The Secret Adversary: Henry George Ward and Texas, 1825-1827

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The years 1825 to 1827 were a period of salutary neglect in Texas History. Guadalupe Victoria, the first president of Mexico believed so earnestly in a policy of non-intervention in state and colonial affairs that his government attempted little interference in the management of Stephen F. Austin and the other empresarios. None of the Texas colonists ever met their first president. Any business pertaining to the colony was settled in the state capital, Saltillo, not the national capital, Mexico City. The cliche, "absence makes the heart grow fonder," may explain the fond memories that Texans have of their first president.

Imperceptibly an anti-Texas feeling began to blossom in the national capital, affecting Victoria himself to the point where the president decided to tighten the Mexican grip on Texas and limit the number of "Anglo-American emigrants," as they were styled. This decision has been characterized as the opening gambit in the match that led to checkmate at San Jacinto. Historians have advanced numerous reasons for the change in the official attitude of Mexico to Stephen F. Austin but none, so far as the writer is aware, has paid sufficient attention to the activities of Henry George Ward, the British charge d'affairs in Mexico during the years 1825 to 1827.

Son of Robin Plummer Ward, one of the most popular British novelists of the period, a dedicated and able young careerist of twenty-seven, well versed in Mexican and Latin American affairs, backed by the mining interests of England, Henry George Ward was admirably equipped for his new position. He was directed by George Canning, British Foreign Secretary, to achieve three objectives:

1. secure a treaty with Mexico granting the most favored nation clause to England;
2. obtain religious toleration for British subjects in Mexico;
3. protect and advance the commercial interests of British subjects, especially the mining community.

Ward, on his own initiative, intended to accomplish two other policies; first, he intended to be so successful that he would be appointed the first British minister to Mexico, and second, he intended to counteract and eliminate all vestiges of American influence in Mexico, at the time being promoted by the American minister, Joel R. Poinsett.

The deadly, mutually destructive rivalry between Poinsett and Ward can only be mentioned in passing, as it is a story in itself. Suffice it to say, Ward held a number of trump cards. He was a personal friend of
Victoria and was the only envoy who had a weekly interview with the
president. Poinsett was handicapped because the United States wanted
all the territory north of the Rio Grande, and he was constantly pres­sured to purchase Texas at any price. British investment and British
prestige considerably exceeded those of the United States in Latin Amer­
ica. Mexico and Colombia wanted to launch a joint naval expedition
against the Spanish-held island of Cuba which was a very real threat
to the new Latin American Republics, but United States policy and self
interest dictated that Cuba be retained by weak Spain. Hence, president
John Quincy Adams had opposed joint intervention, a decision which
irked both Simon Bolivar and Guadalupe Victoria.

Within a matter of days after his arrival in Mexico in 1825, Ward
realized that the elimination of Stephen F. Austin's colony in Texas and
the substitution of a British colony headed by General Arthur Wavell,
or an Indian confederation led by pro-British chiefs would, as Ward wrote,
effectively eliminate all chance of the Americans' obtaining control of the
Gulf of Mexico area. To that goal, he bent all his considerable skills
and efforts.

From the very beginning of Anglo American colonization in Texas, Mex­
ican governments, both imperial and republican, had insisted that all im­
migrants become Roman Catholics, and that no settlers be permitted
within twenty leagues of the sea. Ward found both these restrictions
adverse to the interests he represented. Therefore one of his duties was
to persuade the government to enforce the loosely administered law in
the American settlements in Texas and ignore it wherever it pertained
to British settlers.

Ward was also confronted with the fanaticism of the small-town Mex­
ican. This was a two-edged weapon which Ward, to give him credit, hated
to employ. Nonetheless, while Ward hoped that tolerance would replace
fanaticism, he did not want the national government to be too tolerant
of Texans. When an unknown cowboy, very likely a Texan, came to
Mexico City demonstrating a secret trick to break the most refractory
horses, and was almost lynched as a sorcerer, Ward did nothing to help
him. Indeed, Ward appears to have inflamed deliberately the national
government against both Texans and Americans, promising, as he told
Canning, to make sure his influence would be used only in secret.

