THE CANARY ISLANDS AND AMERICA:

Studies of a Unique Relationship

James J. Parsons University of California, Berkeley

PRIMER COLOQUIO DE HISTORIA CANARIO-AMERICANA (1976). (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1977. Pp. 444.)

SEGUNDO COLOQUIO DE HISTORIA CANARIO-AMERICANA (1977). Two volumes. (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1978. Pp. 427 and 496.)

TERCER COLOQUIO DE HISTORIA CANARIO-AMERICANA (1978). Two volumes. (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1978. Pp. 532 and 378.)

CUARTO COLOQUIO DE HISTORIA CANARIO-AMERICANA (1980). Two volumes. (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1982. Pp. 702 and 926.)

PRIMERAS JORNADAS DE ESTUDIOS CANARIAS-AMERICA (1978). (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Caja General de Ahorros, 1980. Pp. 261.)

SEGUNDAS JORNADAS DE ESTUDIOS CANARIAS-AMERICA (1979). (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Caja General de Ahorros, 1981. Pp. 243.)

LA EMIGRACION DE LAS ISLAS CANARIAS EN EL SIGLO DIECINUEVE. By JULIO HERNANDEZ GARCIA. (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1981. Pp. 629.)

The historically close relationship between the Canary Islands and the Americas has received surprisingly little attention beyond the limits of the archipelago. Located off the western shoulder of Africa seven hundred miles south of Gibraltar, the islands provided the blue-print and proving ground for the conquest as well as a laboratory for testing colonial administration policies and the organization of public life. The Canary Islands served as convenient stepping stones to the New World, and there sailing vessels from the voyages of Columbus onward regularly took on passengers, crew, and supplies prior to picking up the friendly Atlantic trade winds. Tenerife, the largest of the seven islands that make up the archipelago, was still *tierra brava* controlled by the native Guanches when the admiral was at Gomera in September 1492, enroute to his great discovery.

High volcanic islands of recent origin, the Canaries possess only limited areas of good soil. The warmer and drier lower slopes have traditionally been employed for producing export crops (sugar, wine, cochineal, bananas, and tomatoes), with the higher, cooler, and more humid parts used for subsistence crops. Aridity is everywhere a limiting factor for agriculture. The unreliability of precipitation, coupled with the shortage and high cost of irrigation water, has meant that a sequence of dry years could be calamitous. Hunger, especially on the lower, drier eastern islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, has been endemic during much of the islands' history. Foreign markets for sugar, wine, cochineal, and lesser crops have been undermined intermittently by lower-cost producers. Winter tomatoes and potatoes are shipped in some quantities, mostly to Great Britain. Today tourists from Western Europe provide the most important underpinning of the economy. The archipelago's strategic position at the crossroads of Atlantic trade routes, so critical in days of sail, has taken on a new geopolitical significance in recent times, with consequences that cannot yet be clearly foreseen.1

Emigration to America has been the one constant in Canarian history, as the works cited above document. Consistently high rates of population growth, recurrent food shortages, and the lack of economic opportunity have given rise to repeated crises for which emigration has served as the safety valve. Almost from the beginning, the Indies have been part of the islanders' "living space," where friends and relatives could be found.² Even today one encounters indianos, those who have been to America, at amost every turn in the islands. In earliest days, the isleños (as they were known) found their way to the continente indiano as soldiers, sailors, and adventurers. But soon unskilled peasants, increasingly in family groups, came to dominate the migration flow. Later, groups of islanders were recruited to serve as buffers in frontier areas where other European powers threatened. Canario settlement in Santo Domingo, Florida, Texas, Louisiana, Campeche, the Miskito Coast, and Uruguay all served this purpose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Montevideo, Uruguay, and San Antonio, Texas, were founded as Canario outposts. Islanders were important, too, in the early settlement of Saint Augustine, Florida.

Trans-Atlantic migration, both legal and clandestine, fluctuated with crown policy. At times island authorities complained that the "bleeding" of the population from the archipelago left it open to foreign invasion. At other times, they pled for the loosening of restrictions so that "suffering among the impoverished peasantry" might be reduced. In earlier days, the migrations were closely associated with commercial relations between the islands and the Indies. For many years, ships

bound to America from the Canaries were obligated to take a specific number of poor families according to their tonnage.

