-reading of the actions and writings of the US merchant William Davis Robinson in the context of the 18th and 19th Centuries' travel literature examined in recent decades by certain authors. It is based on the concept "travelers of revolutions" by which we understand individuals who are in a country, region or city temporarily, who see themselves as visitors or external observers, and describe and analyze a given political or social process of transformation with an external glance and write for an external audience. The paper analyzes two texts: *A Cursory View of Spanish America* published by the author in 1815 and *Memoirs of the Mexican Revolution* published in 1820, and argues that Robinson's *Memoirs* can indeed be understood as travel writing sympathetic to the "Mexican revolution"; while the other one is an informed description of the available resources and commercial possibilities with Mexico and the countries of South America, once they had gained their independence, as well as a manifesto proclaiming the United States as leader and guardian of freedom in this hemisphere, in opposition to European powers, such as Spain and Great Britain.

Keywords: William D. Robinson, travel writing, Mexico, Latin America, independence, commerce, interests of powers, Great Britain, Spain, United States, geopolitics, interoceanic communication

Resumen

Este artículo propone una relectura de las acciones y escritos del comerciante estadounidense William Davis Robinson en el contexto de la literatura de viaje de los siglos XVIII y XIX, que ha sido examinado en décadas recientes por algunos autores. Este trabajo se basa en el concepto de "viajeros de revoluciones", bajo el cual entendemos individuos que se encuentran en un país, región o ciudad de manera temporal, que se ven a sí mismos como visitantes u observadores externos, describen y analizan un proceso político o social de transformación con una mirada externa y escriben para un público externo. Este trabajo analiza dos textos: *Una somera visión de la América española*, publicado en 1815, y *Memorias de la Revolución Mexicana*, que apareció en 1820. En este artículo se sostiene y se busca demostrar que las *Memorias* de Robinson pueden ser entendidas como literatura de viaje favorable a la "revolución mexicana", mientras que el segundo texto constituye una informada descripción de los recursos existentes y las posibilidades de relaciones comerciales con México y los demás países de América del Sur, una vez que estos hayan ganado su independencia. Este texto constituye también un manifiesto que proclama a los Estados Unidos como líder y guardián de la libertad en este hemisferio, en oposición a las potencias europeas, como España y Gran Bretaña.

Palabras clave: William D. Robinson, literatura de viaje, México, América Latina, independencia, comercio, potencias internacionales, intereses geopolíticos, vías de comunicación interoceanicas, Gran Bretaña, España, Estados Unidos.

Resumo

O artigo propõe uma releitura das ações e escritos do comerciante estadunidense William Davis Robinson no contexto da literatura de viagem dos séculos XVIII e XIX, que foi examinado nas últimas décadas por alguns autores. O trabalho baseia-se no conceito de “viajantes de revoluções” com isto queremos dizer indivíduos que estão num país, região ou cidade temporariamente, que se vêem como visitantes ou observadores externos, descrevem e analisam um processo de transformação política ou social com um olhar externo e escrevem para um público externo. O escrito analisa dois textos: *Uma visão superficial da América espanhola*, publicado em 1815, e *Memórias da Revolução Mexicana*, que apareceu em 1820. No artigo sustenta-se e procura-se demonstrar que as *Memórias* do Robinson podem ser entendidas como a literatura de viagem favorável para a “revolução mexicana”, enquanto que o segundo texto é uma descrição informada dos recursos existentes e das possibilidades de relações comerciais com o México e outros países da América do Sul, uma vez que eles ganharam a sua independência. O escrito é também um manifesto proclamando aos Estados Unidos como um líder e guardião da liberdade neste hemisfério, em oposição aos poderes europeus, como Espanha e Grã-Bretanha.

Palavras-chave: William D. Robinson, literatura de viagem, México, América Latina, independência, comércio, potências internacionais, interesses geopolíticos, vias de comunicação Interoceânicas, Grã-Bretanha, Espanha, Estados Unidos.



This paper¹ examines the ideas and activities of the US American trader and traveler William Davis Robinson, who carried out commercial activities in Cuba, the Danish islands, Barbados, Venezuela, New Grenada and New Spain. He supported the liberating designs of Francisco de Miranda, and became involved in the Mexican insurgency movement. Furthermore, as an agent for the government of the United States he was interested in geopolitics and communications of the region. He was taking part in a multinational network of individuals dedicated to diverse projects in the Wider Caribbean² during the first decades of the 19th Century. In pursuit of their personal and national interests, these traveler/revolutionaries often interacted, at first, with Spanish functionaries and Creole traders and then, following 1810, took up a stance in favor of the insurgents in the wars for independence that broke out in Spanish American colonies.

