

# **"THE ENIGMATIC ADVENTURER"**

## **LOUIS-JACQUES GALABERT**

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During the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the collapse of Spanish rule in the Americas unleashed a revolution in Atlantic power relations by triggering an international scramble over Spain's former empire. I term this scramble the "Western Question." Like the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Eastern Question it posed, the erosion of Spanish authority in the Americas became the focus of intense international competition during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, while traditional diplomatic histories foreground the impact of the Eastern Question on international relations in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, they tend to downplay or ignore the broad Atlantic impact of Great Power rivalry over Spanish America. However, the purpose of this paper is not to offer an alternative version of European diplomatic history. Rather it is to emphasize the local impact generated in the Americas by the Great Powers' struggle to profit from the break up of Spain's Empire by casting a spotlight on one of the more interesting characters to participate in the Western Question: Louis-Jacques Galabert.

The fate of Spain's rebellious overseas provinces was a concern not only of the cabinets of Europe and the United States, but also of the contending forces in the strife-torn Spanish world and independent adventurers who perceived unparalleled opportunities in the upheaval. For their part, the Latin American insurgents manipulated the rivalries of the Western Question

to advance their cause (securing recognition and foreign aid, as well as striking at loyalists and competing insurgent factions). The Spanish government manipulated international tensions to win support for its program of repression, obtain European mediation of some kind, and neutralize predatory foreign countries (particularly the United States). All of this - the rivalry of the Great Powers over the fate of Spanish America, the insurgents' attempts to draw the Powers into their complex struggles, and Spain's efforts to enlist them in its cause - worked to produce a chaotic power vacuum in which opportunities for unorthodox, adventurous, and piratical action flourished. The activities of the professional revolutionaries, mercenaries, spies, and freebooters who lurked in the back alleys of Latin American independence - and often served as relays between the Atlantic powers and local forces on the ground - furnish rich material for a new kind of diplomatic history - diplomatic history "from below" - in which states figure as merely one among several different kinds of actors. Looking at the wars of Latin American independence in the broader framework of the Western Question reveals the rebellion of Spanish America both as a central element in the broader process of geopolitical realignment in the post-Napoleonic world and a theater in which low-level, freelance adventurism could flourish.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars had made available thousands of soldiers, sailors, and revolutionaries, many of whom viewed the struggle in Spanish America as a welcome opportunity to exercise their unique abilities. Some rallied to the insurgent armies, others joined privateering expeditions sailing under various patriot flags, and still others used the cause of independence as a cover for their own self-interested ends. These adventurers included some of the most colorful characters of the age – for example Bolivar’s nephew-in-law, the Scottish Catholic officer Gregor McGregor, who founded the short-lived Republic of Florida; the Lallemand brothers, exiled Napoleonic generals, who tried to create a Bonapartist colony in Texas; and the pirate Louis Aury, former commander of Bolivar’s navy, who led a force of free blacks (the “Battalion of Free Men of Color”) in smuggling Africans into the United States. Employing the clandestine services of these and other adventurers, the great powers vied covertly with each other in Spanish America. Just as the Eastern Question had its Western forerunner, the Great Game of central Asia had its earlier, American equivalent.

Rare was the mercenary, privateer, or ideologue driven purely by revolutionary sentiment. For most, the lines between political engagement, profit, and glory-seeking were blurred. And rather than forming a disciplined legion bound together by a shared ideological commitment, the international supporters of Latin American revolution formed a shifting population of individualistic men of action. Easily forging temporary alliances for specific projects that promised mutual benefits, they just as easily moved apart. They often betrayed each other, revealing information about each other's machinations to the spies and diplomats of the established powers in exchange for personal advantage and protection. The masters of this game were the notorious Lafitte brothers, Jean and Pierre, citizens of France who had settled in New Orleans. But another adventurer no less adept at playing both sides against the middle was the former Napoleonic officer and covert operative,

Louis-Jacques Galabert. It is to his life and his experiences, many of which took place on or in relation to the Gulf region, that I now turn.