The ethos of migration (la vocación americana), already well established in the islands by the late sixteenth century, reached its apogee in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was encouraged by the superior economic opportunities of the New World and the seductive propaganda of recruiters as well as the famed cartas de llamadas from friends and relatives who had gone before. Using contract agricultural work to pay off their passage, the newcomers typically moved up to become mayorales (field bosses) or into the towns as small merchants, peddlers, and lottery ticket vendors. In Cuba, where immigration throughout the eighteenth century was largely of Canario origin (except for slaves), the cultivation of tobacco attracted many. Eventually the terms veguero and isleño became practically interchangeable.³ The "readers" in the Havana tobacco factories were usually Canarios and so were many of the workers. For women, who had fewer options open to them, prostitution offered opportunities that were sometimes irresistible.

Nineteenth-century emigration was directed especially to Cuba, with Venezuela and Uruguay being the other principal destinations. Once steamship service had been established, the carrying of emigrants across the Atlantic became a well-organized and lucrative business, occasioning much criticism of the overcrowding and poor facilities on board. During the course of the century, considerable movement also occurred between Venezuela and the Greater Antilles. The current of migrants to Cuba continued through World War I, then declined to a trickle as oil-rich Venezuela, hungry for immigrants, became the El Dorado of Canario youth. This situation continued until the late 1960s, when Venezuelan entry requirements were stiffened and the Canary economy entered a phase of rapid growth based on mass tourism and unbridled land speculation.

From the beginning, Canarios were considered ideal colonists—cheap, reliable, and readily assimilated. Especially in nineteenth-century Cuba, the efforts to attract Canarios reflected fears of a growing black presence and the desire to "whiten" the population by promoting Spanish immigration. The main objective of the Real Junta de Fomento in Havana was, from its establishment in 1831, "the promotion of immigration of the white race to Cuba, especially Canarios." Not all who came stayed, but many did, despite the often exploitive working conditions that they faced in the first years.

Considering their small size and population (less than a quarter million as late as the mid-nineteenth century, a million and a half today), the Canaries have contributed disproportionately to the Atlantic migrations and to the cultural baggage brought by Spain to the Americas. Although a productive group of island scholars has been long intrigued by the unique relationship between the archipelago and the Americas, their investigations have represented an island perspective, based largely on the rich documentation in the archives of Las Palmas, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and the latter's satellite university town and early administrative center of La Laguna. Most of these studies have been published by obscure island presses or in journals of limited circulation, especially the respected *Revista de Historia Canaria* (formerly *Revista de Historia*) of the University of La Laguna and the *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (Las Palmas-Madrid).⁴

A conspicuous exception to this provincialism has been the voluminous contribution of Francisco Morales Padrón, distinguished professor of American history at the University of Seville and an islander himself. His *El comercio canario-americano*, siglos dieciséis, diecisiete y dieciocho (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1955), Sevilla, Canarias y América (Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1970), and other works have underscored the archipelago's special role within the larger framework of Americanist studies. Considerable recognition of the critical role of the Canaries in the early history of the Atlantic trade is also given by Pierre and Hugette Chaunu in their masterful Seville et L'Atlantique, 1504–1650 (Paris: SEVPEN), especially in Volume 8, Les Estructures géographiques.

The approach of the fifth centennial of the discovery of America has stirred new interest, increasingly interdisciplinary and international, in the special place of the Canaries in New World history. A broadly based and vigorous revival of interest in local history, by no means confined to Spain, has given added impetus to this development. This trend has been especially well represented in the several colloquia on Canario-American history that have been held in Las Palmas, beginning in 1976, under the auspices of the Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria and the Casa de Colón. The sixth such conference, with numerous invited foreign scholars, was held in the fall of 1984.

