

## NOTES AND COMMENT

### ALEXANDER MACAULAY, AN UNKNOWN HERO: HIS FAMILY AND EARLY LIFE

Alexander Macaulay is an unknown hero. He is not recognized in the United States, his native country; and in Colombia, where he met his death, little is known of his background. *Colombianos* know only of his meteoric career during 1812, which ended tragically before a firing squad in the royalist city of Pasto.

The apparent injustice with which history has treated Macaulay, the oblivion which has surrounded his life, are intriguing. His youth, gallantry, and valor, his unselfishness, and his noble sacrifice are impressive. Moreover, he was born in Virginia, and the people of the Southern States have a singular attraction for a man of the Spanish race. The proud, gallant Southerner of those days, with his side whiskers, his gracious manner, and his willingness to risk his life in questions of honor, has much in common with the Spanish cavaliers of old.

In an earlier article on the activities of Macaulay in Colombia,<sup>1</sup> I referred to the romantic theory of General Luis Capella Toledo, who holds that Macaulay was in Venezuela and Colombia in pursuit of a hopeless love. I do not know what General Capella Toledo's sources were although they appear very circumstantial, since he mentioned people by name. In addition, he gave the name of the ship which brought Macaulay from Spain to Venezuela.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that Macaulay was determined to reach Quito, the home of Captain General Don Toribio Montes, father of the girl he supposedly loved. But did that girl actually exist? Or that love? Did the young North American really wish to reach romantic Quito, covered with glory and leading his victorious troops in order to break down the arrogance of the captain general who opposed his amorous designs?

This is a beautiful and romantic idea, but later research seems to prove that the love motive did not exist, that Macaulay was not even in Spain, that he went directly to South America from his own country and was moved by the heroic impulse to fight for the freedom of the Spanish colonies.

<sup>1</sup> "Alexander Macaulay in the Liberation of Colombia, South America," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 2nd ser., XXIII, No. 3 (July, 1943), 235-248.

<sup>2</sup> Luis Capella Toledo, *Leyendas históricas* (3rd ed., 3 vols., Bogotá, 1884-1885), III, 31-58.

Macaulay's background proves that he came from an honorable family and one of means. He was born in Yorktown, Virginia, February 20, 1787, the second child of Alexander Macaulay, a native of Glasgow, Scotland, and of Elizabeth Jerdone, born in Louisa County, Virginia in 1759, but also of Scottish descent.<sup>3</sup>

Macaulay's father died in Yorktown in 1798. He had established himself in that town when very young, about the time of the Revolution, and had conducted a merchandise business with considerable success. He was a close relative of Lord Macaulay, whom he visited on one of his trips to England. It is said that, like most of the Scottish merchants established in this country, he felt that the Revolution was a mistake. He left a fragmentary diary, written in 1783, in which he tells of his trip from Louisa County to Yorktown, years after his marriage. This diary, in the form of letters to a friend, is written in serio-comic style, full of satire, due perhaps to his lack of sympathy for the cause of the North American colonists.

Macaulay's mother, Elizabeth Jerdone, died in Yorktown in 1830, seventeen years after the death of her son Alexander. She came from a good family, and was one of nine children. Her father was Francis Jerdone, one of the most important merchants in Yorktown before the North American Revolution. This grandfather of Macaulay was born in Scotland in 1720, but came to Hampton, Virginia, in 1746 with a cargo of merchandise from London. He established himself in Yorktown, where he made a considerable fortune, then moved to Louisa County. In the *Virginia Gazette* he is mentioned as an eminent merchant who had acquired an attractive fortune and enjoyed an excellent reputation. His father, the great-grandfather of Alexander Macaulay, was John Jerdone, magistrate of Jedburg, Scotland.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Macaulay's father and mother were married December 5, 1782, and had six children, in the following order:

1. Helen Maxwell Macaulay, born in June, 1784, like her mother before her, in Louisa County, Virginia. All the other children were born in Yorktown. Helen married twice, first Peyton Southall in 1802, and, after his death, Robert Anderson in 1814. They left descendants.