Galabert was an enigmatic figure whose career literally took him around the world. Youngest son of a mercantile family in the sleepy town of Castelnaudary, he was related to the future Spanish finance minister Francisco Cabarrus. At the age of 16, Galabert left home to make his fortune in the French sugar colony of Saint-Domingue. But the year was 1789 and the Caribbean island experienced a massive slave rebellion two years later. Appalled by the violence, Galabert returned to France in 1791. For reasons that are unclear, he was arrested soon thereafter, imprisoned in Paris, and barely escaped from the guillotine. He sought anonymity in the army, but was discovered and denounced – once again it is unclear why. To save himself, as well as strike back at a revolution that had treated him so roughly, Galabert fled to England where he joined a unit of French *émigrés* under Major Count Williamson. In 1796 this corps was part of the disastrous Quiberon expedition in which the *émigré* forces landed by the British were captured and then executed to a man. As his unit was held in reserve and never disembarked, Galabert survived the debacle. But the spectacle of what he considered to be the cold-blooded abandonment of his countrymen by the perfidious English left him with a profound hatred of that nation, a hatred that colored his subsequent actions.

As a virulently Anglophobic counter-revolutionary *émigré*, Galabert’s options were limited. Fortunately for him, there was still Spain where his Cabarrus family connections may have helped him gain employment, possibly as a secret agent. In 1798 he was sent on a mission by the Spanish government (under cover of employment with the Spanish Philippines Company) to British-controlled Bengal. Upon arrival in India, however, he was arrested by the British Governor-General first as a French spy and then as a Spanish one. On the point of being shipped to London as a prisoner, Galabert escaped in a Danish vessel which then

spent several months trading in the South China Sea. From November 1800 to March 1802, Galabert returned to Europe heading eastward via Mexico and Cuba, thereby circumnavigating the globe. On his return to France, Galabert entered government service under Napoleon and undertook a series of mysterious trips to Italy during the period 1803-1806. In April 1806 he was commissioned as a lieutenant in the newly-activated Tour d'Auvergne regiment, a unit intended to attract former *émigrés* and other counterrevolutionaries to Napoleon's army. Galabert apparently never joined his new corps. Instead, from 1806 through 1809 he was employed in various diplomatic and covert missions in the Adriatic and Aegean region, notably Turkey, Dalmatia, Albania, and the Ionian Isles. Because of his profound knowledge of the country and its language, Galabert was next attached to the headquarters staff of the Army of Spain in 1809 as Marshal Soult's aide-de-camp. After Waterloo Galabert was exiled to Pau and placed under surveillance. Although he tried to win the confidence of the government – he even began one of his letters to the Duke d'Angouleme with the proud declaration "I am an *émigré*" – the Bourbons remained suspicious of this man who had so effortlessly transferred his loyalty from the English to the Spanish to Napoleon. Frustrated by what amounted to house arrest, Colonel Galabert (as he now called himself) resigned from the army in 1817 and sailed for the United States. A new adventure was beginning for this eternally restless man of action.

In my book, *Bonapartists in the Borderlands*, I describe in detail how - once in the United States - Galabert became involved in the filibustering activities of a group of fellow military expatriates. Led by General Henri Lallemand, these exiled French officers concocted a plan to invade a strip of contested Texas borderland whose ownership was then disputed by Spain and the United States. As Lallemand's trusted lieutenant and as the only member of the group who had had traveled substantially in New Spain, Galabert was given a central role in the endeavor. It was his task to make contact with Don Luis de Onis, the Spanish ambassador to Washington and propose that the

French exiles be permitted to enter Texas as border guards defending the Spanish dominions from Yankee incursions. Galabert made his pitch to the Ambassador in a series of top-secret meetings held in mid-1817. Although Onis showed some interest in this unlikely plan, it was rejected several months later both by the Cabinet of Madrid and the Viceroy of New Spain. By this time, however, Galabert had fallen out with General Lallemand and been ejected from the Texas expedition.