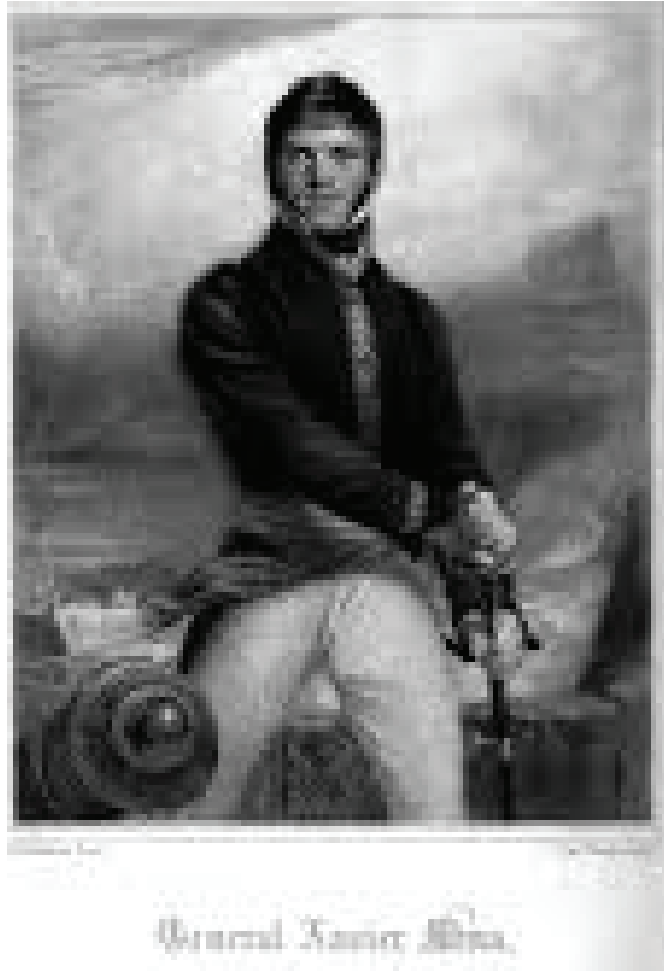
Testimonies relating to several of these traveler/revolutionaries³ have been conserved in correspondence by them and about them, and in proclamations and other forms of writing; some also kept diaries or wrote memoirs that can be considered travel literature.⁴ We conserve an ample correspondence from persons such as José Antonio Álvarez de Toledo, José Manuel Herrera, William Shaler, John Hamilton Robinson, the Lafitte brothers, Jean Joseph Amable Humbert and his sequitur, Louis de Aury, Gregor MacGregor, among others; and there are references to them in the epistolary exchanges between various court functionaries and colonial authorities, such as: the viceroys of New Spain and New Grenada, the Captain Generals of Cuba, Puerto Rico and Venezuela, the intendants of Havana, the Spanish Plenipotentiary Minister to the United States government, and each of the consuls in the Atlantic and Gulf ports of the United States. The writings by and about William Davis Robinson are particularly interesting: two sets

1 This paper is a product of the research Project “Independencia y comunicación. México en las redes de información atlánticas, 1810-1821” (“Independence and Communication. Mexico in the Atlantic Information Networks, 1810-1821”), (Investigación Básica SEP-CONACYT, número de registro Conacyt 83711).

2 I refer here to the Wider Caribbean as the geo-historical region that includes the Greater and Lesser Antilles, as well the Mainland coastal area from Florida to the Guianas.

3 Matthew Brown employs the term “adventurers”. He refers to “7000 European adventurers serving in the armies and fleets commanded by Simon Bolívar, between 1816 and 1825”, and shows particular interest in their role in the construction of the new nations and their identities. Brown, Matthew, “*Adventuring through Spanish Colonies. Simon Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries and the Birth of New Nations*”, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2006, p. 1. In this paper I use different combinations of names indistinctively –such as, trader/travelers, adventurer/travelers, witness/travelers, traveler/revolutionaries, traveler/mercenaries- to refer to the members of this multinational community who during the first decades of the 19th Century operated in the ports of the east of the United States and in the Wider Caribbean region, and who participated in the Independence wars doing business via arms trafficking and as corsairs or enrolling in the armies and fleets of the patriots and insurgents. All these terms serve to describe the multiple activities and interests of these individuals.

4 See the section “Published materials and documents” in the above cited book by Brown, that contains an extensive compilation of the diaries, memoirs, travel books, notes, and letters from the traveler/mercenaries participating in the armies and fleets of the South American patriots. *Ibidem*, pp. 226-232.



https://www.google.es/search?q=xavier+mina&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=oahUK Ewin3uLckdTSAhVh6YMKHWPVD78Q_AUIBigB&biw=1215&bih=655#imgrc=lqmwmVnI6JuWYM:

of documents on him are conserved at the General Archive of the Nation, Mexico City, as well as two newspaper articles that he wrote for the *Barbados Mercury* in 1806, on the expedition of Francisco de Miranda⁵. There is an 1815 text titled: *A Cursory View of Spanish America, in particular the neighboring viceroyalties of Mexico and New Grenada, aimed at explaining the politics of establishing a close relationship between the United States and those countries*, and his work titled: *Memoirs of the Mexican Revolution: Including a Narrative of the Expedition of General Xavier Mina. With some observations on the Practicability of Opening a Commerce between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, through the Mexican Istmus in the Province of Oaxaca, and the Lake of Nicaragua; and the Future importance of such commerce*

⁵ The documents conserved in the AGN, Mexico City, are in volumes 47 and 56 of the “Ramo Infidencias”, containing Robinson’s personal papers, his declarations when he was captured, as well as an extensive and diverse correspondence relating to him. The articles from the *Barbados Mercury* are to be found in the Archive of the National Academy of History, Caracas, *Documents of Caracciolo Parra Pérez*.



