

The end of the affair

Edward Shawcross

The Last Emperor of Mexico:
The Dramatic Story of the Habsburg
Archduke Who Created a Kingdom
in the New World.

Basic Books, 336 pages, \$30

reviewed by Jeremy Black

Here is a well-researched, ably written, consistently interesting, and mercifully short book that deserves reading. Edward Shawcross's *Last Emperor of Mexico* skillfully links developments in Mexico with the career of his difficult but noble protagonist, a man who did not understand the task thrust upon him. Though possibly latent in any presidential system, monarchy was more explicitly a threat to the nascent republics of the New World, and particularly so in Mexico, though Haiti, too, had imperial moments from 1804 to 1806 and 1849 to 1859, and Brazil did not become a republic until after its empire came to an end in 1889.

In 1822, Augustín de Iturbide, an army officer who had played a key role in the fight for Mexican independence, declared himself Emperor Augustin I, although he was forced to abdicate in 1823 after the army turned against him. General Ramón María Narváez, the head of the Spanish government from his successful rebellion in 1843 until 1851, was a supporter not only of the coup by which General Mariano Paredes seized power in Mexico in 1845, but also of the plan to bring stability to Mexico by restoring the monarchy in the shape of a Spanish prince, a plan that would also thwart American expansionism and thus protect the Spanish position in Cuba. James Buchanan, then the secretary of state, however, made clear in 1846 that America would resist any attempt to install European monarchy in Mexico, a position that foreshadowed the opposition to Emperor Maximilian in the 1860s. In 1846 the monarchist plan was destroyed by the impact of American victories in the Mexican–American War on the prestige of the Paredes government, which was swiftly replaced.

Born in the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph Maria von Habsburg-Lothringen (1832–67), the brother of Emperor Franz Joseph, similarly played a role in European policy toward America, but in this case the power was France, not Spain—and France under a figure for whom military emperors were desirable, namely Napoleon III, the nephew of the great Napoleon. Civil war in Mexico from 1858 had led in 1861 to the country defaulting on its international debts and to coordinated action by Britain, France, and Spain with the goal of making Mexico fulfill its obligations. Veracruz, Mexico's leading port, was occupied, but, wary of “mission creep,” Britain and Spain decided not to interfere in Mexico's internal affairs and instructed their commanders accordingly. The French, however, took intervention much further, a contrast that also reflected differences over policy toward the American Civil War. In 1863, the French captured Mexico City and stage-managed the offer of the crown to Maximilian.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Habsburg fleet from 1854 to 1861, Maximilian had helped modernize it. Indeed, landing in Mexico in May 1864, he offered the Mexican liberals amnesty and their leader, Benito Juárez, the position of prime minister, but had no success. Nor did Maximilian's support for some liberal policies win him popularity. Regarded internationally as a liberal, he had been appointed Viceroy of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia in 1857 in order to try to lessen Italian opposition to the Habsburgs, only to be dismissed in 1859 by Franz Joseph, who disliked his liberalism.

In April 1864, the month in which Maximilian had set out, the American House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution that it would not acknowledge “any monarchical government erected on the ruins of any republican government in America under the auspices of any European power.” Opposed to the Monroe Doctrine, Napoleon III moved French units already in Mexico toward the American border in order to block possible Union support for the republicans.

The end of the American Civil War led to an increase in American supplies to the repub-

licans, rather as with the end of the Chinese Civil War and the Viet Minh. In 1865, American generals, notably Grant and Sheridan, backed continuing pressure, as they saw Napoleon III, Maximilian, Mexican conservatives, and Confederate exiles as the key elements in a far-ranging hostile geopolitical and ideological combination. *Estafette*, the French newspaper in Mexico City, pressed in 1865 for new immigration to protect Mexican interests from the aggressive and appropriating tendencies of the Anglo-Saxon race in North America. Somewhat differently that year, Percy Scarlett, the British envoy, reported:

The future regeneration and progress of Mexico are eminently associated with a well-directed system of foreign immigration. A population so sparse as this is, and so incapable, both physically and morally, of undertaking the development of resources which require abler and more numerous hands, renders it imperative that the Emperor Maximilian should turn his serious attention to the subject of immigration.

Scarlett added that Maximilian's intentions were "too frequently frustrated by the old-rooted prejudice of the Spanish Mexican race against the admission of foreigners."

Both America and France had exploited Mexico, America by launching a war of aggression and seizing territory, France by trying to turn it into a satellite state. War between America and France, however, was avoided by a more cautious French government keen on demobilization, just as America also decided not to drive the British from Canada.

Instead, Napoleon III in January 1866 chose to withdraw his forces, the *Corps législatif* being informed that Maximilian was now strong enough not to need French assistance, which Napoleon knew was untrue. American pressure was certainly significant in helping to change Napoleon's mind, but so also were the problems that France faced in Mexico, as well as the developing crisis in Europe. Napoleon had to consider how best to respond to Prussian strength closer to home, all the more troubling because of Prussia's alliance with Italy. He prepared for confrontation with

Prussia, and indeed the two powers went to war in 1870. Napoleon was heavily defeated and subsequently abdicated.

The last French troops left Mexico in March 1867, and the imperial position collapsed. Maximilian did not follow Napoleon's advice to leave. Puebla, Querétaro, and Mexico City were successfully besieged by the liberals, while imperial forces were defeated in battle. Refusing to leave, Maximilian was captured on May 16, when Querétaro fell and an escape attempt failed. He was executed on June 19, 1867, alongside two of his generals, providing Manet with an epic subject. Fortunately, Maximilian has also found a biographer he deserves.