

PROBLEMS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MEXICAN FREEMASONRY, PART I

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The Poinsett material in this article will be incorporated in Paul Rich and Guillermo De Los Reyes, *Mexican Freemasonry*, Regency Press, New York and London, 1997. Comments and criticisms as especially invited and will be credited.

Freemasonry is among the least understood topics in Latin American history. It was brought to Mexico by the Spanish, including those in military lodges. (Luis Zalce y Rodriguez, *Apuntes Para la historia de la Masoneria en Mexico*, Mexico City, 1950, 50-51.) Rodriguez suggests that since there were divisions in Spanish Masonry, it is logical to suppose that the antagonism between rites came with them, with "terrible consequences". (Ibid., 42.) That is certainly true.

How shall we even begin to understand the pervasive influence of Masonry on Latin America? The fact is that no historical topic elicits more prejudice and animosity than does Freemasonry, or more unfounded speculation. Part of the problem is the sociological phenomena of the middle-aged Mason who turns from business to the history of the Craft as an avocation and is determined to make Freemasonry into a much older movement than it is: "Whether in ancient India, Egypt, Greece, Italy or Mexico, or among the Druids of Europe, temples of initiation have ever existed...although these great schools of the Mysteries have long dropped out of the public mind, they, or the doctrine they taught, have never ceased to exist; the enmity of official ecclesiasticism and the tendencies of a materialistic and commercial age have caused them to subside into extreme secrecy and concealment, but their initiates have never been absent from the world...it was through the activity and foresight of some of these advanced initiates that our present system of speculative Masonry is due." (W.L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry*, Bell Publishing, New York, 1980 [fac.ed. of 5th ed. pub. London 1927], 64-65.)

Since the warranting of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No.2076 by the United Grand Lodge of England in November 1884 as a research institution, some Masonic historians (but by no means all) have battled to contain the myths and fabrications which bedevil many accounts of Masonry. Not only do they have to combat the criticisms of those outside the movement who view it as a Satanic conspiracy, but they have to deal with those Masons who prefer fairy tales to what really transpired: "It is fair and proper to say that, following the issue of Gould's famous History in the

1880's, at that time the greatest publishing event in the history of speculative masonry, and one that started a new fashion in masonic research. The work of the famous Quatuor Coronati Lodge has brought about throughout universal freemasonry a new understanding of masonic research in every country where freemasonry flourishes." (Bernard E. Jones, *Freemason's Guide and Compendium*, rev. ed., Harrap, London, 1956 [1950], 343.)

Alas, even in the publications of the research lodges that have been founded since Q.C., its influence is not discernible. Fancifulness flourishes. Of course, speculation about the ways in which history is written and whether there can be a "true" and objective history has been going on for centuries. Presumably the first cave man who came back to his den to retell a story of his adventures was accused of gilding the lily. History is used shamelessly for self-serving motives by politicians, ecclesiastics and just about anyone with a cause. But Masons are especially well qualified to comment on the question of impartiality in history, because they have been the victims for decades of the suspicions, sometimes well-founded, of the public.

In short, Masonic historiography is not exempt from motives that lead to the misuse of history in general. Indeed, it suffers from all the problems *in extenso*. Such too is the case with Mexican Masonry. In discussing Poinsett in Mexico the resemblance between general history's difficulties with historians with axes to grind and the difficulties of Freemasonry at the hands of biased historians will become apparent.

The Poinsett Problem in Mexican History

One of the most controversial episodes in Mexican history involves Freemasonry and the first American minister to Mexico, who was Joel R. Poinsett (1779-1851). He is more recalled today for the Christmas flower which he brought back from his stay and which is named after him than for his stormy years as a diplomat. Charleston aristocrat (although opposed to slavery) and inveterate traveler, Poinsett first went to Mexico at the request of President Monroe in the summer of 1822. There he met and formed an unfavorable opinion of the Emperor Iturbide, an army officer (and Scottish Rite Mason) who had set himself up in considerable style as ruler (self-proclaimed) in the wake of the overthrow of the Spanish.

