

NOTES AND COMMENT

A NOTE ON AN INCIDENT IN THE LIFE OF DOMINGO SARMIENTO

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As Domingo Faustino Sarmiento was being conducted through the Zonda Valley into exile in Chile in late 1840, he stopped to inscribe for posterity a quotation that he remembered from a French writer that he had recently read. He wrote "On ne tue point les idées." That sentence has come to be one of the most famous statements written by the great Argentine statesman. Two problems have, however, always bothered historians and biographers. From whence did the statement come? Where did Sarmiento inscribe it? A little light might be thrown on both of these questions by the results of recent investigations.

The place of the inscription has been the most disputed question. All agree that it was in the Zonda Valley near the Zonda Baths. J. G. Guerra, the Chilean historian and biographer, claims that the phrase was written in charcoal on some rocks along the road.¹ Manuel Gálvez concurs in this, asserting that it was written on a rock under a coat of arms of the Argentine homeland.² Adolfo Saldías holds that it was written on the wall of a post-house.³ Secundino Navarro places it on the wall of his home.⁴ B. González Arrilli writes that Sarmiento wrote the phrase on the wall of a shack near the baths.⁵ A commission was appointed in October, 1940, by the Junta de Estudios Históricos de San Juan to make a report on "the place where Sarmiento wrote the apothegm of Fortoul when he left for exile in Chile." This commission concluded that Sarmiento had first drawn a coat of arms on a rock and then put the quotation beneath it. In the place chosen by the commission a plaque containing the famous words was placed in memory of Sarmiento's use of them.⁶

A hitherto unpublished letter of Sarmiento to his friend Quiroga Rosas a short time after the incident seems to clarify the problem con-

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¹ *Sarmiento* (Santiago de Chile, 1938), p. 60.

² *Vida de Sarmiento* (Buenos Aires, 1945), p. 98.

³ *Páginas políticas* (Buenos Aires, 1912), p. 188.

⁴ *Notas sobre la vida y escritos del Gral. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento publicados con motivo de la inauguración del monumento del prócer en San Juan el 17 de noviembre de 1901* (San Juan, 1938), p. 6.

⁵ *Sarmiento* (Buenos Aires, 1946), p. 17.

⁶ See report of the commission published in Antonio J. Bucich, *Luchas y rutas de Sarmiento* (Buenos Aires, 1942), pp. 109-113.

siderably. Written from Santiago de Chile on February 19, 1841, the letter comes at a time when the incident should have been still fresh and vivid in the writer's mind. He wrote:

Do you remember my room at the Zonda Baths, painted with the arms of the homeland on one side, and with flags and trophies? Well, the day that they cut my throat and lanced me, etc. [referring to his close escape from a lynching] in San Juan, while passing into exile, I went into the room, and under the national trophy, I wrote these famous words: "*On ne tue point les idées*," and then I continued my journey. As nobody understood it, and since ignorance is the mother of suspicion, they suspected that it might say *Hijos de una gran puta montoneros, un día me la pagarán*. And this loose translation ran from mouth to mouth. But when it reached the Governor it was more than this; it was the most gross insults, a plan of conspiracy and defection, that the wife of the governor was a blubber whale. The Government became alarmed at these rumors, and what do you think it did? It did something that Louis Philippe would not have done. . . . Do you think that it ordered it to be erased? . . . It sent a Committee of Learned Men! It ordered them to decipher the enigma, and when the man who brought this news to me from San Juan left there, this Commission was preparing a report on the horrors contained in those sinister words.⁷

The source of the quotation is more difficult to locate. Sarmiento himself attributes it to Hippolyte Fortoul. In *Facundo*, he says: "While passing by the Zonda baths, under the arms of the homeland that I had painted in a room in happier days, I wrote in charcoal these words: *On ne tue point les idées*. Fortoul."⁸ He attributes it to the same source in *Recuerdos de provincia*.⁹ Most authors and biographers accepted this source without question, until Paul Groussac denied that the phrase originated with Fortoul and attributed it to Volney.¹⁰ Leopoldo Lugones contradicted this. He identified the source of the quotation as Fortoul's *Grandeur de la vie privée* (Paris, 1838).¹¹

An investigation of the collected works of Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, reveals that this exact phrase does not appear. The section that approaches it closest reads: "*On tue les hommes, on ne tue point les choses, ni les circonstances dont ils sont le produit. Brutus et Casca poignent César, et la tyrannie se consolide . . . Brutus et Casca sont devenus pour notre âge ce que étaient Ahod et les Machabées pour l'âge antérieur; ainsi, sous des noms divers, un même fantôme ravage les nations; les acteurs changent sur la scène; les passions ne changent pas, et l'histoire entière n'offre que la rotation d'un même cercle de calamités et d'erreurs.*"¹²

⁷ Sarmiento to Manuel José Quiroga Rosas, Santiago de Chile, February 19, 1841, No. 13, Archivo Nacional, Santiago de Chile, Vol. 253, pieza 12.

⁸ (Buenos Aires, 1940), p. 2.

⁹ (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca La Nación, no date), p. 268.

¹⁰ *Crítica literaria* (Buenos Aires, 1924), p. 255.

