



# ECUADOR IN FOREIGN EYES

> "... no one can stand in these solitudes unmoved, and not feel that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body ..." Charles Darwin's Journal.

Since the myth and the reality of this particular spot of the world began to be jotted down by the Spanish chroniclers, many have been the travellers who have visited Ecuador and written about it, from the long line of scientists who have come here to separate the fable from the fact, to the writers who have wanted to revive Ecuador's legends and its pageantry, as a source of artistic creation.

However, the fable and the fact continue to be fused in Ecuador, and this chameleonic quality permeates many of these writings, diffusing a certain poetry into seemingly arid subjects such as geology, anthropology, archaeology, botany and zoology. The scientist becomes a poet and the journalist a dramatist; but in most cases Ecuador proves to be an active stimulant to the creative imagination.

Baron von Humboldt, that versatile European genius, who explored Ecuador at the beginning of the XIXth century, in his long marches over the brooding cold "páramos" and ascents to the Andean summits,



mingles his geological observations with legend, poetry and archaeology. This descriptive passage is of a monument in Cañar—

"Only a small monument of stone, placed on the edge of an abyss, ... proves the passing of the Incas in this lonely site ... The Peruvians in building this monument have employed the same method which the Egyptians used in carving the Djyzeh Sphinx of which Plinius says "e saxo naturali elaborata." The rock of quartzoze sandstone which is the base, has been worked away by taking off the top layers of a sort of seat, thus left in an inclosure. A strange way of building a wall of only a meter high, for a people who transported and used such a fantastic amount of carved stones in the beautiful paved highway of Azuay. The Peruvians have impressed the seal of their laborious character in all their works which show the constancy of those who look for difficulties in order to overcome them ... This monument called Inga-Chungana seen from afar has the appearance of a sofa, the back of which is decorated by a chain of arabesques, and once in the inclosure one can observe that it will only seat one person comfortably, who can then look out on the delightful deep valley landscape of Gulan where a small river, in a multitude of foamy cascades, winds in and out of a small forest ... This rustic seat would be quite a novelty in our European gardens, and shows that the prince who chose it was not insensible to the beauties of nature, and could not have belonged to a people meriting the name of barbarians."

Four decades after Humboldt, the American novelist Herman Melville sailed to the Enchanted Isles of Ecuador; he saw the fused stone moonscape of the Galápagos and this aesthetic experience of seeing a small universe so recently emerged from the nebulae of prehistoric ages, gives his descriptions, an almost mystical quality. Of the giant tortoises he says—

"These mystic creatures suddenly translated by night from unutterable solitudes to our peopled deck, affected me in a manner not easy to unfold. They seemed newly crawled forth from beneath the foundations of the world. Yet they seemed the identical tortoises, whereon, the Hindu plants this total sphere. With a lantern I inspected them more closely. Such worshipful venerableness of aspect! Such furry greenness mantling the rude peelings and healing the fissures of their shattered shells. I no

more saw three tortoises. They expanded, became transfigured. I seemed to see three Roman Coliseums in magnificent decay."

Another decade passed, and a fervent English botanist, Richard Spruce Ph. D. was transplanted from his native Yorkshire moors to the Andean moorland, and the tropical slopes to the east and west of these mountains. His Latin catalogue of names, of trees and plants, and his observations in the cinchona forests of Ecuador, become colourful in spite of himself—

"The crystalline waters of the Chasuan and its tributaries in that part of their course, where the Red Bark grows, run over a black or dull blue, shining and very compact trachyte which would seem to be the foundation of the Quitonian Andes . . ."

Of the wasteland páramo of Sanancajas, which spreads its desolation at the foot of Chimborazo, and the icy breath of that mountain he relates—

"You may have read of the 'paramero' the deadly cold wind charged with frost that sometimes blows over the páramos, and withers every living thing it meets. A person has told me that when a boy, he was once crossing the highest point on Sanancajas, towards Guayaquil, along with his father, when they saw a man sitting by the wayside and apparently grinning at them with all his might. 'See,' said the boy, 'how that man is laughing at us.' 'Silence, my son,' replied the father, 'or say a prayer for the repose of his soul—the man is dead.' I have had to face a 'paramero,' but never of this intense kind. Its approach is indicated by the wind beginning to whishle shrilly in the distance among the dead grass stalks . . . I have been reminded by this sound on the páramos of the Andes, of our bleak Yorkshire moors and moor pastures where the wintry wind whistles through the windlestraws . . ."

This was the wind of death that rode with Pizarro and Orellana, in their quest of the barbaric El Dorado. This too, was the Andean wind which three centuries after Pizarro, took its toll from the ragged Republican revolutionaries who followed Simón Bolívar from the hot plains of Venezuela to the Andean plateaus of New Granada, in quest of freedom.



Browsing in an old book shop in Quito, one finds that in XVIIth century Europe the "gran bestia" or tapir of these South American latitudes, was thought to be a remedy for epilepsy; that no self respecting protestant would take the "Jesuit" quinine bark for malaria; that if one is ready to camp out three nights at the foot of Antisana, one may find two treasures in the environs, buried there by a Spanish royalist, who was killed soon after by the Republicans; and that a certain Mr. James Orton, an American naturalist, visited Quito in 1871. He travelled from the Ecuadorian Andes to the Amazon, and his scientific observations are mingled with very poetical descriptions—

"Beautiful is the view of Cayambe from Quito, as its enormous mass of snow and ice glows with crimson splendour in the farewell rays of the setting sun. No painter's brush could do justice to the prismatic tints which hover around the higher peaks. But this flood of glory is soon followed by the pure whiteness of death. Like a gigantic ghost shrouded in sepulchral sheets, the mountain now hovers in the background of the landscape towering ghastly through the twilight, until darkness closes upon the scene."

