

JOHN CHARLES CHASTEEN

HEROES ON



HORSEBACK

LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST GAUCHO CAUDILLOS

HEROES

A LIFE AND TIMES

ON

OF THE LAST

HORSEBACK

GAUCHO CAUDILLOS

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# 1

## CAUDILLOS

**V**iva el General Saravia!" A shout went up invariably when his men saw him on horseback in battle, but Aparicio Saravia's famous white poncho made him a clear target for enemy sharp shooters as he rode in front of his line of soldiers to encourage them. Always he had laughed—"But they can't hit me!"—at the concern expressed by his officers. This time, at dusk on 1 September 1904, the massed fire came from only two hundred yards away. Two bullets hit Saravia's horse, staggering it, and his sons Nepomuceno and Mauro went toward him, but before they arrived a third bullet hit the general, who slumped forward onto his horse's withers, and a shudder went through the insurgent army. Having watched a lot of bullets do their work, these tough fighters knew to expect the worst when Nepomuceno opened his father's shirt to staunch the welling blood. It was a stomach wound, bringing high risk of fatal infection. Aparicio tried to smile, but he looked pale and wan as darkness settled over the Brazilian-Uruguayan borderland. The moon rose, and the congealing frost seemed to glow dully on the trampled grass. "Don't let the men know I'm wounded," he said as they carried him away, but the army already knew.<sup>1</sup>

During that day of fighting along the Brazilian border, Saravia's Uruguayan insurgents had stood firm against a strong force of Uruguayan government troops. They also possessed the advantage of superior reserves for the next day. Had they stayed to fight, they might well have won. Instead, the astonished government forces



awoke to see the insurgents streaming away across the border in a disorganized rout. Without their hero to give them unity, they had lost all cohesion. The insurgent officers refused to obey the formal second-in-command, and their men seemed altogether to have lost the will to fight. During the next few days, Nepomuceno found the archive of his father's general staff abandoned in a shed near the battlefield, while not far away, in a ranch house just across the Brazilian border, Aparicio Saravia's raging fever signaled the onset of peritonitis, and then, of pneumonia. As the cold wind of a southern hemisphere winter howled outside, Aparicio sank into delirium, directing past battles and ordering imaginary attacks, but even before he died, the army he commanded had ceased to exist. Thus ended the Uruguayan civil war of 1904, the last of so many to convulse that small country in the three generations since independence.<sup>2</sup>

This military collapse recalled the similar loss of an irreplaceable leader during the Brazilian civil war of 1893-1895. Here the fallen hero was Gumerindo Saravia, Aparicio's older brother. Following Gumerindo's death in August 1894, his followers had agreed unanimously that the best path to follow was the quickest one out of Brazil, but they found themselves too far from the border to escape with the body of their slain leader, whom they buried in a nearby church yard. What happened next, recounted in a dozen different versions by the tellers of this tale, shows the special importance attached to the person of the leader by friend and foe alike. The pursuing government forces found Gumerindo's grave, exhumed his corpse, and sprawled it by the roadside. The government commander marched his troops past it so everyone would see that this rather small man—the subject of some very tall tales in the past year—was truly dead. Then the government forces forbid anyone to bury Gumerindo, and when an old woman reburied him anyway, they exhumed him again. Finally, a government officer cut off Gumerindo's head, alleging that the cranium of this misguided military prodigy merited scientific study, just as was done to the body of millenarian leader Antonio Conselheiro a few years later in the backlands of northeastern Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

The brothers Gumerindo and Aparicio Saravia were *caudillos*, leaders capable of inspiring intense devotion among a loyal personal following independent of any formal institution, leaders who became

generals *after* acquiring an army of followers rather than the other way around. In many ways, the Saravias' mounted guerrillas of the 1890s resembled the "gaucho hordes" who had struck terror in the heart of city-dwelling writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento half a century earlier, leading him to begin the Spanish American polemic on the phenomenon of *caudillismo* with his *Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). By the 1890s, the impromptu light cavalry of the southern plains was no longer a match for government armies, now equipped with Mauser rifles and Krupp artillery, coordinated by telegraph and transported by rail, and the insurgents could do little more than gallop through the grasslands with government troops in hot pursuit, rarely capturing towns and never holding them for long. If Facundo was among the first "gaucho" caudillos, the Saravias were among the last.<sup>4</sup>