to the Civilized World and more especially to the United States.⁶ Together, these documents enable us to reconstruct the motives behind the actions, his interests, aims and opinions on the political and geopolitical position of the Spanish possessions in the Wider Caribbean.⁷

This research, therefore, proposes a re-reading of the actions and writings of William Davis Robinson in the context of the travel literature examined in recent decades in the works of Mary Louise Pratt, Elisabeth Bohls, Ian Duncan, Ottmar Ette, Juan Pimentel, Matthew Brown, among others.⁸ In the writings, produced in the last three decades of the 18th Century and first half of the 19th Century, we are particularly interested in two aspects. First, the role of these writers as witnesses of revolutions, which gives rise to what has been called “travel writings on revolutions”.⁹ This specific topic can be traced from the independence of the Thirteen Colonies up to the Sandinista revolution, passing through the French and Haitian revolutions, the Spanish American Independence revolutions and the Mexican, Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions. Indeed, there are identifiable differences between each of these external witnesses: some got involved and occupied leading roles, some displayed unrestricted sympathy and solidarity, while others expressed more or less strong criticism about certain revolutionary figures, processes and results. The names of participatory witnesses such

6 The “*Memoirs*” were published in English in 1820 in Philadelphia, and in 1821 in London; in 1823 they appeared in Amsterdam, in Dutch; and in 1824 they were published in Hannover, in German, and an incomplete Spanish version was published in London the same year. The quotations in this paper are taken from the original English version of 1820 consulted in: <https://ia801407.us.archive.org/22/items/memoirsofmexicanoorobi/memoirsofmexicanoorobi.pdf>

A complete Spanish translation of this version was first published by Virginia Guedea under the title, “*Memorias de la Revolución Mexicana*”. *Incluyen un relato de la expedición del general Xavier Mina, con un estudio introductorio, edición y notas de la misma traductora*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Fideicomiso Teixidor, 2003. The edition includes the *Cursory View* as Appendix 3, in the first translation into Spanish, also by Virginia Guedea.

7 Necessarily the treatment we give here to the *Memoirs* is more extensive than that to the *Cursory Views*, because of its richness and amplitude of information and opinions, while the text *A Cursory View* is more specific, although it may deserve a broader approach in an exclusively geopolitical oriented analysis.

8 A. Bohls, Elisabeth and Duncan, Jan, *Travel Writing, 1700-1830, An Anthology*, Nueva York, Oxford University Press, 1990; Pratt, Marie Louise, *Ojos imperiales, Literatura de viajes y transculturación*, FCE, 2007 (the first edition in English is from 1992); Clifford, James, *Routes: Travels and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1997; Ette, Ottmar and Bernecker, Walther L. (eds.), *Ansichten Amerikas: neuere Studien zu Alexander von Humboldt*, Frankfurt am Main, Vervuert, 2001; Pimentel, Juan, “*Testigos del mundo, Ciencia, literatura y viajes en la ilustración*”, Madrid, Marcial Pons, Ediciones de Historia, 2003; Brown, Matthew, “Richard Vowell’s Not-So-Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Adventure in Nineteenth-Century Hispanic America”, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 95-122.

9 Rosana Meireles Magalhaes dedicated her doctoral research to the discussion of this concept, focusing on Latin American traveler/witnesses writing on the Cuban and Sandinista revolutions: “*Latinoamérica tan violentamente dulce. Estudio de relatos de viajes de intelectuales latinoamericanos sobre las experiencias revolucionarias de Cuba y de Nicaragua*”, Doctoral dissertation, defended in the candidate exam, June, 2013, Mexico, UNAM, Postgraduate Department in Latin American Studies.

as Lafayette and Thomas Paine come to mind, or even Alexander von Humboldt, but also travelers such as Marcus Rainsford, James Barskett, William Woodis Harvey, Jonathan Brown and James Franklin who all knew Haiti during and after its revolutionary process.¹⁰

The concept “travelers of revolutions” acquires significance if we understand them as people who are in a country, region or city temporarily, who see themselves as visitors or external observers, and describe and analyze a given political process with an external glance and write for an external audience. This does not exclude the fact that on occasions they also become “actors”, such as Paine or Lafayette, or Humboldt, who in 1790 found himself in Paris and participated in the celebrations for the first anniversary of the taking of the Bastille.¹¹ Eventually, these traveler/witnesses receive the name of “sympathizers”.¹² This does not necessarily imply a full commitment to the ideals of a given “revolution”; the view that these witness/participants offer can include critical reflection, but as a group this type of testimony aims to show external readers a “fair” process with “just causes”, and one that pursues “legitimate” objectives against a despotic and oppressive system. The Anglo-Saxon travelers mentioned above, who arrived in Haiti approximately between 1802 and 1820, were writing for an audience in their countries of origin –Great Britain and United States- and were describing the nature of the French colonial regime on the island of Saint Domingue, its destruction by the slave revolution and war of independence (1791-1804) and the creation of the first independent governments. If indeed, they were not totally free of the racial prejudice of the period, and were also given to formulating criticism on several of the protagonists of the process they described, they did however share antislavery and anticolonial sentiments and positively valued the results obtained by former slaves and free colored,¹³ results that materialized in the political, economic and social organization of an independent Haiti. In this way, these