This rebuff did not, however, end Galabert's career as an adventurer. During the first half of 1818, the period when the Lallemand group effectively established an armed encampment in Texas, Galabert informed on their activities to the worried governments of both the United States and Spain. He also drafted and passed on to the American Department of State a comprehensive plan for invading New Spain. In calling for a diversionary land attack from the North to cover a decisive amphibious drive from Veracruz to Mexico City, Galabert's plan clearly foreshadowed the strategy adopted by the United States in the Mexican-American War 30 years later. It is not clear what influence, if any, Galabert's plan had on those subsequent military operations.

Despite these activities, life in the United States must have appeared dull to Galabert. By 1820 he had returned to Europe to take up military service in constitutionalist Spain, supposedly as a colonel in a regiment of French volunteers striving to defend the constitutionalist regime from French invasion. Like many of the French Bonapartists and liberals who took up arms against their own country to defend the short-lived Cortes, Galabert was captured and brought back to France. There, he was allowed to live in freedom in Castelnaudary, albeit under police surveillance. He seems to have tried to restart his military career, but his efforts to gain reinstatement went nowhere under the Bourbons. But after the revolution of 1830, Galabert, like many other veterans of Napoleon's armies, found himself welcomed with open arms by the new regime. He was elected to the legislature in 1831. There he

lobbied continually, but without success, for a project that became his obsession, the creation of the *Canal des Pyrénées* to link the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. He died in 1841 after a long life full of global adventure and, in its final decade, bourgeois respectability.

One aspect of Galabert's American exile is however almost totally unknown: his literary career. In the final months of 1817, after his expulsion from the Lallemand expedition, the now-underemployed and restless Galabert published a series of remarkable poems in the *Abeille Americaine*, the French-language newspaper brought out in Philadelphia by the blind poet-silvermaker Jean-Simon Chaudron. In these poems, Galabert describes various stages of his trip around the world: India, Malaya, the Philippines, China, and the long voyage across the Pacific Ocean. While the literary quality of his poems may leave much to be desired, they do provide some surprising insights into the ideas and worldview of this extraordinary man.

***"Fragment on Malaca"***

*(Abeille Americaine, no.19, 20 novembre 1817)*

*It was there that boredom joined solitude  
To heighten our fears on that frail vessel  
But finally destiny, fulfilling our desires  
Bore us safely to the Malay shores.*

*In these happy locales, fecund nature  
Offers to the eyes of man fields of abundance  
An eternal Springtime brings flowers to the grass  
And under an azure sky confounds the seasons  
Soft voluptuousness on the wings of Zephyr  
Infuses the senses with the air one breathes*

*On these shores only man, by his activity  
Outrages nature and destroys its beauty  
Iron and poison in his bloodstained hand  
Have opened the door to innumerable crimes  
His hand, ever-armed with a horrible dagger  
His fierce presence and his frightful regard  
Trouble the tender soul of the startled traveler  
Barbarousness reigns in this happy land  
And the sun never illuminates its climes  
Without revealing horrors and assassinations*

*On these faraway beaches, the proud Europeans  
Have subjected the ramparts to their sovereign laws  
On the pathetic debris of the Dutch Empire*

*Glowers the English Leopard at Malaca;  
There, the sons of Albion plot their crimes,  
Proud of their treason, engorged on the blood of their victims.  
Beneath a pompous veil, politics vainly  
Covers with pretty words all their villany;  
In its perfidious mouth, honor and virtue  
Are but greed, and self-interest is its guide;  
Force makes the law, and the weak enchained  
Must suffer without complaint or die condemned.*

***"Fragment on Manilla" (Same issue)***

*In this coveted port, the flags of Spain  
Festoon the ramparts and wave above the countryside,  
And from afar Manilla, rising from the rock,  
Erects on its walls imposing fortifications  
In all the nearby fields the apparatus of war  
Blinds the eye and makes the earth tremble;  
And many well-trained warriors  
Are eager to vanquish the English.  
These brave Spaniards, armed for their defense,  
Have vowed to preserve their rights,  
In the midst of danger, they joyously  
Demonstrated the valor of the children of Mars,  
Which previously subjugated the Moor and America,  
And brought under their laws Granada and Mexico.  
Their antique laurels, Pavia and St. Quentin,  
All these famous names, excite in their breast  
The noble ambition of surpassing the glory  
Of these renowned days, beloved of victory.*