Iturbide's palace in downtown Mexico City on Avenue Madeiro has been restored and is well worth a visit: "I was presented to His Majesty this morning [3 November 1822]. On alighting at the gate of the palace, which is an extensive and handsome building, we were received by a numerous guard, and then made our way up a large stone staircase, lined with centeniels (sic.), to a spacious apartment, where we found a brigadier general stationed to usher us into the presence. The emperor was in his cabinet and received us with great politeness...I will not repeat the tales I heard daily of the character and conduct of this man." (Joel Roberts Poinsett, *Notes on Mexico Made in the Autumn of 1822*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1969

[originally pub.Philadelphia 1824], 67-68. See J.Fred Rippy, *Joel R. Poinsett, Versatile American*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1935, 90-103.)

There is no evidence to show that Poinsett had any reason to be predisposed to dislike Iturbide, and the principle of Occam's Razor should be applied: the philosophic doctrine that entities and causes should not be multiplied unnecessarily. Rather than fabricate reasons, we can (unless evidence surfaces to the contrary), observe that Iturbide was not a very likable individual and that Poinsett was annoyed by the pretentiousness of the court that the would-be emperor had created.

This was only the initial encounter in Poinsett's involvement with Mexico, a relationship which had profound consequences for the country but which it is easy to misread. While it is true that later when he was America's envoy, Poinsett was to have a unique opportunity to make his views felt, there is nothing to substantiate claims that he was part of a Masonic cabal which sent him to Mexico with a secret agenda.

Minister to Mexico and Royal Arch Mason

He received the official appointment as minister to Mexico in 1825, one which had originally been offered to Andrew Jackson. Jackson was grand master of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee in 1822-1824. He, like Poinsett, was a Royal Arch Mason and was deputy grand high priest when the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Tennessee was instituted in 1826. When he was president he helped in Masonic cornerstone ceremonies for a monument to George Washington's mother. He attended lodge meetings and Royal Arch chapter meetings all his life. (William R. Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, Vol.I, Macoy Publishing, Richmond (Virginia), 1957, 283-284.)

So it would be possible, based on the notion that only Masons were nominated for the post, to allege that the Masons were determined to have a Mason as envoy to Mexico. That would be quite untrue. Poinsett was appointed by John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), who was an anti-Mason, having published as a book the letters he wrote against the Craft. (Ibid., Vol.II, 1958, 5.)

What is true is that a predominantly Protestant and democratic United States was suspicious of what had been a narrowly Catholic and aristocratic neighbor, wary of increasing British presence in Mexico, and alarmed about Mexican intentions in Cuba. (See Frederick C. Turner, *The Dynamic of Mexican Nationalism*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1968, 36. "Poinsett failed to dispel this discord but rather increased the hostility by his intervention in Mexican politics. The friction caused by Poinsett's promotion of democracy and American business interests, his countering of British activity, and his siding with the York Rite Freemasons of Mexico against those of the Scottish Rite was increased still further by the second United States minister, Anthony Butler." (Ibid.)

That these were not Masonic concerns but American concerns is demonstrated by the diplomatic correspondence. Poinsett was given a mandate by the American government to support the Monroe Doctrine and extend democracy. To accomplish such ambitious goals, Poinsett audaciously determined that he must change the attitudes of the Mexican government, challenging those in the leadership who were Spanish-born or sympathetic to Spain and who still looked towards Europe. Strangely, and coincidentally, this involved taking sides in a bitter fight between rival branches of Mexican Freemasonry. Although Poinsett himself was a Freemason, many of those he considered as opponents to his republican goals for Mexico were Scottish Rite Masons who in his view were paternalistic, monarchistic, and socially elitist.

Poinsett did not introduce Masonry to Mexico. If the York Rite blue lodges of this era are considered to be those lodges which were not part of any larger system but which gave the first three degrees alone, then possibly the first York lodges in Mexico were those established by the Grand Lodge of Louisiana in 1816 and 1817.

The eighteenth-century origins of Masonry in Mexico are shrouded in mystery, almost an inevitability given the nature of the organization. (Raymond Estep, Lorenzo de Zavala (Profeta del Liberalismo Mexicano), Mexico City, 1949, 107.) For that matter, Masonry's origins in Europe remain mysterious. (See P.J.Rich, comments on C.N.Batham's "The Origin of Freemasonry: A New Theory", Ars Quatuor Coronatorum, Vol.106,1993,45.)