10 Rainsford, Marcus, *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti. Comprehending a View of the Principal Transactions in the Revolution of Saint Domingue with its Ancient and Modern State*, London, Albion Press, 1805; Barskett, James, *History of the Island of St. Domingo, from its first discovery by Columbus to the present period*, New York, Mahlon Day, 1824; Brown, Jonathan *The history and present condition of St. Domingo*, W. Marshall and Co., 2 vols., 1837; Woodis Harvey, Williams, *Sketches of Hayti, from the Expulsion of the French to the Death of Christophe*, London, 1827 (re-printed F. Cass, 1972); Franklin, James, *The Present State of Hayti (Saint Domingo) with Remarks on its Agriculture, Commerce, Laws, Religion, Finances and Population*, London, J. Murray, 1828. James Franklin would be better classified as one of those travelers who visited the recently independent Latin American countries with the aim of finding out the possibilities for production and commerce. Franklin includes explicit recommendations for English members of commerce interested in establishing trade relations with Haiti.

11 Oster in Ette, and Bernecker, (eds.), *Ansichten Amerikas... op. cit.*, pp. 263-264.

12 Concept discussed in the aforementioned research by Rosana Meireles Magalhaes.

13 During the colonial years, these were referred to as people of color or freemen, and were mainly mulattos, legally speaking free, although they did not enjoy equal rights in political or civil terms with white persons.



“visitors” defended the first and only state resulting from a slave revolution, in the face of the many detractors at that time.

The second interpretative aspect of the travel literature from those years is that of the 19th Century travelers as a herald of capitalism. Mary Louise Pratt has developed this concept to refer to several British travelers who visited the length and breadth of South America after independence and drew up a series of inventories on natural resources, on the state of the communication systems, on monetary politics in the new states, on the state of commerce and industry, and on politics and social conditions, amongst other aspects.¹⁴ Pratt argues that the information gathered by these travelers was of great use for future investors and was received with interest at home. Raw “savage” nature was no longer the principal objective of description as it had been for the previous generation of travelers, but rather, nature was seen as a resource for exploitation and commercial activity.¹⁵ One observation from *A Cursory View of Spanish America* of William Davis Robinson clearly points to this new situation and objectives. He observes that, unlike himself, Humboldt “did not examine with a political and commercial eye” the “beautiful and luxuriant” countries he visited.¹⁶

A new reading of the writings of William Davis Robinson in the light of some of Mary Louise Pratt’s proposals would be incomplete if it did not include a reference to the famous title “imperial eyes”, title that has been re-employed by Matthew Brown in his article “Not-So-Imperial Eyes”, in which he deals with an Englishman, both traveler and adventurer, who was a member of the armies and fleets of the South American independents, and who wrote two novels on Venezuela based on his personal experience of more than ten years in New Grenada, Venezuela, Quito and Chile.¹⁷ By referring to the gaze of the person in our study, William Davis Robinson, we can transform Pratt’s influential heading into “New Imperial Eyes”, recalling the passages that Robinson dedicates to the description

14 Pratt, *Ojos imperiales... op. cit.*, pp. 270 ss.

15 *Ibidem*.

16 Robinson, *A Cursory View... op. cit.* p .23. Indeed, one of the principal objectives of Alexander von Humboldt’s work is to account for the richness of South America’s pristine nature; to classify the flora and fauna, and to show the wealth of bio-diversity on the subcontinent. This objective is most clearly stated in the 5 volumes of his “*Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions*”. His displays of enthusiasm aroused by the contemplation for the unspoiled beauty of the tropical jungles of the Orinoco are often bathed in poetic charm. Cfr. Alexander Freiherr von Humboldt, *Viaje a las regiones equinocciales del nuevo continente hecho en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803 y 1804*, Caracas, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Dirección de Cultura, 1941-1942, 5 tt. In his two essays on New Spain and Cuba, however, Humboldt appears more interested in analyzing different areas of the economy of these two Spanish possessions: agriculture, ranching, mining and industry as well as in the opportunities to improve and develop them. On the other hand, in his remark about Humboldt, Robinson underlines also the scientific interest of the German traveler that guided his observations.

17 Brown, “Richard Vowell’s ...” *Op. cit.*



<http://www.monedas-bimetalicas.com/mexico.htm>

of natural resources, to the commercial opportunities for the United States with the newly independent countries, to the construction of interoceanic communications and the benefits that this would bring to international commerce, particularly for trade and for the merchant navy of his country. However, there is one further aspect to note here. Robinson not only writes as a merchant interested in resources and communications, but he also shows a wider gaze, as an educated and well informed traveler, with ample knowledge about international politics, United States foreign policy, and aspects of geopolitics in the Atlantic context. Many of the passages in his work are dedicated to promoting the role of the United States as a leader of the “free world in the Western Hemisphere” and her responsibility in counteracting threats from European powers.