Only the published proceedings of the first four colloquia, totaling seven fat volumes (some thirty-five hundred pages), are considered here. Francisco Morales Padrón, the coordinator and driving force behind these conferences, refers to them as part of the program that Spain is developing for the upcoming celebration in 1992. By then the results of ten such colloquia are expected to be available and will presumably serve as the basis for a more elaborate centennial publication tentatively entitled *Canarias y América*, *América y Canarias*.

The first colloquium produced seventeen published communica-

tions, all apparently by Spaniards, with an understandably strong emphasis on the twin phenomena of emigration and trade, especially in the earlier period. They range from a suggestive new hypothesis by Demetrios Ramos Pérez concerning the Columbus letters announcing the discovery and an analysis of institutional parallels and comparisons between the annexation of the Canaries and America by Antonio Muro Orejón to essays on the Louisiana colony by Pablo Tornero Tinajero and on the miserable conditions aboard most nineteenth-century emigrant ships by Julio Hernández García. The work also contains biographical materials, freshly exhumed from the archives, on isleños who played leading roles in the government and politics of the American colonies (for example, in Guatemala and Puerto Rico) as well as partial inventories of documentation available in peninsular collections on Canario emigration. Several of these documents are reproduced in the proceedings.

Subsequent colloquia (always held in the second week of October so as to include Columbus Day), have been broadened to include contributions on the history and culture of the archipelago itself that may not directly address the American connection. In the second session in 1977, which produced two volumes, island art, architecture, and literature received considerable attention. A particularly engaging essay by Juan Régulo Pérez discusses the early traffic in the indigenous song birds that take their name from the islands. Such reports, which demonstrate the dynamic nature of Canario scholarship and are of interest in their own right, are presumed to provide background for the consideration of the archipelago's trans-Atlantic connections. Noteworthy from the more specifically Americanist perspective is a paper by Javier de la Tabla y Ducasse that develops a statistical series on eighteenthcentury traffic from the Canaries to the American colonies using the account books of the Real Seminario de San Telmo in Seville. By royal order, this seminary received a limosna of two pesos per ton from each westward-bound vessel (the average being 4.5 ships and 550 tons per year during the forty-six years between 1708 and 1776 for which data exists).

The third colloquia held in 1978 further expanded its horizon to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Las Palmas in 1478. Most of the thirty-three published contributions were devoted to the history, institutions, and morphology of this port city and Atlantic crossroads. Those papers devoted specifically to Canario-American relations focused on such themes as the licensing of nineteenth-century embarkations, the nature of trade regulations, Las Palmas citizens who were important government functionaries in the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (by Analola Borges), and biographi-

cal details on Canario field marshall Tomás Morales, whose capitulation at Maracaibo in 1822 marked the end of serious resistance by royalist forces in Venezuela (by Francisco Morales Padrón).

The fourth colloquia in 1980 got back on track with a diverse collection of nearly fifty papers in two oversized volumes, half of them restricted to archipelago themes that included art, architecture, trade with African and European ports, islanders attending the University of Seville, and the other half pertaining directly to Canario-American relations. Noteworthy among the latter are essays on the contraband trade, the return flow of migrants (indianos and golondrinas), the Canario colonies in Uruguay, Texas, and Louisiana, Canario contributions to the Cuban tobacco industry, and Canarios as frontier missionaries. Participants included several internationally known historians of Latin America—Charles Verlinden, Enrique Otte, Charles Minguet, and Marcello Carmagnani—as well as virtually all of the leading Canario scholars. Two richly documented longer essays by Miguel Molina Martínez and Germán Hernández Rodríguez consider the Canario colony in Louisiana. Materials from national archives in Paris and Madrid on the eighteenth-century American trade are partially inventoried by Minguet and Encarnación Rodríguez Vicente, while material in the Archivo Histórico de Montevideo on the founding of that city is described by Luis Alberto Musso Ambrosi. The colloquium was held in conjunction with sessions of the International Commission on Maritime History that focused on the theme of "The Atlantic Islands." The results will presumably be published separately.