Nor was there any Masonic unity between the rites. Early nineteenth-century Mexico was in revolutionary ferment, the atmosphere being one which encouraged the growth of different expressions of Freemasonry and a multifarious jumble of Masonic ideologies and philosophies. (Remberto Padilla, Historia de la Politica Mexicana, EDAMEX, Mexico City, 1993, 67. Alonso Fernandez, La Francmasoneria en la Independencia de Hispanoamerica, Buenos Aires, 1988, 16.)

Poinsett seized upon the York rite of Masonry, to which he belonged, as a means by which he could strengthen his diplomatic mission. (This relates to Alberto Carreño's discussion of the importance of extraofficial relationships in Mexican-American affairs. See Alberto Maria Carreño, La Diplomacia Extraordinaria en Mexico y los Estados Unidos, 1789-1947, Vol.I, Editorial Jus, Mexico City, 1961, 7.) The British minister, Henry B.Ward, was siding with the Scottish Rite in hopes of achieving trade privileges, and the Colombian Minister had been an Scottish Rite officer in Cartagena and was siding with Ward. This foreign interference coincided with growing resentment among Mexican patriots of the power of the Scottish Rite, which along with its supposed European affinities was regarded as working for patronage and position rather than the common good.

In respects, Poinsett's decision to employ Masonry as a tool of his interventionist policies was the start of that long involvement of Masonry with Mexican politics which has been regarded so ambiguously by scholars as far as its good and bad effects have been concerned. Regardless of the rite, whether Masonry's political role was beneficial to Mexican society remains a deeply

contentious issue. There are those who believe Masonry in Mexican history has been "a symbol of and major instrument for the creation of the modern 'neutral' society. a society in which the fixed statutes of the medieval world gave way to the needs of a changing and dynamic economic and social structure, where artificial and dysfunctional group distinctions are ignored and the individual is judged on his achieved rather than ascribed status." (Rodriquez, 57.) Others would be far less complimentary!

Masonry: Vocation or Avocation?

Generally Poinsett's activities are presented as political, and perhaps not enough credit has been given Poinsett's Masonic as opposed to his political enthusiasms. His involvement in Masonry was during an intense period of anti-Masonic activity in America, so his commitment to the fraternity must have been firm. Before arriving in Mexico he had been Master of Recovery Lodge No.31 in Greenville, South Carolina, and of Solomons Lodge No.1 in Charleston. In 1821 he was Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina as well as High Priest of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of South Carolina, a post he held until 1841. (Denslow, Vol.III, 352.)

The Royal Arch degrees of which he was an officer, then as now, were open to a Mason after first taking the three degrees offered by the "blue" lodge. Conferred in chapters rather than lodges, they are known to all Masons today as part of the system of Masonic initiations popularly called the York rite.

The nineteenth century was a time when degrees, which may be explained as ritual dramas in which the candidate took a principal role, proliferated in number. "Higher degrees frequently drew fire from Blue Lodge spokesmen, who criticized them for deflecting interest away from Blue Lodge. It was a common complaint that men attracted to the 'high sounding title and the glory of a gorgeous and showy uniform' joined Blue Lodge as a 'stepping stone' to the other orders, and quickly lost interest in the plainer lodges. Blue Lodge leaders also complained that these groups undermined the egalitarianism of Masonry. As John Arthur, Grand Master of Washington, noted, Masonry has 'allowed a childish longing for feathers and titles to destroy the democracy of our Fraternity and convert it into a system of castes more complex than those of [India].'" (Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1984, 16-17.)

The situation in Poinsett's day was somewhat similar to that of today as far as the York rite being composed of several autonomous bodies: other York organizations included the Council of Royal and Select Masters, which conferred the Cryptic degrees, and the Knights Templar, whose commanderies gave the chivalric degrees. The Royal Arch was much more wide-spread in the United States at the time than was the Scottish Rite. (E.g. see Gerald D. Foss, *Three Centuries of Freemasonry in New Hampshire*, Grand Lodge of New Hampshire, Concord (New Hampshire), 1972, 356-369. A Royal Arch chapter was established in New Hampshire in 1807. A Scottish Rite Lodge of Perfection was not established until 1842.)