Occurring on the eve of the twentieth century, the Saravias' rebellions were much better recorded than those of the 1830s and 1840s. Daily newspapers in modernized capital cities sent reporters, a number of well-educated participants produced numerous accounts of their own, and, in contrast to earlier condemnations by observers like Sarmiento, many chroniclers of the 1890s—particularly in Uruguay—celebrated the rustic qualities of these "barbarous" caudillos and their "gaucho" followers, thereby displaying the same creole nativist spirit evident in the Argentine pulp novels of the period. The Saravias' appeal as nativist symbols led Manuel Gálvez, the conservative Argentine literary nationalist of the early twentieth century, to write a *Life of Aparicio Saravia* (1942), and an Uruguayan historical and literary tradition has continued to surround Aparicio with tribute in prose and verse since the last years of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, however, the image of the older brother Gumercindo, once famous throughout Brazil, has faded practically into oblivion. Today, an equestrian statue of Aparicio towers over a busy intersection in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, while no statue of Gumercindo can be found in Brazil—yet, of the two, Gumercindo was the better general.<sup>5</sup>

The Saravias' contrasting careers as culture heroes provide a metaphor for general Spanish American and Brazilian patterns of nineteenth-century political history. Caudillos stand in the path of any narrative of Spanish American history, enigmatic and unavoidable.

One encounters the most famous of them—Rosas, Morazán, Santa Anna, Alvarez, Artigas, Páez, Obando, Castilla, Flores, and so on and on—somewhere between independence and the onset of export-oriented economic growth after 1870. The list of national-level caudillos alone includes hundreds of names, especially if one adds all the leaders to whom the term has been applied in the twentieth century. Almost invariably, their rise occurred in a “revolution,” or at least, in a civil war or barracks revolt that they termed such. Narratives of Brazilian national history, on the other hand, offer few equivalents. A different Brazilian pattern is clear in the career of one of that country’s best remembered military leaders, the Duque de Caxias, who put down provincial rebellions and fought foreign wars but never turned his arms against the government. Why do such heroes on horseback dominate the pages of Spanish American, but not Brazilian, history in the nineteenth century?<sup>6</sup>

This book will suggest an answer to that question by using the careers of Gumerindo and Aparicio Saravia to make an argument that departs significantly from the conventional wisdom concerning Spanish American *caudillismo*. Current interpretations all privilege the logic of political economy. Since Sarmiento, historians have observed the close relationship between landowning and political power in the nineteenth century, a relationship naturally central to Marxian renderings. Tulio Halperín Donghi has pointed out the militarization of rural society, resulting inevitably from the long and hard-fought Spanish American wars of independence, and John Lynch has described how caudillos distributed the spoils of war and then became the “prime protectors” of the propertied classes in the 1830s. E. Bradford Burns has argued that some caudillos gained a following by defending the interests of ordinary folk. All these historians, however, present economic interests as the driving force of Spanish American caudillismo, and they say little about the leaders as heroes, attractive figures who occasionally prompted idealistic emulation as well as pragmatic obedience among their followers. It is this last element—the caudillo as culture hero—that will be emphasized here. By concentrating on what the Saravias’ followers thought about them, I hope to show how backlands caudillos could thrill and inspire, whether or not they defended the material interests of their followers.<sup>7</sup>