2. Alexander, shot in Pasto in 1813.

3. Sarah, born in 1789.

4. John, born in 1791. Died at the age of four.

5. Francis, born in 1793. Graduated from William and Mary College, but died at the age of eighteen.

6. Patrick, born in 1795. Practiced medicine in Baltimore.

("Family records of the Southall, Macaulay, Jerdone, Bright and Macon Families," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 1st ser., XII, No. 1 [July, 1903], 29-35).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, No. 1 (July, 1896), 21-22; VI, No. 1 (July, 1897), 37. Macaulay's maternal grandmother was Sarah Macon, also of a good family. A native of New Kent, Virginia, she was born in 1731, and died in October, 1818.

The only material on Alexander Macaulay's life that I have been able to find in the United States was published in 1817 in a Baltimore periodical called *The Portico*.<sup>5</sup> Under the title of "Biographical Sketch of Doctor Alexander Macaulay—Collected from authentick sources," there is an account of the early years of his life, his departure for South America, and his early experiences in Venezuela and Colombia. Probably the "authentic sources of information" refer to his brother Patrick, a Baltimore doctor.

At the age of seven, Macaulay was sent by his father to a boarding school in Northern Neck, Virginia. But the monotony and tranquillity of life there did not agree with his active and daring spirit, and he was shortly transferred to the Grammar School of William and Mary College, and later to Lexington College.

Macaulay's father died at that time, and his education remained under the direction of his maternal grandmother, Sarah (Macon) Jerdone. At the age of seventeen he finished his preparatory studies and, in accord with his mother's wishes, began the study of medicine under an eminent doctor in Hampton. "Few young men of those who left the college," says his eulogist, "had a finer character than Macaulay." Noble, ardent, generous, and lively, with an intelligent and persevering mind, Macaulay mastered whatever he undertook.

Macaulay spent much of his spare time in nautical studies. During his stay in Hampton, the Naval Squadron under Commodore Barron was preparing for the expedition against the pirates of Tripoli. Macaulay's imagination was immediately fired with the idea of abandoning his medical profession and acquiring more rapid distinction in the naval service of his country. But his mother was strongly opposed to the idea. However, he secretly sought admission to the Navy, and probably would have been successful had not a friend of the family informed his mother. Nevertheless, his desire for service was too firmly entrenched to be thus easily discarded, and in 1807 he sought and received an appointment as surgeon of the army at Fort Mifflin. Macaulay took easily to military life, and he was soon very popular with his comrades. He devoted every moment he had free from his professional activities to the study of the military art.

About this time an unfortunate incident took place. In spite of Macaulay's popularity among the members of the garrison at the fort, one of them offended him. Macaulay, who was very sensitive to personal insult, wrote to his adversary: "I offer you the chance to retract.

<sup>5</sup> IV, 124-129; 299-309; 400-409; 471-480. The last part of the article, with an introduction, was published in *The Daily National Intelligencer* of Washington, May 5, 1818, under the title of "Alexander Macaulay."

Otherwise, it will be too late on the field of honor." No satisfaction was offered, and the adversaries met face to face. At the first shot, Macaulay's opponent fell mortally wounded. Tardily he acknowledged the injustice and retracted. Macaulay then gave him professional attention and took care of him until his death.

In 1808, at the age of twenty-one, Macaulay sought a commission in the army from the secretary of war, submitting recommendations from high military men. When General Dearborn, then secretary of war, learned of the youth and impetuosity of the aspirant, he refused his request. "We have enough ambitious men in the army already," he said. At that time General Wilkinson, who had come to esteem young Macaulay highly, assigned him to the Army Medical Corps in New Orleans. He left for that post in the spring of 1809. In his *Memoirs* (Vol. II, page 414), General Wilkinson makes very complimentary reference to Macaulay's services and to his activity and ability as an organizer. However, that young man aspired to be more than a famous doctor. He had not lost sight of his military ambition.

The expansion of the army of the new United States was then under consideration. Armed with very good references, Macaulay once more made application in Washington for a commission in the regular army. Unfortunately, his friendship with General Wilkinson was not looked on with favor by the new secretary of war, Dr. Eustis, and the doors were once more closed against him. Discouraged by the persistent hostility of the secretary of war, Macaulay left Washington in the spring of 1810. The proposed army expansion fell through, and he saw all his hopes and dreams of a military career in his own country blasted.