So it was not surprising that Poinsett's affiliation was with the Royal Arch rather than the Scottish Rite. But the full implications for Mexico of his Royal Arch membership have to our knowledge never been adequately discussed. This apparently arcane matter of lodge affiliation was to prove enormously significant in Poinsett's tempestuous Mexican career and to American relations with Mexico. The ramifications of this apparently minor matter of which Masonic ritual and obedience would reverberate for more than a century.

Although numerous Masonic rites existed in Mexico during the nineteenth century and in fact still exist, attention has focused on the Scottish and Yorkist groups. One aspect of the Scottish-Yorkist issue in Mexico during the last 175 years that is not much considered is whether the two rites have different views about religion and secularism arising out of their different rituals. Mexican Masonry, since it achieved visibility in the 1820s, has always been involved with Mexican church-state issues. However, a case can be made that the Scottish and York organizations have had different postures towards religion. One reason for this may be that the York rite culminates in the Christian degrees of knighthood including those conferring the honors of Knight of Malta and Knight Templar.

That is not to claim that the York rite in Mexico was Christian in a sectarian way or that the entire rite was Christian; the matter is more complicated. While taking the Royal Arch degrees was then as now a requirement for taking the chivalric degrees, the Royal Arch has never been a mere appendant body, as some would argue are such Scottish Rite bodies encountered on the way to the thirty second degree as the Lodge of Perfection and Council of Princes of Jerusalem.

The Royal Arch was the most widespread of the York organizations, having the largest membership of the York bodies, and its situation was unusual. Unlike some of Masonry's auxiliary bodies, Royal Arch Masonry has a case for being considered as an integral part of Masonry. Proponents consider that its ritual dramas complete the story which the candidate is told in the first three degrees. Thus considerable numbers of men, including non-Christians, took and take the Royal Arch degrees not as a step to further degrees but as a completion of their Craft or blue lodge degrees. (In the Scottish Rite, the Royal Arch of Solomon or thirteenth degree conveys a similar story to that of the York Royal Arch degree, but it is not generally regarded as being of the importance in the Scottish system that the Royal Arch degree is in the York system.)

On the other hand, although the Royal Arch admits non-Christians, because the York rite of which it is part limits its 'higher' degrees to Christians it may be that the religious beliefs of members provide a partial explanation of why the Royal Arch in Mexico has never been accused of anti-clericalism to the same extent that the Scottish Rite has. Nevertheless, all Freemasonry is suspect to the religiously conservative. The Craft is accused of being a "featherbed for fallen Christians": "In *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut, 1789-1835*, Dorothy Lipson indicates that as a social club, Masonry provided conviviality. As a charitable

organization, it offered relief in times of distress. And as a far-flung network of 'brothers,' it was useful to geographically mobile men and those engaged in trade. One of the most significant aspects of the fraternity, however, was the way in which Masonry served as a vehicle for dissent from Connecticut's standing order, particularly its established Congregationalist church. For many men, Lipson argues, Masonry could have been a surrogate for the church. Its rituals included not only initiation ceremonies, but also elaborate funeral services. Moreover, like the church, Masonry propounded a code of ethics. Apparent parallels notwithstanding, Masonry's religious ideas conflicted sharply with Connecticut orthodoxy. Beyond a faith in God, the order made no doctrinal demands on its members...In offering men an alternative religious framework, Masonry engendered church disapproval, which occasionally erupted in open conflict between lodges and local clergy." (Dumenil, 5.) In Mexico, the battlelines were drawn much more sharply than in Connecticut. Whether the presence in the Royal Arch of chivalric knighthood holders has mitigated any potential anti clericalism is worthy of investigation.