The Jornadas de Estudios Canarias-América, sponsored by the Caja de Ahorros of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, have been Tenerife's reply to the initiative of the Cabildo Insular and the Casa de Colón in rival Las Palmas. The published proceedings of the first two such conferences held in 1978 and 1979 suggest a less ambitious and somewhat more popular approach to the theme of historical linkages between the archipelago and the Americas. Their twenty-nine papers are all tied in one way or another to the announced topic. While the Las Palmas colloquia have attracted more professional historians, the organizers of the Tenerife jornadas seem to have sought a broader participation, including several student presentations based on memorias de licenciaturas.

The Tenerife contributions reach well beyond conventional history to include comparisons and parallels in literature, folklore, tradition and customs, art and architecture, speech, and even the physical environment. Emigration, with the transfer of culture traits and terminology that it involves, remains implicit in all of them. Some contributors, perhaps emboldened by a perceived mission to maximize the impact of the islands on the New World, go to considerable extremes to make their cases. For example, José Alcina Franch insists on the impor-

tance of the Canaries in pre-Columbian culture trait diffusion from Africa and the Mediterranean to the Americas, and Antonio Rumeu de Armas recognizes effusively the "civilizing force" of medieval Spain as transmitter of the concept of "the liberty of man" through miscegenation, first with the Guanches and then with the native peoples of America.

Additional *jornadas* are planned in coming years. It is hoped that they will lead to joint meetings with the Las Palmas group in October 1992 on the island of Gomera, where Columbian traditions and *la projección americanista* run deepest.

The unbroken current of emigration comprising the overriding theme in Canario-American relations had received no modern monographic treatment until the appearance of Julio Hernández García's groundbreaking analysis of this phenomenon in *La emigración de las Islas Canarias en el siglo diecinueve*. Originally a La Laguna doctoral dissertation, the book begins with an eloquently concise prologue by his principal professor, Antonio Béthancourt Massieu, who places the study in the broader time frame of island history. Using emigration permits (*comendaticias*), Canario and Cuban newspapers, and unpublished records of a wide range of private and government organizations, Hernández García has constructed a highly satisfying picture of the character, the causes, and the impact of this extraordinary human mass movement. This outstanding young historian's valiant attempt to quantify it, however, inevitably falls short.

Despite the title, the study is concerned almost wholly with the last half of the nineteenth century. Emigration by Spaniards, including residents of the Canaries, to the newly independent American republics was technically illegal from 1838 to 1853. But much clandestine movement occurred, especially in foreign vessels that found the Canaries poorly patrolled. These ships went chiefly to Venezuela and Uruguay, where substantial Canario colonies had already been established. The island of Cuba, which remained under the Spanish flag until 1898, was the most favored destination of migrants and remained so throughout the century, despite the gradual removal of restrictions on movement to other areas. The heart of Hernández García's study is his analysis of more than sixteen thousand comendaticias issued in the last half of the century, which represented over twenty-three thousand emigrants from fifteen Canary Island ayuntamientos. An overwhelming 80.3 percent of these emigrants indicated that Cuba was their intended destination, compared with 7.9 percent bound for Venezuela and 2.8 percent bound for Uruguay. Despite the large size of the sample, its validity must be questioned in view of evidence from other sources cited by the author on the large numbers of Canarios who were also going to Venezuela and the countries in the La Plata region during this period.

Such a discrepancy can be explained in several ways. Many emigrant vessels disembarked their passengers at destinations other than those announced, especially when the ship captains knew that labor contractors waiting there would pay them well. Moreover, the Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico served as way stations for many Canarios, especially those seeking to avoid military service, whose final destination was Venezuela. Finally, migration was extremely place specific. Thus of the eight thousand persons represented in the comendaticias issued at Santa Cruz de La Palma (this one outer island's ayuntamiento accounts for better than one-third of the entire sample), a remarkable 97 percent are indicated as going to Cuba, compared to 65 percent from Oratava and 61 percent from La Laguna (both on Tenerife and the places next best represented). But for less populous Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, data exist for only the ayuntamiento of Teguise, and of this group, more than half listed Uruguay as their destination. Drought-stricken Lanzarote had originated much of the clandestine traffic to Montevideo earlier in the century.