The call to revolution had by that time been heard in South America, and Macaulay recognized in that great field of action ample opportunity to use his talents and to fight for a noble cause. He also felt that relations with that interesting section of the New World, almost unknown in the United States, were closely related to the future prosperity of his native country. Although he returned to New Orleans to attend to his duties as army doctor, he was now interested in obtaining all the information available on South America. He was again in Washington in the autumn of 1810, and again he failed to secure an appointment. Finally, he was sent to Fort Norfolk, Virginia, as a doctor.

Macaulay then decided to offer his services to the revolting colonies in South America. When he sent his resignation to the secretary of war, he also forwarded a plan of the fortifications at the post where he had been stationed as physician, indicating the improvements he felt were indispensable for the future expansion of the defenses. He embarked for

the island of Grenada in May, 1811, arriving at La Guaira in the autumn of the same year.

During the voyage, Macaulay was captured by Spanish privateers and robbed. Later when the privateers were repairing their boat, near Puerto Cabello, they were surprised by two republican gunboats. Macaulay was caught between two fires. The Spaniards attacked him because he was their prisoner and was escaping from them. The republicans also shot at him when he attempted to approach one of the gunboats in a canoe. Finally, by signals, he induced them to stop firing, and he was soon happily aboard one of the republican boats.

It was difficult for the captive to make himself understood by the crew, since he was unfamiliar with their language. But observing that the firing was poorly directed against the parapet that the Spanish privateers had erected on the beach, he obtained permission to direct the firing from one of the cannon. He was so successful that he immediately gained the confidence and admiration of his new comrades. When the action was over, the gunboat left for Puerto Cabello, and from there Macaulay went on to La Guaira.

The United States consul in La Guaira, Robert K. Lowry, extended the most generous hospitality to his countryman. The consul gave him a great deal of information about the country; and on his advice Macaulay went to live in Calabozo in order to acquire a knowledge of Spanish, without which he would not be able to take an active part in affairs of the country.

At the time of his short stay in La Guaira, Macaulay had begun to keep a sort of diary, with observations about the country, its inhabitants, manners, customs, and foods.<sup>6</sup> There is little of interest in those notes and in his description of the modest buildings of the time. The soil he describes as rich and fertile, but cultivated by primitive means. Cattle-raising was the main source of wealth, but the cattle appeared to be of poor quality and badly tended.

When Macaulay reached Calabozo, he had only nine dollars. He knew no one, had not a single letter of introduction, and his knowledge of the language was limited. A difficult situation for a foreign youth, well born and from a family of comfortable means, but he met everything with his usual enthusiasm and strength of character.

In a few days he made friends with Don José Antonio Morales, a man of heart and one of the richest and most esteemed residents of Calabozo, a gentleman, he says, who would do honor to any country. Morales extended to the young North American the most generous hospitality, feeding and housing him. Macaulay lost no time in rendering his serv-

<sup>6</sup> "Biographical Sketch of Doctor Alexander Macaulay," *loc. cit.*, p. 299 ff.

ices as doctor to the community, since there was no other physician in hundreds of leagues around. He did so well that, in addition to alleviating much sickness, in a very short time he was able to repay a small loan he received in La Guaira, as well as to send a substantial amount to the United States to help his younger brother — probably Patrick—in the continuation of his studies.

Despite Señor Morales's hospitality, the tranquillity of Macaulay's life there, and his success in his profession, Calabozo did not satisfy the ambitions and desires of Macaulay. So one day he decided to leave the hospitable town and go to the Llanos to seek entry into New Granada, where the fight was going on against the Spaniards. He felt that Bogotá, Papayán, and Quito would be the centers of great struggles and events.

By this time Macaulay was well equipped with a knowledge of Spanish. With recommendations from Morales, whom Macaulay had attended with great care during an illness before his departure, he left Calabozo in December of 1811. The noble Morales gave him one of his most faithful servants to act as guide. He crossed the Guarico and the Portuguesa rivers, saw the Llanos in all their grandeur, and arrived at Apure. After spending two days at Villa de la Isla, in the home of a friend of Morales, he continued over the prairies, rivers, and plains until he arrived at the village of Guasqualito, where he secured another guide who conducted him to Pore.

