

Filibusters and Freebooters

-and Costa Rica's National hero

Visitors to Costa Rica who arrive in the capital San Jose via Juan Santamaria airport will soon be told that Santamaria is a national hero. If they tour the city, it is likely that they will be shown a statue of him running whilst brandishing a flaming torch. They may wrongly assume that, like Simon Bolivar, Jose de San Martin and other heroes of the liberation of Central and South America from Spanish rule, Santamaria fought for his country's liberation in the period, roughly between 1800 and 1820, when many such countries gained their independence.

Indeed, Costa Rica did become independent around that time (15th September 1821). Santamaria however gained his fame at a rather later date (1856) and in combat with a very different opponent, the American "filibuster" or freebooter William Walker. This story does not appear in many accounts of the history of either Costa Rica or the USA hence is given here.

To set the scene, the history of Costa Rica has several interesting features. As part of the Spanish Empire, Costa Rica always had a peripheral position. It was the southernmost state of the Viceroyalty of New Spain and its neighbour to the south, Panama, was part of the Viceroyalty of New Granada. Trade between the two Viceroyalties was forbidden. Further factors adding to Costa Rica's isolation were that it was relatively poor in gold and silver and lightly populated, so never had extensive, slave operated plantations. Its independence from Spain came about as a result of the Mexican War of Independence which had a knock-on effect, resulting in independence for other Central American States without their having to fight their own war.

Turning to William Walker, he was born in 1824 in Tennessee and had a brilliant academic career. Around 1850, he began to take up an idea which had gained popularity in various American slave states of conquering regions of Latin America where similar slave states could be created anew. One impetus for this action was the "Compromise of 1850", a set of bills passed in the US in 1850 which dealt with the status of territories acquired during the Mexican American War of 1846-48. By severely limiting slavery in these territories, the expansionist hopes of the existing slave states were dashed.

Walker's first foreign venture came in 1853 when he sought a land grant to certain territories from the government of Mexico. Undaunted by the rejection of his proposal, Walker and a band of volunteers recruited mainly from the slave states of Tennessee and Kentucky then set out to take these same territories by force. They were defeated and retreated to California. Because his aggressive action constituted

an offence under the US Treaty of Neutrality of 1794, under which only Congress had the right to undertake war on other nations, Walker was tried in a federal court in San Francisco California (a non-slave state which had joined the Union in 1850) but was rapidly acquitted. This acquittal demonstrates that many in the US, at least in frontier states, were sympathetic to his aim of expanding US territory, if not necessarily to the aim of extending slavery. Walker thus exemplifies the noun "filibuster", in the sense of "an irregular military adventurer, especially an American engaged in fomenting insurrections in Latin America in the mid C19" (Merriam Webster Dictionary which dates the term from 1851), a word which comes – like the much older term freebooter "a pirate or plunderer" (Merriam Webster) - from the Dutch "vrijbouter". The use of the word to mean "to obstruct a legislative process" seems slightly newer.

Following this lack of success in Mexico, Walker turned his attention to Nicaragua where there was already a sizeable American presence in particular around the trade route between the Pacific and Atlantic through the South of the country. After civil war broke out there in 1854, Walker was invited in 1855 to intervene by one of the parties, on terms that did not contravene the Treaty of Neutrality. After a victory in September of that year he took control of the country, albeit at that time through a provisional President, Patricio Rivas. This government was recognised by the US in May 1856.

Even before that date, Walker's actions in Nicaragua and his declared intention of further conquests had alarmed neighbouring countries, particularly Honduras, Guatemala and Salvador to the North and Costa Rica to the south. Costa Rica soon had two victories, on March 20th 1856 at Santa Rosa and on April 11th at Rivas. It was on the latter occasion that Juan Santamaria achieved his fame, running forward with a flaming torch to set alight the building housing the enemy troops, but sustaining fatal injuries whilst doing so. April 11th is observed as a national holiday in Costa Rica and Santamaria is revered as a national hero.

To briefly conclude the story, Walker was for a while undeterred by these military setbacks. He assumed the presidency of Nicaragua in July 1856 and declared that slavery was now legal there. His reign however ended the following year. After some further filibustering in Honduras he was executed there by firing squad in 1860, being even then only 36 years old.