Of the more than twenty-three thousand persons accounted for by the comendaticias, a substantial number were in family groups where youth predominated. The proportion of women (29 percent) was much higher than for emigrants from peninsula ports in the same period.

Hernández García discusses the complex of factors that sustained the migrations, the Atlantic crossings, the work contracts and conditions of work in Cuba and Venezuela, the role of remittances home, and especially the enduring sense of identity that held the migrants together as isleños in their new homes. The last factor is clearly reflected in the overseas Canario press and the mutual aid societies and social clubs, especially in Havana and the provincial cities of Cuba.⁷

Official statistics on Spanish migration became available only with the founding of the Instituto Geográfico y Estadístico in Madrid in 1882. Several factors, however, frustrate their effective utilization, including the intensive character of clandestine movements and the abundance of repeat migrants, the *golondrinas* who crossed over temporarily for the sugar harvest. Extreme fluctuations from year to year reflected economic and political conditions both in the Canaries and in America. The sea of numbers is confusing, sometimes contradictory, and further complicated by the maddening absence of legends on several of Hernández García's charts. The peaking of Canario migration to Cuba in the 1870s and 1880s correlates well with the collapse of the cochineal market in the face of new competition from synthetic dyes. For several years after 1898, migration levels were closely tied to the price of sugar. The author's data does not carry him into the period of

the U.S. interregnum in Cuba, when there was much confusion as to the status of Canary-born residents of Cuba. This situation resulted from an apparent oversight in the drafting of the Treaty of Paris, on 10 December 1898, which mentioned only Spanish subjects (*naturales de la península*) as foreign-born who were to be "immediately eligible for Cuban citizenship."

The local histories and community studies that have been proliferating recently in the Canaries, usually supported by government subventions, inevitably have been providing another useful source of information about the "American connection" and the demographic impact of the tradition of emigration. With some reason have the islands been referred to as *la pequeña América*, or more recently as *una extensión de Venezuela*. Remittances from the New World have built the terraces and irrigation systems that support much of the present-day agricultural sector in the archipelago, and to a much lesser extent, tourism. Earlier crop introduction from America—maize, potatoes, tobacco, and tomatoes—along with the cochineal insect and its host cactus have contributed decisively to the islands' welfare. Even the uncultivated land-scape, with its many adventive American species (Opuntia cactus, agaves, wild tobacco, California poppies, and Monterey pines) displays a distinctive New World character.

The fashion of "going to America" produced a channeled, rather than a random, migration. While the Canario presence has been overriding in a few areas, it has been almost completely absent in others. Mexico and the west coast of Central and South America, for instance, scarcely felt the Canario touch. Their influence has been almost exclusively on the more readily accessible Atlantic side, from Florida to the La Plata estuary.

Canarios undoubtedly have been the most geographically localized of Spanish immigrant groups in the New World, and perhaps the most cohesive and readily distinguishable. How many may have crossed over and how many of these may have returned in the last five centuries will never be known. With major fluctuations, they may have averaged two thousand arrivals a year for much of this period. The persistence of this migration, a phenomenon of "long duration" in the terminology of Fernand Braudel, and its geographical concentration at different times in different places is one of the more neglected and intriguing themes in New World culture history.

NOTES

- 1. Canarias ante el cambio (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Lith. Romeo, Universidad de La Laguna, 1981).
- 2. José Pérez Vidal, "Aportación de Canarias a la población de América," Anuario de