The undeniable attraction exercised by many caudillos over their followers is usually termed a matter of "charisma," or personal magnetism, but the notion of charismatic leadership seldom receives close attention from historians. Beginning from the premise that leadership must be analyzed less in terms of a leader's personal qualities than as a relationship between leader and followers, I will argue that, like beauty in the proverb, the charisma of the Saravia brothers was in the eye of the beholder. It was intensely personal but also dependent on a collective assessment and therefore accessible to reconstruction. Leaders who exercise an unusual attraction must embody something of transcendental significance for those who respond to them charismatically. What the Saravias represented to their followers, I believe, was a collective identity that elicited reactions similar to those associated with the appeal of nationalism. The twentieth-century cult of Aparicio Saravia has powerful overtones of romantic nationalism that will surprise anyone who thinks of caudillos as mere providers of spoils, protection, and patronage. I thought at first that the heroic tints of the Saravias' portraits had been added after their deaths, but in the course of my research I found, to the contrary, that the cult of exemplary heroes already exerted a powerful attraction for nineteenth-century borderlanders and that it contributed to the meteoric political rise of Aparicio, especially.<sup>8</sup>

This conceptualization of caudillo charisma might be described as Durkheimian. That is, the leader gains the group's allegiance by personifying it and facilitating (for some of its members) the powerful experience of self-transcendence. Rather than a small, tightly-knit community like a peasant village, the Saravias' followers were a large and diffuse "imagined community" of people who recognized each other through symbols of a common heritage and destiny. To study caudillos as culture heroes and symbols of collective identity, one must piece together in detail the outlook of their followers, seeking to recover the material textures of their daily lives and trace the constellations of meaning embedded in their particular historical experience. Next, one must pay careful attention to narrative representations of the leader and try—by zigzagging back and forth between text and context—to identify the qualities that resonated most strongly among their followers. That, at any rate, is the method adopted here.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, this book is organized into two separate streams of

chapters, braided together. The first stream is composed of short narrative chapters following the Saravias' careers as political and war leaders of the 1890s. These chapters (introduced by dates) necessarily echo previous tellings of the Saravias' campaigns in oral tradition, newspapers, pamphlets, and a string of partisan biographies. The second stream of chapters (introduced by thematic titles) alternates with the first stream and provides a context or gloss for the narrative. These longer, thematic chapters describe basic characteristics of borderland society, explore the political impact of the border itself, and trace the gradual onset of hard times toward the end of the nineteenth century. Because relatively little documentation about the Saravia family has survived from the time before their rise to fame, one must reconstruct the social origins of the caudillos through a detailed recreation of the rural milieu in which they lived. The reconstruction draws on such sources as census data, tax rolls, local newspapers, judicial records, and the reports of local administrators from both sides of the Brazilian-Uruguayan border.

Throughout, the story of the Saravia brothers guides the presentation, and an initial "plot summary" may provide useful orientation for the reader.<sup>10</sup> Gumercindo Saravia's career fits the conventional profile of most nineteenth-century caudillos. This Saravia brother began as a local strongman, a rich landowner with a powerful presence and the habit of dominating those around him. He was a fighter and a killer—sometimes chief of police, at other times the armed rival of the police, a leader in his neighborhood one way or the other. Gumercindo fought his way to leadership of a Brazilian insurgent army and became the focus of a personal cult with messianic overtones. Anecdotes about Gumercindo echo Sarmiento's famous descriptions of Facundo Quiroga's mesmerizing gaze and the fanatical devotion of Facundo's followers. Younger brother Aparicio Saravia, on the other hand, was remembered by his neighbors mostly for his sense of humor, and seemed destined to remain a rancher like the rest until he accompanied Gumercindo in the Brazilian war of 1893 and inherited command of the army at his brother's death. Aparicio, too, knew how to fight, but—more skilled at leading a charge than at deciding what the army should do next—he was soon surrounded by urban men who used his military experience (and political inexperience) to further their own ends. The political power of this Saravia

brother lay partly in the nativist image of him disseminated by the print media. The photographs and pamphlets presenting Aparicio as a patriotic "Countryman in Arms," reincarnation of heroic caudillos past, produced an enthusiastic response among his party's rank and file, catapulting Saravia over the heads of hundreds of more experienced leaders to make him, at the turn of the century, the second most powerful man in Uruguay.