To sum up, this research is based on the premise that Robinson’s memoirs can indeed be understood as travel writing sympathetic to the Mexican revolution, (as he refers to the war of independence fought in New Spain); but also as an informed description of the available resources and commercial possibilities with Mexico and the countries of South America, once they had gained their independence, as well as a manifesto proclaiming the United States as leader and guardian of freedom in this hemisphere.



Robinson's commercial activities in the Wider Caribbean, 1799-1816

According to data provided by William Davis Robinson himself, and information gathered from the file opened on him by the New Spain colonial authorities,¹⁸ we know that Robinson was born in Philadelphia in 1774 and that he was a trader in the city. In 1799 William Davis, then a young 25 year-old merchant, arrived in Caracas to set up business with the colonial authorities there, so as to, in his own words, “embarking in the speculation”.¹⁹ In exchange for the sale of 40 000 quintals of tobacco belonging to the Crown, Robinson promised to supply the General Captaincy of Venezuela with European merchandise valued at almost 900,000 pesos, an exorbitant amount of money at the time. These were the years of the naval wars between Great Britain and Spain when commerce between the Iberian Peninsula and its colonies in America was obstructed and the local economies suffered a severe supply crisis. Through his commercial networks in the Caribbean islands, the United States and Europe, Robinson was able to get the required merchandise to Caracas. Indeed, he even writes in his “Statement of the Claims of W.D. Robinson upon the Spanish Government”, that the public rental of the commercial transaction of the imported and re-sold merchandise amounted to more than a million pesos.²⁰ By contrast, Robinson himself was cheated in the most shameless manner, as he complained in his “Statement of Claims”. Four-fifths of the tobacco that was given to him in exchange for the solicited merchandise turned out to be “unsellable, all rotten and worm-infested”.²¹ Our merchant had invested an important part of his fortune in this operation and had pledged commercial capital from partners in the United States, London, Amsterdam, Hamburg and Curaçao. Seeing that his investment and that of his associates was being lost, he began a “documents war” both with the authorities of the General Captaincy in Venezuela and with the ministries in Spain.²² Not only were his efforts to recover the lost money fruitless, but he was also expelled from the country in 1806, according to the Captain General, as a consequence of the orders from the minister of Justice of Peace, Manuel de Godoy, who emitted a decree stating that all foreigners had to abandon Spanish possessions in America. Following this tough setback to both his business and fortune, Robinson went to the Danish islands. In Santa Cruz, he left all the documents pertaining to his failed

18 AGN, México, ramo Infidencias, vols. 47 and 56. See also Guedea´s, Virginia, “Estudio introductorio...” *op. cit.* pp. VII-XLV.

19 Robinson, *Memoirs...*, *op. cit.*, p. 380

20 *Memoirs...*, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

21 *Memoirs...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 383-384.

22 *Memoirs...*, *op. cit.* and following.

business and his claims for indemnity that finally the Spanish Government had promised him, but he was never able to receive due to the political crisis of the Monarchy of 1808.

Soon after being expelled from Venezuela, we come across Robinson again in Barbados where, under the pseudonym of Rolla, he published two articles in the *Barbados Mercury*, in support of Francisco de Miranda's expedition and against Spanish government in America. In the same year of 1806, his daughter María Asunción Robinson y Duquesnay was born in Santiago de Cuba, a result of his marriage to Eugenia Duquesnay, who, to judge by the surname, was probably a French immigrant from Saint-Domingue, that is, from the neighboring French colony that had recently emerged from an anti-slavery and anti-colonialist revolution lasting fifteen years and that had led many French colonials to emigrate. We know little of his activities in the following years, only that in 1813 he was in Cartagena de Indias and in April of 1816 in New Orleans, where in that same month he set sail for Boquilla de Piedras, a tiny port under control of the Spanish American insurgents on the coast of Veracruz. Robinson arrived there, empowered by merchant Joseph D. Nicholson to meet with the insurgents and discuss the outstanding payment of bills of exchange. First, he met with Guadalupe Victoria who argued a lack of resources and sent him to Manuel Mier y Terán in Tehuacán, to collect the debt. Robinson succeeded in getting payment for a part of the bills of exchange that were owed to the American merchant for arms purchases.²³

With the intention of returning to the Gulf of Mexico and from there to the United States, Robinson decided to accept an invitation from Manuel Mier y Terán to accompany him to Coatzacoalcos, a port that the insurgents were trying to gain control of. It was July, and the rainy season took the detachment by surprise as they were arriving at the shore. The roadways were flooded and it was impossible to continue. In these circumstances, the insurgents were attacked by a group of royalists: Terán and other leaders were able to escape, but Robinson was taken prisoner after having decided to abandon his hiding place in the woods because of exhaustion and hunger.²⁴ From then on –September 1816- until March of 1819, Robinson was held captive by the Spaniards. While Robinson insisted on his innocence and claimed to be just passing through New Spain on legitimate business, the Colonial authorities of the viceroyalty accused him of being an

23 *Memoirs...*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

24 *Memoirs...*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.