In any event, a full consideration of how the teachings and rituals of the degrees may relate to the Scottish and York competition over the decades in Mexico and their religious posture is beyond the brief of this paper. It seems though to have had a relevance to the political development of the country, because in the later part of the nineteenth century the growing Scottish anti-clericalism enabled the rite to present itself and to prosper as the spokesmen for a secular Mexican republic in the face of a corrupt and authoritarian church in a way that the York movement never did.

Moreover, the Scottish Rite had a tradition of reinterpreting Christian symbols which the York did not, giving them a Masonic gloss. For example, INRI stood not for the Latin inscription _Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum_ but instead had a different and dual meaning, standing for the Hebrew words _iammim_ (water), _nour_ (fire), _rouach_ (air) and _iebeschah_ (dry earth) and as well for the Latin _Igne Natura Renovatur Integra_ (all of Nature is renovated by fire). The cross was reinterpreted as Druidic, Egyptian, and Indian symbolism. (Mark C. Carnes, _Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America_, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1989, 63.)

This theological revisionism would fuel fears of the Catholic hierarchy about Masonry. Nor of course would the Church appreciate Masonic orders of crusading knights, no matter how pious and sincere their professions of faith. In fact, a case can be made that _both_ the Scottish and York lodges were anti-Catholic and that the differences are those of degree (to pun) rather than of kind. Undoubtedly the continuing tension between Catholicism and secularism which has characterized and bedeviled Mexican history since the beginnings of the Republic can trace part of its roots to the Masonic activity of this era.

The question then of whether the _ritual_ of the Scottish and York Masons supported opposing outlooks on the church-state problem and contributed to the political animosity between the two rites in Mexico is deserving of attention. But the Scottish Rite in Poinsett's time was not anti-clerical in the way that the Scottish Rite subsequently was in the 1850s and 1860s during

the time of President Benito Juarez. Indeed, clergymen belonged to the early Scottish Rite in Mexico.

An understanding of the Scottish-York issue is further complicated by the fact that the accurate reconstruction of the rituals worked in early Mexico has not yet been accomplished. Problems of analysis of fraternal ritual are compounded by the secrecy that enshrouded the affairs of the early lodges. The orders were more scrupulous about obeying injunctions not to have the ceremonies recorded or published. However, "...publishers sold exposés to members who needed help in memorizing their parts or to the curious who wished to 'fathom the wonderful secrets of Freemasonry' without paying for an initiation (Richardson's Monitor, p.iv)." (Ibid., 161. See Benjamin Henry Day, *Richardson's Monitor of Freemasonry*, David McKay, Philadelphia, 1861?)

In any event, Scottish or Escocis Freemasonry was the dominant Masonic rite in Mexico in the early 1820s when Poinsett arrived on the scene, and despite his efforts for the Yorkists it continued in the face of difficulties to be a major influence in Mexican life for many decades. It still dominates Mexican Masonic life, where one of its roles has been to legitimize political power in a country where other sources of legitimacy, such as the Church, are denied to the ruling elite: "To sustain a 'father' role, the power leader often surrounds his leadership with a mystical aura. By claiming a divine right, for example, he persuades the 'sons' of his own infallibility, supposedly derived from a godhead." (Richard and Hephzibah Hauser, *The Fraternal Society*, Random House, New York, 1963, 151.)

The two branches of the brotherhood were decidedly not brotherly, and as the losers in the struggle the Yorkists were ultimately far less successful in Mexican political affairs than was Scottish Rite Masonry, which became the guarantee of a politician's secularism. Catholicism per se has not been necessary to political success in Mexico, while some would argue that Scottish Freemasonry has been essential: "A Mexican can win acceptance as a full member of the national community from the other members of that community, the majority of whom profess Catholic beliefs whether or not he shares this religious faith. Catholicism may open some doors to him in the social, intellectual, or business communities, just as Masonic affiliation aids a man in political circles, but religious association is significantly not the prime criterion for acceptance within the national community." (Turner, 141.)