Ward wrote Canning a long letter in September, 1825, enclosing a man­
uscript map of Texas showing the Sabine River as the present United
States boundary which eliminated the shadowy claim of the Americans
to the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande). He mentioned that the Americans were
still pushing their claims to the Rio Bravo, and offering to pay Mexico
for the additional territory. To make matters worse for the Mexicans,
they had not enforced their authority in the area between the Sabine
and the Rio Bravo. As a result, American settlers, backwoodsmen, lawless
and scornful of all restraint, were pouring in. Six thousand families were
there already, pretending to recognize the authority of Mexico, but every­
one knew that in case of a rupture between the United States and Mex­
ico, these bad subjects and inconvenient neighbors would side with the
former. Ward reported that he had already warned Victoria and his cabinet members, Jose Ignacio Esteva and Lucas Alaman, but Esteva had retorted that the Texans were all good Catholics and could be trusted. Ward scoffed at this naive statement, retorting that American backwoodsmen, as everyone knew had no particular religion and their creed would be affected by circumstances. Furthermore, these interlopers would practice smuggling; hence, if Mexico thought she was gaining any real advantage from these people, she was wrong.\(^\text{11}\)

Having once committed himself to the struggle for Texas, Ward redoubled his efforts. He wrote Canning in November 1825 that he dreaded the loss of Texas unless Mexico bestirred herself. Ward was relying on several informants, one of whom, a Senor Caran, lived in Texas and acted as Ward’s principal agent and informer. Caran reported that Austin’s colony and the newly established Fredonian colony were practically independent; and that, contrary to Stephen F. Austin’s agreements with the national authorities, Catholic priests were deterred by threats from officiating in Austin’s colony. No other authority except Ward ever made that statement. All’s fair in love and diplomacy and Ward certainly did not love the Texans. Ward told Victoria that Poinsett was purposely delaying the settlement of the boundary question in order to introduce more North Americans into Texas. Ward also produced a second map showing the American boundary on the Rio Grande, and this evidence really alarmed the president. Victoria, who had a tendency to alibi, told Ward quite untruthfully that he did not know of the events in Texas and promised to inform Congress of the dangers involved in permitting Texans to trade freely with their neighbors to the north. The president asked Ward’s opinion on the feasibility of sending investigators into Texas and establishing custom houses to regulate trade in the colony. Victoria refused to eliminate Austin’s colony but promised to isolate it, surrounding it with Mexican settlers, and cancelling all other empresario grants. Ward wrote to Canning:

I have agreed with Victoria on all his remarks and strongly approve of those ideas but I had to warn him not to tell his plans to Ramos Arizpe or Jose Ignacio Esteva who were friends of Poinsett and thus indirectly sympathetic to the Texans.\(^\text{12}\)

Ward could say that again, for he had been placed in a quandary. Almost all the would-be empresarios were British, hence he had to modify Victoria’s policies before they got out of hand.

Victoria nominated an able Mexican official, Manuel Mier y Teran, to be the chief Mexican boundary commissioner in November 1825. Teran was not inclined to accept the appointment, fearing a ruse to remove him from the capital but Ward persuaded him to head the mission. Ward was delighted with Teran’s appointment, believing that once Teran had reported on the state of affairs in Texas, Congress would act more firmly.\(^\text{13}\) Ward was too astute a strategist to depend on one man or one policy or to rely on purely negative tactics. Taking the offensive, he was able to discredit Poinsett’s Texas objectives when the latter was surprised in an attempt to secure copies of documents and maps pertaining to the
Louisiana boundary by bribing one of the clerks in the foreign office. Ward did not mention that Poinsett's behavior was the accepted way of securing information, one which Ward had employed more successfully, but magnified the incident so greatly that Victoria panicked and hid the maps so well that, to this day, no one has been able to unearth them. The British charge d'affaires also produced his copies of the maps and documents which he had previously acquired and doctored the maps so as to reveal the United States in actual possession of Texas. He also dusted off a proposal by Juan De Azcarate first made in 1821, suggesting that Irish immigrants be introduced into Texas, but the proposal fared no better in 1825 than it had in 1821.