American spy and of supporting the rebels, as he was found among them at the moment of his capture. In addition, they confused him with the much sought after Dr. John Hamilton Robinson, who was a feared American activist and pro-insurgent.²⁵ Our Robinson, hoping to ingratiate his captors, offered them valuable and abundant information on the international situation and on American foreign policies, but this, however, backfired on him completely, as in the eyes of the royalists having such full and complete knowledge made him an even more dangerous enemy to the Spanish crown.

As a result of his adventures in New Spain Robinson ended up spending 14 weeks locked up in the convent of Santo Domingo in the city of Antequera in the province of Oaxaca in relatively benign conditions; a further 11 months in horrendous conditions in the dungeons of San Juan de Ulúa; 5 months in Campeche, due to the sinking of the frigate that was taking him, as a prisoner, to Cadiz; and then another 6 months in the Morro in Havana. In Cadiz, he learned that it was planned to send him to Ceuta, which usually meant life imprisonment and sure death due to the inhuman conditions of this prison camp in Northern Africa. However, in March 1819 our frustrated merchant and unfortunate insurgent sympathizer succeeded in escaping to Gibraltar and from there returned to the United States.

Biographical data shows Robinson first of all as a merchant/traveler. When Guadalupe Victoria tells him that he cannot immediately pay the bills of exchange and informs him that he will be paid in three weeks, Robinson writes: “he (the writer) was more readily induced to wait, as he was desirous to view the interesting country in which he then was, and likewise to acquire correct information respecting the political state of affairs, in the expectation that it might be such as would justify his entering into some commercial arrangements as well with the government as with individuals.”²⁶ However, once a prisoner of the royalists, he became what has been called an “involuntary” traveler, one of those persons who “travels” against their will, or at least not with the freedom that underlies the “myth of travel”, established by James Clifford when he says: “The traveler, by definition, is someone who has the security and the privilege to move around

25 His proselytism in favor of the New Spain insurgents was public knowledge in many cities across the east of the United States, and was frequently denounced by the Spanish plenipotentiary minister to the United States government, don Luis de Onís. See: Letters from don Luis de Onís to the Viceroy of New Spain, Philadelphia, 20th August, 19th and 25th September and 13th of December, 1813, in José R. Guzmán, “Aventureros, corsarios e insurgentes en el Golfo de México”, *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación*, tomo XII, núms. 1-2, 1971, pp. 205, 216, 221 and 222.

26 *Memoirs, op. cit.* p. VIII. In his work Robinson often refers to himself in third person as “the writer”.



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with relative freedom”.²⁷ However, as Elisabeth A. Bohls and Jan Duncan put it: “What happens to those individuals whose movement is neither so free nor so safe? Do sailors, soldiers, servants, slaves, immigrants, exiles, convicts transported by force, or military and diplomatic wives, count as travelers?”²⁸

Robinson, advocate for the insurgent cause and sworn enemy of “the Spanish”

During his long sojourn in Venezuela (1799-1806), his visits to New Grenada and his two year stay, largely forced, in New Spain, Robinson accumulated empirical knowledge and gathered documental and testimonial material, as well as reading several important works on America by writers such as Cornelius de Pauw, father Raynal, William Robertson, Brian Edwards and Alexander von Humboldt.²⁹ He used all this to inform his articles on Francisco de Miranda’s expedition, his

27 Cited by Bohls and Duncan, *Travel Writing, 1700-1830*, p. XVI.

28 *Ibidem*.

29 Robinson, *Memoirs*, *passim*. See also Virginia Guedea’s Introduction to the Spanish translation of 2003, pp. XXIV-XL.



Cursory View of Spanish America and *Memoirs of the Mexican Revolution*.³⁰ In the two articles he published under the pseudonym of Rolla in the *Barbados Mercury* in 1806, Robinson already showed himself to be a harsh critic of Spain, an advocate for Francisco de Miranda and to be sympathetic to the idea that Great Britain should give more support to the independence of South America.³¹ While in St. Thomas in 1806, Robinson was on the verge of joining Miranda's expedition to the Venezuelan coasts. In Barbados, he met Admiral Cochrane and gave him valuable information on the Venezuelan situation.

His most important work, the *Memoirs of the Mexican Revolution*, consists of 13 chapters, 11 of which center on the events taking place in New Spain from 1808 to July 1819, with digressions on the wars in Venezuela and in New Grenada. In this work, the author displays sympathy for the independent cause, but he also criticizes several of the insurgent leaders, some with great vehemence (father Torres, for example, leader of the insurgents in the center of Mexico),³² while showing admiration for the most outstanding ones, such as Hidalgo and Morelos, but never ceasing to mention their "political errors". Others earn his respect, such as Guadalupe Victoria, Manuel Mier y Terán and Vicente Guerrero. The undisputed hero of Robinson's text is Xavier Mina, whose expedition to New Spain in 1817 is told in great detail, with two thirds of the pages detailing the war, and about half of the whole work, dedicated to the telling of this story. But Robinson not only writes his memoirs to make known the heroic struggle of the insurgents and their external allies –the foreign officers in Mina's small army are assigned great importance-, he also writes to reveal "the despotism, treachery and cruelty of the Spaniards in general, and of the Spanish government in America", in particular. A large part of the account and reflections are dedicated to this; Robinson describes, with luxury of detail, the cruel punishments inflicted on the insurgents by the royalists, the slaughtering of women and innocent children, and the horrendous conditions of the royalist prisons, especially San Juan de Ulúa. In general, he is concerned with showing the "barbarous" way of warfare carried out by the Spanish counterinsurgents in America. He even dedicates the whole of chapter XII to this topic, as well as numerous pages included in other chapters

30 We will leave the comments to chapter XIII of the *Memoirs* and the text *A Cursory View of Spanish America* for the next section of this paper.