At this point the diary ends. But in a letter to a friend in the United States he says: "I arrived at this capital [Bogotá] on the 2nd of February [1812], and after remaining a week, returned to the provinces of Pampeluna and Tunja. On the 10th of March I again entered it, and was immediately arrested and put under guard, under pretence that I had made *rapid journies* to those provinces. After three days' confinement, I was restored to liberty, but subsequent sickness has detained me in my projected visit to *Popayan* and *Quito*."<sup>7</sup> It is thus evident that Macaulay went to Nueva Granada from the Llanos through Pamploña, and that his movements aroused the suspicions of the patriot leader Antonio de Nariño, who was then quarrelling with the congress in Tunja.

In this letter Macaulay gives a somewhat impassioned account of the political situation and of the movements of Nariño, whom he did not judge very favorably. Because of the struggles of the federalists and centralists at that time, Macaulay did not have much hope for the country's liberty. His prophesies were confirmed in 1816, when the country was completely dominated by the Spanish general, Pablo Morillo.

"At present," Macaulay's letter adds, "*Santa Fé* is a bad place for

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 471-475.

one who knows the value of liberty—he is surrounded with spies, and if an unguarded word escape him, a prison is ready to receive him.”

Undoubtedly some indiscretion on Macaulay's part was the cause of his arrest, but he found a friend in Don Pedro Groot. Don Pedro, says Macaulay, “has more influence than any man in *Santa Fé*. . . . It was his influence that saved me from a longer imprisonment, and that has procured me a passport to Quito.” Nariño wanted to force Macaulay to go to Cartagena, alleging that the young North American was hostile to his plans and should not be allowed to remain longer in the country.

This letter of April 2 from Bogotá was the last his friends and relatives in his native land received. The war between Great Britain and the United States put a stop to correspondence. It remained for Don Pedro Gual, who in 1815 came to the United States as envoy from New Granada, to break the tragic news of Macaulay's death in Pasto to friends and relatives.

An Englishman of Cartagena, by the name of Glenn, was going through Pasto at the time of Macaulay's execution. He had an opportunity to visit the young Virginian in prison and offer his services in communicating with the prisoner's relatives and friends in the United States. Mr. Glenn relates that he found Macaulay serene and reposed in mind, but that he referred with dignity and firmness to the barbarity of those who condemned him. When Mr. Glenn mentioned the object of his visit, a shadow passed over Macaulay's face, but, recovering rapidly, he said to his visitor: “In one hour more you will witness my fate. Tell them how I met death; it is now all the consolation you can carry to them.”

When the moment of execution arrived, Macaulay turned to his companions in misfortune and said: “Let me be the first to receive death, in order that I may show you how a republican and an American should die. For my part, had I, at this moment, a thousand lives, I would freely offer them up for the noble cause in which we have fought. Yet, brave soldiers, fear not for your country; thousands will arise to avenge her.”

Turning to his executioners, he advanced with firm step, and removed the bandage from his eyes. Standing straight and without flinching, he extended his arm and gave the signal to fire.

Thus ends the account published in *The Portico* of Baltimore in 1817. At the end the campaign of Nariño against Pasto in 1814 is briefly recounted. It is stated that Nariño suggested removing Macaulay's remains from Pasto to Popayán.

In contemplating the little that we know about Macaulay, there remains a feeling of regret for his untimely death and for his unnecessary

sacrifice. He was one of the first foreigners to come to the assistance of those who fought for Colombia's liberty. Macaulay did not go there in search of material advantages, which he could so easily have found in his own country. He went inspired by his dreams of glory and action in the service of a cause which interested him, and in which he so early met his death!

Everything seems to indicate that Macaulay, disgusted by the chaotic situation of Cundinamarca, decided to go to Quito to practice his profession of medicine until events took another turn. Such at least was the intention he expressed in the first declaration before the military tribunal at Pasto. He arrived in Popayán, however, at the critical moment when the royalists menaced the city; and he was not the man to withdraw from the struggle and action around him. His military knowledge, acquired in Hampton, Fort Mifflin, and Fort Norfolk, brought him to the front in those tragic days. In Colombia they were not aware of Macaulay's familiarity with military art, and if the cruelty of Montes had not cut short his career, undoubtedly the Virginian would have been an important military figure in the future campaigns in Colombia.

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