Elsewhere he quotes
—"if as Ruskin says, the elements of beauty are in proportion to the increase of mountainous character, Ecuador is artistically beautiful to a high degree."

Regarding the ladies of Quito in the year 1871, Mr. Orton is not as poetical as he was about nature—

"The ladies of Quito, give few entertainments for lack of ready money. They spend much of their time in needlework and gossip, sitting like Turkish sultanas on divans on the floor . . . They go to mass every morning and make visits of etiquette on Sundays. They take more interest in political than in domestic affairs . . . Not only the lords but also the ladies are inveterate smokers."

However, these pleasant harem-like scenes are now gone forever, more is the pity. Nowadays, one may see the ladies of Quito engaged in tasks less sedentary than sitting on divans, such as driving a car

or playing golf—the only near equivalent to the Turkish sultanas of 1871 Quito, would now be our local bridge and "canasta" fiends. Gossip, the same as in other parts of the world, is still a favourite pastime of the gregarious.

Mr. Wolfgang von Hagen, who is one of those gifted writers who have revived the legend and pageantry of Ecuador for his own creative purposes, which he admits when he says—

"From out of Ecuador's storied past stalk enough heroes, saints and pícaros to fill a new Iliad"

begins a chapter on Humboldt's ascent to Chimborazo (in his book *South America Called Them*), with a most uplifting sentence—

"In the secret chemistry of the emotions, man is attracted without cease by that which is least attainable."

No doubt it was like that with Humboldt, and must have been also with Edward Whymper, the celebrated English mountain climber who, in 1880, was the first man in recorded history, to reach the summit of Chimborazo. In his travel book *Travels Amongst the Great Andes of the Equator,* Mr. Whymper tells entertainingly not only of his ascents to most of the Andean peaks, but of his experiences and travels in the most isolated parts of Ecuador, which, at the time was in political turmoil against General Veintemilla—

"We travelled through Ecuador unarmed, except with passports which were never exhibited, and with a number of letters of introduction which for the most part were not presented; adopting a policy of non-intervention in all that did not concern us, and rigidly respecting the customs of the country, even when we could not agree with them; and traversed that unsettled Republic without molestation, trusting more to our wits than to our credentials, believing that a jest may conquer where force will fail, that a bon-mot is often better than a passport."

Contrasting with Mr. Whymper's above statement, Mr. Thor Heyerdahl's account in his recent best seller *Kon-Tiki* is all the more incongruous. Mr. Heyerdahl apparently found the country teeming



with bandits and lurking dangers, which illustrates how a writer becomes a dramatist in Ecuador.

Another genre of writing inspired by the land of Ecuador, is the clever caricature drawn by Mr. Ludwig Bemelmans entitled *The Donkey Inside*, and who, with his own special brand of artistry, describes the old houses of Quito—

"The houses, good and poor, all have patios. In some of them are chickens and workbenches and in the others pools of water or a fountain arrangement of palms, cacti, and tangerine trees. You find floors done in coloured tiles, inlaid with the vertebrae of oxen, walked on until the bone has taken on the feeling of old ivory and so arranged that the inlay forms a design or spells the family name, the date of the house, the name of a favourite saint, or a motto . . . Some of the patios are also painted with landscapes or naive, bright designs done with great individuality, sometimes by the owner of the house. There are majolica vases with a thousand small cracks in them and banisters, doorways, columns and cornucopias which show restraint, good judgment of space and a quiet humor. It is all old, worn, bleached, and made by hand."

Occasionally old friends come back to Ecuador—we had one of these delightful visits recently. This was that of the eminent Frenchman, Professor Paul Rivet, anthropologist and creator of the "Musée de l'Homme" in Paris. His last brilliant lecture in Quito, on the concept of race and the scientific point of view regarding this, ended with a few personal, deeply felt statements on his connection with Ecuador, which are quoted, in the following, from memory—

"I was a young graduate of medicine when I visited Ecuador, fifty years ago, and was undecided what my life's work was to be . . . I was eager to leave France and visit strange distant places, and it happened that I came to Ecuador . . . It was here that I became inspired to make anthropology my career. In this way Ecuador became my first love, I consider this to be my second country. I am an old man, and in the nature of things, I do not expect to visit you again, so that I wish to say goodbye—both to those of you who speak Spanish and those whose mother language is Quechua, to all of you who in the most isolated places I

visited, received me always with the kindest hospitality and shared what they had with me . . . In the apex of my affection for you and in the midst of my endeavours I must say goodby since—

In the height of noon cometh darkness . . ."

and so Professor Paul Rivet said goodbye to Ecuador and to the Ecuadorians. But following on the footsteps of Professor Rivet new scientific, artistic, or simply curious men will continue to come to Ecuador because they will find here the stimulus of a land still untamed, a race in formation, and primitive cultures hobnobbing with the Middle Ages and the XXth century—a pleasant relief from the pattern of sameness that is spreading everywhere.

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