Latin American Research Review

Estudios Atlánticos 1 (1955):91-197; Analola Borges, "Notas para un estudio sobre la proyección de canarios en la conquista de América," Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos 20 (1974):145-265; "Aproximación al estudio de la emigración canaria a América en el siglo dieciséis," Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos 23 (1977):239-62; James J. Parsons, "The Migration of Canary Islanders to the Americas: An Unbroken Current since Columbus," The Americas 39 (1983):447-81. The contribution of the Canary Islands to the early settlement of the New World has been largely unrecognized because of the tendency of scholars to accept the lista de pasajeros a las Indias, the authorized departures from Seville in the sixteenth century, as representative of the geographic origin of the participants in Spain's "great enterprise." Only a handful of Canarios are included among the many thousands thus inscribed because those embarking from the islands were completely beyond the reach of the peninsular authorities. Thus Peter Boyd-Bowman's Indice geo-biográfico de 40,000 pobladores españoles de América en el siglo dieciséis, vol. 1, 1493-1519 (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1965) and vol. 2, 1520-1539 (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1968), lists only thirty-nine Canary Islanders as having departed for the New World during the period 1493–1539! Later periods show no significant increase. See Boyd-Bowman, "Patterns of Spanish Emigration to the Indies, 1579-1600," The Americas 33 (1976):78-95. In contrast, Analola Borges has documented more than ten thousand Canarios who crossed over to the Indies in the sixteenth century, which is clearly only a fraction of the total ("Notas para un estudio," 261). Some would have been Andalusians who had participated in the conquest of the archipelago, but after the first years, almost all appear to have been Canaryborn, no small number of whom were of mixed Spanish-Guanche blood.

- 3. Levi Morrero, Cuba: economía y sociedad, vols. 2 and 3 (Madrid: Playor, 1974–78).
- 4. El Museo Canario (Las Palmas) and Estudios Canarios (Instituto de Estudios Canarios, La Laguna) are two other island scholarly journals of long standing.
- For example, Francisco Morales Padrón, "El desplazamiento a las Indias desde Canarias," El Museo Canario 33–36 (1950):1–15; and "Colonos canarios en Indias," Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos 8 (1951):399–441.
- 6. The two provinces of Las Palmas and Santa Cruz de Tenerife that comprise the archipelago today are an integral part of Spain, but ambiguity existed in the earlier centuries regarding their status. Until 1775 they had a distinct monetary system. They were excluded from the eighteenth-century Catastro de Ensenada, which was designed as the basis for a special levy. Although official documents often included them under overseas colonies, they were not freed, as the American colonies were, from the extraordinary taxes of the Napoleonic Wars. Simón Bolívar, in his famous manifesto in 1813, addressed his audience as "peninsulares y canarios." A. M. Bernal, "En torno al hecho económico diferencial canario," in Canarias ante el cambio (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Lith. Romeo, 1981), 25–38.
- 7. Hernández García, who traveled to Cuba in the course of his research, is one of the few Canario scholars to have examined primary sources in Latin America. In addition to Cuban-Canario newspapers, he consulted the libros de registro of the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Havana, the books of the Real Junta de Fomento, and the memorias of the Real Sociedad de los Amigos de País in Cuba with profit. Earlier, the late Leopoldo de la Rosa had employed data from the libro de matrimonios in the Caracas cathedral to demonstrate the dominant position of Canarios in that community. Fully 70 percent of all those inscribed between 1684 and 1750 who were born outside of Venezuela were from the Canaries. "La emigración a Venezuela en siglos diecisiete y dieciocho," Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos 22 (1976):617–31.
- 8. Examples might include A. Cioranescu's remarkable Historia de Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 4 vols. (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Caja de Ahorros, 1977–79); Juan Francisco Martín Pérez, El NW de Gran Canaria: un estudio demográfico histórico, 1485–1860 (Las Palmas: Mancomunidad de Cabildos de Las Palmas, 1978); E. L. Burriel de Orueta, "La emigración, factor clave de la demografía de . . . la población de la isla de Gomera," in Canaria: población y agricultura en una sociedad dependiente, Taller de Geografía 2 (Barcelona: Oikos-tau, 1982), 183–247.
- 9. Thomas Glick's The Old World Background of the Irrigation System of San Antonio, Texas

- (El Paso: Texas Western University Press, 1972) provides outstanding documentation of the transfer of a set of Iberian irrigation institutions, modified in the Canaries, to a New World setting.
- New World setting.

 10. Günther Kunkel, "Notes on the Introduced Elements in the Canary Islands' Flora," in *Biogeography and Ecology in the Canary Islands*, edited by G. Kunkel (The Hague: Dr. W. Junk, 1976), 249–66.