Ward's ace in the hole was General Arthur Wavell, a distinguished British officer, a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, a former military attaché in Chile, and a financial backer of Stephen F. Austin. Wavell had actually made it possible for Austin to obtain his grant in 1821, had loaned him money to get his colony started, and was supposed to share in Austin's good fortune. Austin could not, and did not, object to Wavell's plans to create a British colony on his doorsteps. The British empresario had been proceeding cautiously with this idea but had not gotten any actual colonists or even surveyed his settlement, but his backers included Ben Milam and "Baron" de Bastrop, both closely connected with Stephen F. Austin.

In December 1825, Ward learned that Poinsett planned to forestall Wavell's colony by buying four million acres in Texas and introducing another American colony. Poinsett had promised his backers that in case of trouble with Mexico, American troops would intervene.

Alarmed at the glacier-like speed of Wavell's plans, Ward tried to hurry the Britisher, while at the same time opposing Poinsett's program. He found himself blocked on both projects by Esteva who as Secretary of the Treasury was backing Poinsett. This was indeed a setback, as Ward admitted, for he could not involve the British government in the affray.

Wavell, on Ward's prompting, and with his encouragement, formally applied for, and received a grant in March 1826, which included Lamar, Red River and Bowie Counties, and part of Fannin and Hart Counties. The grant had not gone smoothly for the government split, the Senate favoring and the House opposing Wavell's settlement. Nor was the Senate really favorable, for it had taken all of Victoria's influence to force the upper house to support the measure. Senator M. Cavallo from Coahuila and Tejas who had been a staunch advocate of Wavell's grant, was defeated in the next election and removed from the political scene, a grievous blow to both Wavell and Ward.

Poinsett, aware of the anti-Wavell feeling, protested that Wavell's grant was too near the Arkansas Frontier which was still a matter of argument. Indeed it was later discovered that part of Wavell's grant lapped over into U.S.-held Arkansas which, as Ward knew, had been ceded to the Americans by Spain, but he pretended that he had never heard of the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819.
A second person appeared on the scene, the enigmatic John D. Hunter who had been captured by the Cherokees in 1816, and had written a book about his experiences which became a best seller in London. Hunter had returned to Texas as a missionary and civil chief to the Cherokees, and was a thoroughly convinced integrationist and apologized for his Indian clients. As a result he was disliked and distrusted by the American press of that period.\textsuperscript{19}

Ward did not like Hunter either, writing Canning that: [U]pon every other subject, his language was coarse, his appearance dull, and his manner totally devoid of energy and grace.\textsuperscript{20} Yet Ward believed that Hunter could be a useful pawn in the struggle, for he was an eloquent speaker on the subject of his beloved Indians and a fervent despiser of Texans. Hunter wanted to persuade Victoria to assign a portion of the vacant lands in Texas to the Indians who had been expelled from the Southeast and who hoped to be allowed to settle along the Southern boundaries of the Colorado and Sabine rivers. If this permission were granted, Hunter promised that the Indians would become loyal Mexican subjects, members of the Catholic Church, and defenders of the frontier against all intruders, “Anglos” or Apaches, both equally feared by the Mexicans.\textsuperscript{21} While neither Ward nor Hunter mentioned this possibility, there was always a good chance that the Indians might turn their attention to Austin’s colony. Hunter appealed to Ward who personally dictated the letter that Hunter sent to Victoria asking the president for a grant. Ward wrote an additional note to Victoria pointing out that the Indians, living adjacent to Wavell’s grant, would be an effective buffer state against the Americans. In effect, Austin’s colony would be surrounded and isolated.\textsuperscript{22}

In his letter, Hunter charged that the Americans were building distilleries along the border in order to encourage drunkeness among the Indians who only wanted to settle down and protect the Mexicans. Hunter demanded an immediate answer to his request as he had to appear before the Great Council of the Cherokees in May 1826. At this council, the Indians were expected to decide on residence in Mexico or a move further west to escape the Americans.\textsuperscript{23}