What is not appreciated is that Poinsett arrived when a conflict between the York and Scottish bodies was already looming. He was not the instigator of the conflict, although he contributed to it. Regardless of the merits or lack of merits of Masonry in general, in the first days of the new republic York Freemasonry did seem to be a promising potential rival to the Scottish Rite. (Harold Dana Sims, *The Expulsion of Mexico's Spaniards, 1821-1836*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990, 5.) The first president of the new republic, Guadalupe Victoria, left the Scottish movement to establish an anti-Spanish xenophobic lodge called *The Great Legion of the Black Eagle*. (Jose Maria Mateos, *Historia de la Masoneria en Mexico desde 1806 a 1884*, Mexico City, 1884, 41.)

It was not surprising that this lodge affiliated with the York Masons (Yorkinos), who to a man were unsympathetic to the Spanish -- even those pledging themselves to support the new republic -- remaining in Mexico. (The lodge that Victoria established, The Great Legion of the Black Eagle, was regarded as a something of a personality cult, and the members were called guadalupanos after their mentor. Nevertheless, its members thought of themselves as serious Masons. Rodriguez, 60.) By extension, the Yorkists were opposed to the Scottish Rite Masons: "The two camps became competing political clubs, sharply divided over the Spanish question. Scottish Rite Masons defended the resident Spaniards, seeing their cause as a test of individual rights and guarantees; the Yorkists attacked the gachupines in a manner reminiscent of the Jacobins, as if to avenge Hidalgo and Morelos." (Sims, 5.)

While we believe that not enough importance has been given to Poinsett's interest in Royal Arch Masonry for its own sake, he unquestionably seized upon the Yorkists as a means to his ends. They were already functioning and regarded the Spaniards as a fifth column, and the Escoseses as ultramontanes, (Ibid., 12.), positions which suited him exactly. He promised five of their lodges to obtain charters from New York (and eventually obtained recognition for three). He entertained Yorkists in his house and supported their creation of a grand or national organization. Cabinet members, senators, congressmen, and army officers affiliated. The Yorkists expanded rapidly. At the end of 1826 they were present in fifteen of the twenty-four federal states and territories, and had 130 lodges. (Ibid., 13.)

Poinsett's meddling was deeply resented. However, he himself consistently denied any fault. "In the last days of 1841 the members of the Grand Lodge of New York referred to the organization of 'Ancient York Masons, under your auspices, in Mexico,' and inquired of the subsequent history of Masonry in that country. Poinsett replied that he had received no information on the subject since his departure from the land of the Montezumas, and that he had ceased to take any part in their procedure long before he left. He recalled, however, that the two rites became the designations of the great political parties which divided the nation, the Scottish Rites opposing democratic institutions while the Yorkists sought to uphold them." (Rippy, 225.) He is perhaps the first exemplar of the interfering gringo, the intrusive American who interjects himself into Mexican affairs without an appreciation of the society. The Escoseses in December 1827, in a declaration called the Plan of Montaqo, sought to expel him from the country.

The censure was justified, as Poinsett sided with the self-proclaimed republicans and democrats against what he thought was a reactionary ragtag collection of monarchists and opportunists. But his attitude towards the Spanish was not completely unsympathetic. In fact, "Poinsett's actions during the revolt were at odds with his previous politics: he sheltered several Spaniards and monarchists in his residence, at some personal peril." (Ibid., 52.) In June 1827, two state legislatures, Puebla and Vera Cruz, petitioned for his recall. (Rippy, 124.) President John Adams was content however to let him remain, possibly because he was more of an embarrassment to Adams' political opponents than to Adams. The Scottish Rite party, under the

titular direction of Nicolas Bravo, took up arms but were defeated by the Yorkists led by General Vicente Guerrero.

In the Mexican presidential election of 1828, the Scottish Rite supported Gomez Pedraza, who had left the Scottish lodge for the York lodge. He defeated Guerrero, but the Yorkists rose up and Pedraza fled. Poinsett however became an increasing embarrassment to Guerrero, and in July 1819 he asked President Andrew Jackson to withdraw him. He departed Mexico in January 1830. Poinsett left when the York cause was collapsing, and when many other Yorkinos were leaving Mexico. (Sims, 121.) One reason was that a new Mexican National Rite of Freemasonry had started in 1828, and it competed with the Yorkists (and to a lesser extent with the Scottish Ritters) for support.