Now to set the scene. The Saravia family lived on the rolling prairie that stretches for hundreds of miles between Uruguay and Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. The family's ranches lay in the southeastern part of this borderland, the most active meeting place between Spanish Americans and Brazilians since the eighteenth century. Here the Spanish and Portuguese empires had fought for control of the Rio de la Plata, and Brazilian armies repeatedly occupied the area after independence. Large numbers of Brazilian ranchers migrated south into Uruguay in the wake of these invasions, the Saravia family among them. Life on this rough cattle frontier gave borderland males all the skills needed to become irregular light cavalry—collectively, a *montonera*—at a moment's notice. In December of 1892, about four hundred horsemen gathered around Gumercindo to form a *montonera* much like those of the independence era. Hammer blows rang on steel as borderlanders prepared for war in the manner of their fathers and grandfathers, breaking apart heavy sheep shears and lashing the broad blades atop cane poles to make lances, their principal weapon.



## 2

### JANUARY 1893

While Gumerindo Saravia's men waited to invade Brazil, they concealed themselves in the low trees that line the stream beds of the borderland, green and sweltering in the southern hemisphere summer. This year there were violent thunderstorms and people laughed about "atmospheric revolutions." Around the cooking fires, Saravia's men gathered to talk in a Portuguese heavily laced with Spanish terms while they passed a gourd of bitter *mate* (Paraguayan tea) from hand to hand, carefully lifting the kettle with rough hands to pour water into the gourd over the packed leaves and then drain the brew through a metal straw. Each of the men had brought several horses, the sheep-fleece which served as saddle and sleeping gear, and little else. Although some of these three to four hundred men had firearms (generally of some antique variety), most carried only a lance and a long knife. Rather surprisingly, given the size and capability of the Brazilian army just seven years before the turn of the twentieth century, the plan of this montonera was to invade the Brazilian subcontinent and force its government to its knees.<sup>1</sup>

Gumerindo Saravia's montonera presents us with an interpretive problem. Inevitably, one wonders: Were these men crazy? Why did they start a bloody civil war against a vastly superior force? How were they able to march six hundred miles north through the Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, to threaten—if only for a moment—the country's political and economic



heartland? More difficult than explaining their fleeting success (for, though not professional soldiers, these men were impressive military athletes) is explaining their motivation and, above all, their resolve to fight on for thirty long months, animated only by the most far-fetched hopes. At the outset, I wish to renounce the goal of certainty in this explanation. Surely we can never really know the hearts of people distant from us in time and circumstance, especially when they left so little record. We can only hope to make reasonable inferences about their interior lives, drawing on a knowledge of external circumstances and using a bit of imagination.

Almost all of the horsemen who joined Gumerindo Saravia's invasion of Brazil were rural men, inhabitants of the ranches—called *estancias*—that covered the borderland of Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul. From various descriptions, one can guess their social circumstances. Some were the owners of considerable property, as indicated by the fine quality of their woolen ponchos lined with cotton, by their wide pants and high black riding boots, and by the silver inlay on their spurs and on their horses' bridles. Others among them owned modest properties hardly big enough to be called *estancias*, but they held their heads high because their relative poverty seemed less important in the rowdy male society of the camp. Many in the rough crowd of men who sat drinking mate, sharpening their weapons, and remarking on each other's horses during this steamy January were not landowners at all, but day laborers or *agregados* who cared little what party ruled in Porto Alegre, the state capital of Rio Grande do Sul. (*Agregados* lived on someone else's land and grazed horses and cattle of their own in return for occasional services to the landowner. Many of the *agregados* and day laborers were black and mulatto men.) And finally, there were ragged drifters—black, indigenous, white, and anywhere in between—the last generation of real gauchos. They wore headbands to hold back their long hair, and, in lieu of pants, the Guaraní *chiripá*, a long woolen loin cloth secured around the waist by a very broad belt, and most carried their foot-long blades thrust diagonally under that belt at the small of their backs. Some still knew the Indian language, Guaraní, spoken by most of the first gauchos. A fuller description of these men (there were no women among them, yet) will emerge in the chapters ahead.<sup>2</sup>

Why had they gathered around Gumerindo Saravia? The answer