To Ward’s dismay, Hunter’s proposal elicited mixed feelings from Victoria, who, like all Mexicans, had a healthy respect for Indians and found it difficult to distinguish between the good and bad ones. In all probability, the president resented the pressure put upon him by Hunter for he refused to give the missionary or his British sponsor an immediate answer. Hunter left Mexico City with nothing to show for his efforts. Embittered, he appeared before the Great Council and urged the Indians to move into Texas anyway and join Edwards group at Fredonia. Only a few followed his suggestion.\textsuperscript{24}

Wavell and Ward worked ceaselessly during the summer of 1826. Wavell, writing to one of his backers, Sir Herbert Taylor, reported:

Any hopes of preventing the United States from becoming in fifty years the most powerful nation in the world depended mainly
on the measures of the present moment adopted to raise an insuperable barrier in Texas against the intrigues, the ambitions, and encroachments of the North Americans.  

At the time, Ward appeared to have convinced Victoria that Wavell was the only man who could stop the Americans in Texas, but for a variety of reasons Wavell was never able to establish a successful colony despite his associations with Ben Milam, who introduced a number of families into Wavell’s grant. One reason for the Britisher’s failure was his absence from the Mexican scene in 1827 and 1828. No empresario could hope to gain his ends through absentee ownership. Another and more likely reason was Wavell’s inability to secure adequate financing for his project.  

Ward hoped that his plans would be advanced by the abortive Frederonian Revolt, but he was disappointed. An anonymous writer (believed to be Arthur Wavell) ridiculed the uprising which flared briefly between December 21, 1826, and January 31, 1827, in Nacogdoches. According to the anonymous author:

The late affair in Texas was nothing more than an attempt made by a few North American squatters (persons without a right to the land had chosen to occupy on the frontier) to establish a claim to the land by force aided by the Indians whom they had tried to seduce into a revolt. The real number of participants in the revolt amounted to fourteen, and an equal number of gallons of whiskey.  

The great number of Texans remained loyal to Mexico as both Ward and Wavell acknowledged.  

When news of the revolt filtered back to Mexico City, Ward deliberately misrepresented its extent, hoping to alarm Victoria. He magnified the scope of the fight, the number of participants and tried to involve Poinsett. Ward told the president that all Americans in Texas had signed the Frederonian Declaration of Independence and also asserted that the backwoodsmen were receiving aid from the United States. The credulous Victoria believed his British confidant, threatened to deport Poinsett from Mexico, and offered to lead an army into Texas. War was the last thing Ward wanted because he still hoped that Wavell’s colony would succeed; hence he warned the president not to be contemptuous of these adventurers in Texas. They were men reckless of danger, excellent marksmen, well acquainted with the terrain, who could hold their own against twice their number of Mexican regulars. Ward’s suggestion that the president proceed with caution had a soothing effect on the volatile Victoria, but Texas and Mexican relationships were clouded permanently even though two weeks later Victoria learned that Austin’s colony was instrumental in quelling the Frederonian Revolt.  

Ward still pinned his hopes on Wavell, the saviour of Mexico. He asked Canning to consult with the general who was, in Ward’s opinion, the best qualified man in England to deal with the situation. Ward reiterated his belief that Europeans must be encouraged to colonize in Texas for
with their help Mexico could retain her authority in the province indefinitely. Ward also enclosed documents relating to the Fredonian Revolt, and proposed treaties between the Mexicans and Cherokees along the same lines as those suggested by Hunter and his ally Fields. Ward apologized for Hunter's premature signing of the Declaration of Independence, excusing this action on the ground that the Mexican local officials had insulted both Hunter and the Indians. 30

Time was running out for Ward and his grandiose plans. Hunter and Fields were found guilty of treason by the Great Council of the Cherokees and both were executed. Wavell could not obtain the necessary financial backing because of the collapse of Baring Brothers, and another English financial house, and Ward was notified by Canning that he would be recalled because of his willful extravagance and failure to follow his instructions. 32 Although Ward defended himself and his policies vigorously, he was replaced by Richard Pakenham in April of 1827. Pakenham, while more frugal and less bellicose than Ward, followed Ward's tactics; hence anti-Texas feeling in Mexico increased.