31 See also Virginia Guedea's Introduction to the Spanish translation of 2003.

32 Robinson, *Memoirs*, *op. cit. passim*. Robinson's opinion on some of the insurgent leaders in the last pages of chapter XI is scathing: "[...] the reader should bear in mind that the men who Mina was obliged to co-operate with rose to their station by during seasons of anarchy and confusion: they had been heaved to surface of the revolution by its currents and agitated waters, and were no way else distinguished than by their ambition, licentiousness, and ignorance." *Memoirs ..., op. cit.*, pp. 305-306.

and in the appendix, where he sets out his personal reclamations against the Spanish government in Spain and America.

In many passages, William Davis Robinson's view of the Spaniards is essentialist: he criticizes and highlights the defects of "the Spanish". However, regarding individual cases, he records hospitable actions, and the displays of humanity and generosity that he received from certain individuals who alleviated the rigors of his long imprisonment. Among these, the Dominican friars in Oaxaca who were kind to him, the frigate commander when they sailed from Veracruz to Campeche, and many distinguished residents of Antequera and Campeche. By contrast, the principal targets of his criticism are those at the highest levels of royal authority. Robinson speaks of the "treacherous conduct" of the Viceroy of New Spain, Juan Ruiz de Apodaca, who refused to confirm the reprieve that the American had asked for at the time of his capture, and that the royalist officers supposedly had conceded to him.³³ The Venezuelan Captain General is also severely criticized, and also the intendant of Caracas, Esteban Fernández de León, for "such injuries, not merely as they affect the immediate interests of individuals, but in regard of the irreparable wounds they inflict on mercantile character"³⁴; and nor does he speak well of the authorities on the island of Cuba.

Robinson, agent for the economic and political interests of the United States

One of the important objectives in the writings of William Davis Robinson is to demonstrate the advantages for "humanity", and in particular for the United States, that would come about with the independence of the Spanish possessions in Mexico and South America.³⁵ Like many of his compatriots, Robinson was excited by the supposed wealth of the mines in Mexico, and with the importance of this country as a potential market for the development of the industry, commerce and merchant navy of the United States. In the sections dedicated to these topics, his assessments are often grandiloquent and not very realistic, but on occasions the author was capable of notable insights. Robinson viewed his country as the natural leader of the future "free world" in the "Western Hemisphere". The

33 *Memoirs ..., op. cit.*, p. 14.

34 *Memoirs ..., op. cit.*, p. 385.

35 It is worth to clarify here that Robinson refers in his texts to New Spain as Mexico or even Mexican Empire, to underscore the greatness of the country.



<https://www.google.es/search?sa=G&hl=es&q=inicio+de+la+independencia&tbm=isch&tbs=simg:CAQSlQEJLMcv8APQPrgaiQELEKjU2AQaAggCDAsQslynCBpiCmAIAxIooArZCtQK2gqCBNMK1QrYCr8Xzwr-LK7k6uDrYPTwqtTq7OYkutDqKLhowBoNKgkRU7Ki55oFQhVuMaCKBGCbIhUDjgjoLDXeTsau9wlSoot-Ft5heSP6hvSQ4LIAQMxCORv4IGgoKCAgBEgRboseWDA,isz:l&ved=oahUKEwj-g7PKmNTSAhUX9WMMKHZPCBXkQ2A4IHCgD&biw=1215&bih=606>

United States, he said, had the power and the means to decide the fate of the 17 million miserable people groaning under the yoke of Spain.³⁶

In *A Cursory View*, published in 1815 but written a year earlier when the United States was still at war with Great Britain, Robinson spoke of the need to liberate “the whole Western world from the tyranny of Europe”.³⁷ The first pages of this text are dedicated to detailing a threatening picture of the dangers for the United States that would result from an alliance between Great Britain and Spain, to

³⁶ Robinson, William Davis. *A Cursory View of Spanish America, in particular the neighboring viceroyalties of Mexico and New Grenada, aimed at explaining the politics of establishing a close relationship between the United States and those countries*, Georgetown D.C., Richard and Mallory, 1815, pp. 7 and 40. Consulted in: https://books.google.com.mx/books?id=O39XAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=A+Cursory+View+of+Spanish+America+pdf&hl=es-419&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false [February 16, 2016].