*The time has passed when, with a hooded monk,  
Absolutist order and sacred authority,  
Displayed saints on the battlements  
To defeat the soldiers of Albion.  
The ramparts of Manilla and all their bastions  
Manned and defended by big battalions  
Reveal amidst the fiery roar of cannon  
The sons of Magellan defying armies.*

***Fragment on China  
(no.20, 27 novembre 1817)***

*My destiny carried me beyond far away seas  
To this amazing people, the only people in the universe  
Whose pride, resting upon antique annals,  
Can brag of its faith, of its original mores;  
This numerous people is the model for all mortals  
Thanks to its laws, its virtues, its gods, and its alters.  
The superb Chinese, in the bosom of his country,  
Contemplating his greatness, his active industry,  
His power, his possessions, his widespread arts,  
His delicate pleasures, and above all those virtues  
Whose happy ascendancy, captivating the Tartars,  
Subjugated on three occasions these conquering barbarians,  
Admires his country, adores his ancestors.  
He owes to them his happiness; he has made them into gods.  
The wise inhabitants of this immense empire,*

*Find in work peace and abundance,  
Under the rule of law, they live without remorse,  
And without imaginary fears descend among the dead.*

*But the impostor Bonze, priest of ignorance,  
Vulgarity, and stupidity, leads them astray;  
Heaven is in his hands, he sells it on the cheap,  
Getting fat in his cloister and living in disdain.  
In all places and at all times, it is thus that the virtues and  
vices  
Of poor humanity are sacrificed;  
And crime in all places and in all accents,  
Is consecrated by error and obtains our incense,  
The barbaric Gauls, holy murderers,  
Burning their children at the command of the Druids,  
Thought they were pleasing gods who, drunk on blood,  
By this sad holocaust were all the more honored.*

*Prostitution in fanatical India  
Has sullied its authors by its shameless cult  
And the credulous people, in their simplemindedness  
Do homage unto Vishnu by offering him the virginity of  
their daughters.  
The sneaky Brahman that the imbeciles cover with incense,  
Claims descent from the gods and claims all their powers;  
And timid beauty, adoring at their feet,  
Must surrender to their arms in order to have a husband.  
But the Chinese people, the stern magistrate,  
Keep at arms length the priest they tolerate.  
With a holy and just zeal, they yearn for their rights,  
They believe in Tien, whom they adore and whose voice alone  
they follow.  
Obeying his lessons, each following the appropriate example,  
They find their temple in the family household;  
There, the father, surrounded by his grieving family,  
Respectfully approaches the mystical coffin,  
Fervently invokes the soul of his ancestors,  
And blesses his children without the help of priests.  
Thus in this region, the great Legislator,  
Guided by Reason, triumphs over error,  
Founds on virtue its religion and its morality,  
And bannishes from the alters pomposity and scandal.*

In conclusion, what is the most striking about Galabert's literary output is the extent to which he remains a man of the Enlightenment even in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of the nineteenth century. Although the period following Napoleon's defeat in 1815 is generally associated with the literary and cultural trends of Romanticism and the revival of Catholic religiosity, Galabert seems unshakably wedded to and irrevocably marked by the Enlightenment tradition within which he was raised. We see this in several aspects of his poetry. First, the strong, even virulent anti-religious sentiment and the

celebration of reason which characterize the last poem on China. Second, in the celebration of nature - with its corresponding denunciation of the polluting works of man - in the first poem on Malaya. Third, we see it in the persistent thread of Anglophobia that pervades his entire literary output and, indeed, his long career as an international adventurer. For Galabert was a French nationalist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century sense of the term, in which Frenchness was decisively shaped by opposition to all things English. And finally, Galabert's Enlightenment sensibility emerges with particular clarity in the distinctive combination of activities he followed simultaneously in his career - arms and letters. For nowhere more than in the French Enlightenment did these two tendencies come together. Galabert, like other, better-known figures like Guibert, was a *soldat-philosophe* to his core. In this, he remained until his death in 1841, a typical man of the Enlightenment.