In 1829, Pakenham produced a plan that was worthy of Ward in every respect. The British minister announced that he had uncovered a plot by Poinsett to obtain Texas by financial skulduggery. Poinsett and some British merchants were working to obtain a loan for Mexico. Half would come from British interests and half from American interests. To secure the United States' share of the loan, about two million dollars, Mexico would use Texas as collateral. Poinsett in return agreed to Britain's having the most-favored-nation privilege. Since the Mexican financial situation was so chaotic, the government would be unable to pay its debts and Texas would pass painlessly into the possession of the United States. Pakenham never offered any proof of this supposed intrigue. Furthermore, it is idiotic to believe that British interests would work with Poinsett, or that Poinsett would for one instant relinquish his dreams of American hegemony in Latin America. Another and more likely proposal which Pakenham inherited from Ward was to encourage Robert Owen "the Father of British Socialism" to establish a colony in Texas, but this also failed. 34

What had Henry George Ward accomplished during his stay in Mexico? On the surface it appeared very little. Austin was firmly entrenched in Texas, Teran's attempt to delineate the boundaries had bogged down in red tape, the Fredonian Revolt had been suppressed by fellow Texans, and Poinsett remained as U. S. envoy in Mexico.

Ward's real success must be measured on future events. The tactics that he employed and the influence that he exercised on Guadalupe Victoria made the nervous president anti-American and anti-Texan. More importantly Ward influenced Manuel Mier y Teran and changed him from a neutral observer to a bitter anti-Texan. Many of the ideas and recommendations that Teran later advocated echoed Ward's position. Teran respected the American colonists in Texas and deplored the type of Mexicans who were in Texas. Yet, while Teran commented on the universal desire of both Mexicans and Anglos for a separate state gov-
ernment, he opposed it, giving virtually the same reasons in his letter of June 30, 1828, that Ward had stressed three years earlier. Teran, too, insisted that no concessions be made to the slave owners beyond the establishment of a local jepe politico, subject to the one at Bejar. Later, Teran would advocate more stringent rules such as increasing the garrisons in East Texas and enforcing the tariff laws and customs. It is, therefore, not too far fetched to emphasize Ward's influence on the Law of April 16, 1830, which marked Teran's final break with the Texan colonists.

Ward poisoned the relationships between Poinsett and Victoria as well as Guerrero who became Mexico's second president in 1829. At any time, Ward possessed the ability and the power to stop the flights of fancy that made both Victoria and the country look ridiculous. Yet, he did not. Moreover, the British envoy was instrumental in preventing a meeting between Stephen F. Austin, the most influential Texas empresario, and his president, Victoria. A word from Ward on the desirability of such a meeting would have sent Victoria winging to the border. Austin and Victoria had the same goals and aspirations, including many qualities in common, and could have worked together successfully. The president's dislike of the Texans was not a lasting one and needed considerable fuel to keep it going, which Ward supplied. In later years, at the time of the Alamo, Victoria was put under custody for refusing to support the war against Texas. Ward effectively prevented any détente from occurring by his tactics.

Such suspicions that Ward aroused could not be glossed over or negated by the open letter that he wrote to Victoria on the occasion of his recall. Ward had been the instrument that moved the administration of Victoria to send a commission to Texas in charge of Teran whose unfriendly attitude to the North Americans soon became apparent. Ward had foreseen this and had acted accordingly. The British envoy had unleashed propaganda convincing the Mexican people of the avarice and perfidy of its Northern neighbors and the effects of his actions were irrevocable. Not that Ward would have had it any other way.