There is ample evidence that Poinsett's York Masonry was a sincere affiliation and not one manufactured for political purposes. He continued his York activities long after leaving Mexico. On his return to the United States, he accepted a national Masonic position as Deputy General Grand High Priest of the General Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masons. At his installation (April 3, 1830), he went out of his way to deliver an exoneration of his Mexican actions:

"I have been most unjustly accused of extending our order and our principles into a neighboring country, with a view of converting them into an engine of political influence. In the presence of this respectable assembly of my brethren, and on symbols of our order, which are spread around me, and the sacred book which is open before me, I solemnly aver, that this accusation is false and unfounded and that if Masonry has anywhere been converted to any other than the purse and philanthropic purposes for which it was instituted, I have in no way contributed to such a perversion of its principles. And with the same solemnity I here declare, that if such evil councils were to prevail in this country, and Masonry be perverted to political use, which God forbid, I would sever the ties, dear as they are to me, which now unite me to my brothers." (Denslow, 352.)

Despite this rebuttal, Poinsett has gone down in history as an interloper except to a minority such as his biographer, J.Fred Rippy, who defended his subject's interference in Mexican domestic affairs and claimed that he actually was a moderating force. "If he made no effort to dissuade the insurgents of December, 1828," Dr.Rippy asserted, " it was because he loved justice more than order, and hated snobbish aristocracy and special privilege. Without his interposition, revolt would have come earlier." (Rippy, 131.)

Poinsett's public career was by no means ended by his Mexican difficulties. A time in South Carolina politics was followed in 1836 by his appointment by President Martin Van Buren as Secretary of War. Serving until 1841, he reorganized the department's affairs, his efficiency contributing to its strength during the Mexican-American War. As for his Masonic career, he was returned to Royal Arch office as the Deputy General Grand High Priest for the United States in 1829, 1832, and 1835, and despite his age he consented to become Master of Greenville Lodge No.5 when it was being revived in 1849.

The York cause, which he served in such high office in America and with such controversy overseas, never became as important in Mexico as did the Scottish Rite. But it persists in Mexico, and in a curious turn of history, nearly one hundred years after the first confrontation between the two old competitors, the resentments again surfaced.

Ill feelings among liberal Mexican Freemasons arose in 1910 when American, British, and Canadian Freemasons supporting the Diaz regime for reasons of business interests took over the Valley of Mexico Grand Lodge to the exclusion of Mexican Masons. Resident English-speaking foreigners in independent Masonic lodges openly challenged the pro-President Madero Mexican lodges, accusing Mexican Masons of "never really understanding Freemasonry" and of "possessing Latin minds incapable of grasping Freemasonry." This Mexican nationalist spirit supposedly contravened Masonry's unifying principles of universal brotherhood, emphasizing self-interest. From a distance it is hard to determine which side, if either, had altruism as an ally. The 1910 conflict between Mexican and English-speaking Freemasons led to a continuing schism, with the founding of the York Grand Lodge of Mexico by the foreigners, one which exists to this day. The York Grand Lodge still conducts many of its rituals in English (giving only the first three degrees), competes for exclusive jurisdiction with the much larger Mexican grand lodges, and has gained recognition from as many overseas grand lodges as has the giant, Mexican-oriented, and Mexican staffed Valley of Mexico Grand Lodge. From its numbers come Royal Arch, Cryptic, and Templar recruits.

Although other Mexican Masonic rivalries abound, including those among the Confederation of Regular Grand Lodges, the old Rito Nacional Mexicano, and the blue lodges of the "Cardenas Rite," this major conflict among Masons in Mexico based on the foreign-national antagonism between Mexican lodges and the York Grand Lodge of the Anglo-Saxons has an eerie resemblance to the difficulties of the 1820s in which Poinsett participated. (Turner, 238-239.) Thus in a way the York and Scottish rivalry continues, although with different issues, different rituals and different goals than in the past.

Poinsett is remembered more for the Mexican Fire Plant that became the universal Christmas symbol as *_Poinsettia pulcherrima_* than as a politician. In a post-Nafta era when Mexican-American relations are again a highly charged issue, it is also appropriate to recall his misadventures as both the convinced Mason, and as the meddling minister.