¹¹ *Historia de Sarmiento* (Buenos Aires, no date), p. 164.

¹² Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, *Leçons d'histoire*, in *Oeuvres de Volney*.

On the other hand, it is also possible to affirm that the phrase does not belong to Fortoul's *Grandeur de la vie privée*. Many thoughts expressed in miscellaneous articles by Fortoul in such journals as the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and the *Revue Encyclopédique* approach the idea of the deathless character of ideas. At one point he refers to an idea that belonged to Abelard, Montaigne, Descartes, and Voltaire in different centuries, but that withstood all the batterings of time.¹³ At another point he says "la liberté ne meurt pas, elle se transforme. . ."¹⁴

Sarmiento was more apt to have had access to the eighteenth-century Volney in the libraries of remote San Juan, but he may have read one of Fortoul's miscellaneous articles that were in the periodicals of the day. Both Volney and Fortoul expressed thoughts that approximated that of the phrase written by Sarmiento at the Zonda Baths. We can, therefore, reach one of two conclusions. First, Sarmiento read Volney's quotation, grasped its general import, forgot the exact quotation and the author in the excitement of the moment, and summarized Volney's thought in a phrase. Second, Sarmiento had read one of Fortoul's articles in one of the periodicals that reached Argentina from France. The French author may have used this phrase in one such article, for his statements in other places show that it is not foreign to his thought.

The former hypothesis seems to be the most convincing. It is doubtful if many of the works of Fortoul were available to Sarmiento in the small frontier community of San Juan. Most of the authors that he read there belonged to the eighteenth or very early nineteenth centuries. Quiroga Rosas brought from Europe a library of the latest authors, but Fortoul's name does not appear among these. Don Domingo had, however, read Volney. He cited his *Ruins of Palmira*, and there are traces of Volney's thought as early as 1845 in *Civilización y barbarie*.¹⁵ We should not be surprised at such a glaring inaccuracy in Sarmiento as a misquote and a mistaken author. In much calmer situations than that in which he wrote his famous quotation, he revealed inexcusable errors in his works. *Facundo* is filled with such inaccuracies, and recent investigations have demonstrated repeated mistakes in names, places, and dates in other important works.¹⁶

¹³ H. Fortoul, "De l'art actuel," *Revue Encyclopédique* LIX (Paris, 1833), 152.

¹⁴ H. Fortoul, "La Fronde," *Revue Encyclopédique* L VIII (Paris, 1833), 536.

¹⁵ Leopoldo Lugones, *op. cit.*, 164.

¹⁶ Justo Garate Arriola refers to some of these mistakes appearing in Sarmiento's *Viajes* in "Novedades acerca de Sarmiento," *Nueva Era* (Tandil, 1949), August 22, 1949. In his *Viajes* we also find such glaring inaccuracies as a mistake in the name of the President of the United States, a confusion of political parties, etc.

We might conclude, therefore, that Sarmiento wrote his celebrated quotation on the wall of a room that he had constructed near the Zonda Baths. We might assume that it was probably a paraphrase of what Sarmiento understood of Volney's statement to this general effect, and that it was mistakenly attributed by the careless Argentine leader to Fortoul.

THE ASSASSINATION OF SUCRE

COMMUNICATIONS TO THE EDITOR

Bogotá, Colombia, Marzo 27 de 1951

Señor Don

Charles C. Griffin y demás miembros del "Board of Editors" de "THE HISPANIC AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW."——

Muy estimados Señores:

He tenido oportunidad, gracias al señor don Enrique Ortega Ricaurte, Director del Archivo Nacional de Colombia, de leer el escrito "The Assassination of Sucre and Its Significance in Colombian History, 1828-1849," de que es autor el señor Thomas F. Macgann, publicado en la HISPANIC AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, en el número 3, correspondiente al mes de Agosto de 1950. Debido a la circunstancia indicada, con bastante retardo me informé del artículo mencionado y de aquí la demora en dirigirme a Usted haciéndole algunas aclaraciones que estimo necesario que publique la HISPANIC AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW a fin de evitar torcidas o equivocadas interpretaciones de la historia de Colombia.

Debo hacer constar mi satisfacción por el interés del señor Thomas F. Macgann, tan vinculado al departamento de historia de la Universidad de Harvard, por estudiar y conocer la historia de Colombia y por hacerla conocer de los numerosos lectores de la HISPANIC AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW. Este interés del señor Macgann es altamente encomiable y dada la autoridad merecida de que goza es posible que su trabajo de divulgación alcance merecidos triunfos. Mas para que estos sean sólidos es preciso no apartarse de la verdad histórica, ni emitir conceptos inaceptables desde muchos puntos de vista.

Leyendo con gran atención el escrito del señor Macgann, lo primero que se observa es su marcado interés *inicial*, preconcebido, por establecer la culpabilidad del General José María Obando en el asesinato del Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Antonio José de Sucre, héroe de la Independencia de América del Sur. Como lógica consecuencia, el señor Macgann se empeña en presentar a Obando con caracteres apropiados para el fin que persigue dejar en el lector desprevenido, y deja, naturalmente, al