A policy of reconciliation between the Anglo-American settlers in Texas and the Mexican governmental officials would have been regarded by Ward as an act of black treason against his own government. It was Ward's purpose to increase, rather than decrease, the tensions and the gulf between Victoria and his Anglo-American subjects. It was Ward's real triumph that the chasm he created was never bridged. Hence the secret adversary played his part well. He had not involved Britain in a direct confrontation with the United States or in the affairs of Texas. It was certainly not Ward's fault that Wavell had not measured up to the opportunity provided for him. In every other aspect of Texas-Mexican affairs Ward had poisoned the relationships of Texas and Mexico so subtly that never again would American immigrants be as welcome as they had been before the arrival of the British charge de'affaires in Mexico.
FOOTNOTES

1This study is based on letters, documents, and memoirs of Henry George Ward found in the Foreign Affairs Section of the Public Records Office, London, England, 50, 1-40, 1822-1827, hereinafter referred to as F.O.50; on Henry George Ward's Mexico (Second edition, London, 1829). The British Museum, the University of Texas Archives, the Hemeroteca and Biblioteca in Mexico City were also utilized. This study was made possible by a sabbatical granted the author by Austin College for the year 1963-1964.


4Ward to Canning, Mexico, Nov. 5, 1825, F.O. 50/15, No. 54; Ward to Canning, Mexico, Dec. 10, 1825, F.O. 50, No. 64.

6Luis Chavez Orozco, “Un Esfuerzo de Mejico por la Independencia de Cuba” in Archivo Historico Diplomatico Mexicano, Mexico, 1930, passim; Ward to Canning, Mexico, May 29, 1826, F.O. 50/21, Nos. 2 and 3.

6Ward to Canning, Mexico, March 19, 1825, F.O. 50/20, No. 18: “I cannot believe that His Majesty’s Government would agree to let the N. Americans take possession of a province which would give them command of the Guelph (sic) of Mexico.” Ward to Canning, Mexico, Nov. 5, 1825, F.O. 50/15, No. 54.

7Ward to Joseph Planta, Undersecretary of State, Mexico, August 22, 1825, F.O. 50/14, No. 27; Ward to Channing, Mexico, Sept. 19, 1825, F.O. 50/14, No. 34.

8Ward to Channing, Mexico, August 12, 1825, F.O. 50/14, No. 25.

9Ibid.
10 Ward to Canning, Mexico, Nov. 5, 1825, F.O. 50/15, No. 54.

11 Ward to Canning, Mexico, Sept. 6, 1825, F.O. 50/15, No. 32. Ward's information about Austin was inaccurate for Ward thought Austin was an ex-officer of Mina's army who had purchased land while on the latter's expedition.

12 Ward to Canning, Mexico, Nov. 5, 1825, P. S. Nov. 23, 1825, F.O. 50/15, No. 54; Ward to Canning, Mexico, Sept. 19, 1825; F.O. 50/14, No. 34; Lionel Hervey to Canning, Regional Palace of Mexico, March 12, 1825, F.O. 50/17, No. (out of order).

13 Ward to Canning, Mexico, Nov. 5, 1825, F.O. 50/15, No. 54, Postscript, Nov. 23, 1825.

14 Ward to Canning, Mexico, July 9, 1825, F.O. 50/13, No. 17.


17 Ward to Canning, Mexico City, March 19, 1826, F.O. 50/20.

18 Ibid.


20 Ward, Mexico, II, 309.

21 Ward to Canning, Mexico, March 19, 1826, F.O. 50/20, No. 18; Hunter to Victoria, enclosure, n.p. n.d.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ward, Mexico, II, 310.


28 General Wavell, “Account of the Provinces of Texas,” Appendix B in Ward, Mexico, 1829, II, 438; Ward, Mexico, II, 310.
Ward to Canning, Mexico, February 21, 1827, F.O. 50/31, No. 34.

Ward to Canning, Mexico, Feb. 21, 1827, F.O. 50/31, No. 34; Blake, “John David Hunter,” 1865.

Ward’s troubles with his expense account are found in F.O. 97/272; Cody, British Interests, 449, passim.

Richard Pakenham to Earl of Aberdeen, Mexico, March 4, 1829, F.O. 50/53, No. 22.