³⁷ *A Cursory View ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

whose throne Fernando VII had just returned. Robinson lets loose some alarming suppositions about a treaty that the two European crowns would sign in order to unite “in the invasion and dismemberment of our territory”, plans that in the opinion of our author would bring dire consequences for Spain:

Fatal day for Spain, when such a treaty may have been signed, or such a scheme agreed on! – Auspicious moment for the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere! From that day the glory and splendor of the Spanish Monarchy ceases forever! The proud Castilian may then wrap himself up in the mantle of departed dignity and together with the gloomy offspring of fanaticism, may cast their fruitless sighs over departed power, and shed their unavailing tears at the shrine of superstition.³⁸

Written in the heat of the 1812-1814 war, Robinson reproached Spain for having broken the pact of neutrality with the United States, by instigating the Indians of West Florida to go to war against the neighboring American inhabitants. In the face of the machinations of Great Britain and Spain against the American Union, the latter’s government should have helped the Mexican people to free themselves from the despotism of the Metropolis. In less than a year, Robinson forecast, 15-20 thousand volunteers “accompanied by gallant officers, with such an equipment that can be obtained with facility in Kentucky or Tennessee, would decide the fate of all Mexico in less than a year”. All that was needed to legitimate this operation was that “our Government shall step forth as the ally and friend of the Independents”,³⁹ a step, however, that the United States government was not willing to take at any time during the years of the war between insurgents and royalists, in the second decade of the 19th Century.

It appears very important to Robinson that the “ambitions and influence” of Great Britain in South America be curtailed, as their wealth “can and would be available” to them due to their naval superiority, and this would mean an income of 20 million pesos for the European power. Great Britain had not been inclined to intervene on behalf of the revolutionaries and such was her apathy, opportunism and moral wanting, claimed the author, that the former “view her if possible with more jealousy and contempt” than even the Spanish themselves”.⁴⁰

38 *Ibidem.*

39 *A Cursory View ..., op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

40 *A Cursory View ..., op. cit.*, p. 34.



Finally, Robinson shows great interest in available communications and certain strategic sites in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea (Chapter XIII of the *Memoirs*). He recognizes Havana as the most important nodal point for Gulf and Atlantic communications. Whoever controlled Havana, would not only control commerce to Mexico via Veracruz, but also the trade between the Southeast and East of the United States, he affirmed. Robinson also names Coatzacoalcos as a major port, well located with regard to a possible interoceanic route that he considered feasible for development in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Communications between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans is a topic that occupies a relatively important position in Robinson's writings. Grounding himself in the works of Humboldt and Bryan Edwards, on the maps of John Melish and Dr. Hamilton Robinson, as well as on information obtained from Creoles and Spaniards in New Grenada, Oaxaca and other places in New Spain, and including his own personal observations, he is able to give a fairly detailed picture of the topographic, climatic and hydrological conditions that would be faced in the different possible sites for the creation of an interoceanic connection in the province of Chocó, New Grenada, in Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua or in the South of Mexico.

Conclusions

The writings and sources concerning William Davis Robinson that have been analyzed in this article show his involvement in the extensive commercial and information networks in the Atlantic, and more specifically, in the Wider Caribbean; networks that Robinson used for his own personal business, but that were also of use regarding his explorations into the civil wars in Spanish America and on the possibilities of strengthening a commercial and political presence for the United States in Mexico and South America, once the region was freed from Spain.

Robinson's view of the "Mexican revolution" is one of solidarity, not in a merely gratuitous way, but rather more in line with removing the "Mexican empire" from the "tyranny and oppression" of Spain and opening it up for trade with the rest of the civilized nations, especially the United States. His solidarity with the independent cause is founded on the conviction that Spanish despotism necessarily forced a liberation movement from the Creoles and Indians. Robinson's message to his readers in the United States is that the United States had the "power"

and the “means” to regulate the destiny of the countries in their process of liberation from Spain.

Robinson’s work has an eminently political character and frequently employs legal language. In personal terms, he leaves no tables unturned in his efforts to assert his legal rights against the injustices suffered in Venezuela and New Spain. His insistence on his own innocence, arguing that his actions were legitimate, occupies an important part of his writings. He defends justice on his own behalf, for that of the people of New Spain and also on behalf of his country, when he speaks of the rights of the United States to lead America’s struggle for freedom.

Robinson’s view of Spain, of her overseas possessions and their independence struggles is an American one, where the “other” is European, and specifically Spanish, and who embodies grave defects such as cruelty, despotism, envy, excessive pride, and is shown to be unworthy of the civilized world. It is then, exactly the reverse vision to that of the European travelers to America in the 18th and 19th centuries who watched non-European peoples and their overseas descendants from the privilege of “Civilization”. Robinson speaks of the Western hemisphere as the paradigm of freedom that opposes European despotism, and speaks of the political and commercial progress of the United States, of Mexico and South America, a progress that should be led and defended by the United States in the face of aggression from the Old-World powers.

With regard to Robinson’s alleged official mission to gather information for the United States government regarding the war in New Spain, he repeats over and over again that he was not a spy and that he did not occupy any position in the insurgent armies; that he was only a merchant pursuing legitimate interests by legal means. As I have tried to show here, Robinson’s declared objectives are contradicted by his own writings, as for example in Chapter XIII of the Memoirs, or in the text published in 1815. In these, the author makes great show of his knowledge of geopolitics, of United States foreign policy and international politics, knowledge that reveals greater insights into the role the United States should play in the wars of Spanish America against the Colonial regime and its involvement in the future of the newly independent States.

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