

Point of Departure

Robin Bayley tells how his great grandfather, a Mancunian businessman, became caught up in the tumultuous period of worker unrest that paved the way for the Mexican Revolution.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly



Guards at the Bellavista cotton mill during Arturo's time running the foundry there.

When researching my book, *The Mango Orchard*, about my journey in my great grandfather's footsteps round Latin America, I made several extraordinary discoveries. Not only did my ancestor leave a secret family behind in Mexico, now numbering over 300 people. I also discovered that on the night of November 20th, 1910, when Francisco Madero, the exiled Mexican opposition leader, called for his compatriots to rise up in revolution, my great grandfather Arthur Greenhalgh was crossing the border from Texas into Mexico on his way back from a visit to Britain. It is unclear when he realised that he had just entered a country at war with itself, but it is a fair bet that he would have had no idea that he unwittingly helped to start it.

Arthur, known in Mexico as Arturo, had sailed from Liverpool to seek his fortune in the New World in September 1898. He got a job as the head of a foundry in a cotton mill in the small village of Bellavista in the western foothills of the Sierra Madre. The factory was the jewel in the crown of the powerful Spanish company, Casa Aguirre. It was run by another Arthur, an Englishman whom Arturo had known back home, named Arthur Ecroyd.

Ecroyd was not popular with my family. He was referred to as 'the Flash Harry from Oswaldtwistle'. In Mexico his reputation was far worse. He was renowned for his temper and his workers endured a 'regime of terror'. He was accused of hitting, horse-whipping and even killing members of his staff for the smallest of misdemeanours. After he lengthened the working day to up to 16 hours there were mutterings among the workforce but Ecroyd dealt with any dissent mercilessly and had prison cells built in the grounds of the factory.

My great grandfather, however, as foundry head, worked closely both with the Casa Aguirre management and the factory machine operators. He was promoted to a more senior post within the mill and when, in early 1905, Ecroyd returned to England for a holiday, Arturo was left in charge. During these few months, freed from the tyranny of Ecroyd's rule, the Bellavista workers saw an opportunity to express their

grievances. They were mobilised by the brothers Enrique and Pedro Elías. In the Casa Aguirre archive in Spain I unearthed a letter written by Pedro Elías on behalf of the entire Bellavista workforce, addressed to 'Señor Arturo Greenhalgh'. The letter asked Arturo to improve the poor pay and working conditions 'in view of the alarming increase in food prices, and the fact that we do not earn enough to eat. We have decided, by common agreement, to make this protest so that this wrong is remedied.' The letter made specific wage demands for each department and went on to ask that 'the boys [in the factory] ... not be beaten'.

Though he had sympathy for the workers, Arturo was powerless to meet these demands and so, on March 20th, 1905 the Elías brothers chained the gates of the factory closed and went on strike. They led a march to the nearby town of Tepic to see General Ruiz, the *jefe político*, or political chief (in effect the state governor). But the protestors didn't reach Tepic. Ruiz ordered the head of the military to prevent them from entering the city, with gunfire if necessary. Anxious to avoid a bloodbath, the Elías brothers led the workers back to Bellavista.

To this day, the residents of Bellavista are proud of the strike, and there is a museum dedicated to it in the old factory. They are proud not just of the fact that it was one of the first industrial strikes in Mexico's history, but of the democratic way in which the protest was held and that the leaders campaigned for social and political reforms as well as improvements to working conditions, predating the demands of the Mexican Revolution by more than five years. The villagers refer to the strike as a glorious failure, but a failure it was. The strikers won no concessions, gained no political backing from the opposition Liberal party or support from the press and the strike leaders lost their jobs.

Lessons were learned, however. In early 1906, within a year of the Bellavista strike, activists began to congregate in Cananea, home to an American-owned copper mine near the Arizona border. They were keen to exploit the sense of injustice felt by the thousands of miners who were being paid less than half the wages earned by their American colleagues. Estaban Baca Calderón, a former teacher from the Tepic area, was one of the activists and he knew the Elías brothers.

In May 1906 Calderón helped to organise a rally for the Cananea workers at which he made a speech that is still quoted in school textbooks today. He stirred up nationalistic outrage that Mexicans were being treated as second-class citizens in their own country.

Show them you are not beasts of burden! Show them you are not inferior to their legions of blond, blue-eyed men ... Show your love for your country! Honour your heroes! ... Your children wait for the fruit of your honourable struggle ... Don't wait! The laurels of your triumph will fit your foreheads! Viva la República!

Galvanised by the speech, thousands of Cananea workers went on strike soon after. The demonstration began peacefully but escalated into violence. A vigilante squad was raised and sent from Arizona to join the battle, adding to the sense of nationalistic fury. The fighting lasted several days and dozens died.

Arturo Greenhalgh and the author's great grandmother, Mariah. The photograph was taken shortly after her arrival in Mexico in 1901.



Calderón helped to negotiate a ceasefire, but was sentenced to 15 years in the infamous prison of San Juan de Ulúa in Veracruz. The strike, however, made a lasting impact. Cananea, with its powerful foreign interests aligned with the Mexican government, was a microcosm of the national economy that President Díaz had created. The workers' rebellion was a damning repudiation of Díaz's form of government and was a portent of things to come. The opposition Liberal party drew confidence from the support at Cananea. Within a year another even bloodier uprising took place at Río Blanco and sporadic guerrilla attacks against the government began to erupt around the country. When President Díaz declared himself winner of the rigged 1910 election to extend his rule to 30 years, revolution became inevitable.

The significance of the revolution cannot be overstated. The constitution of 1917, which Calderón helped to draft, granted Mexicans labour rights, land reforms and the right to a free education. The revolution may well have happened anyway but, if Ecroyd had not gone on holiday and my great grandfather had not allowed the Bellavista workers to go on strike and make the mistakes from which Calderón was to learn, the path would undoubtedly have been different.

Shortly after Ecroyd returned to Bellavista from his holiday in England he was replaced as director of the factory by my great grandfather. Arturo finally returned to Britain in 1912 after a bandit warned him of a counter-revolutionary attack and helped him escape the country. Back in England he never spoke about the strike or the family he had left behind. Ecroyd stayed in Mexico and was killed one Saturday morning in 1916, stabbed in his bed by eight men who broke into his house. As one of my Mexican family said to me, 'the Revolution was no party'.

Robin Bayley is the author of *The Mango Orchard* (Arrow, 2011); www.themangoorchard.com. For more articles on this subject visit www.historytoday.com/mexico