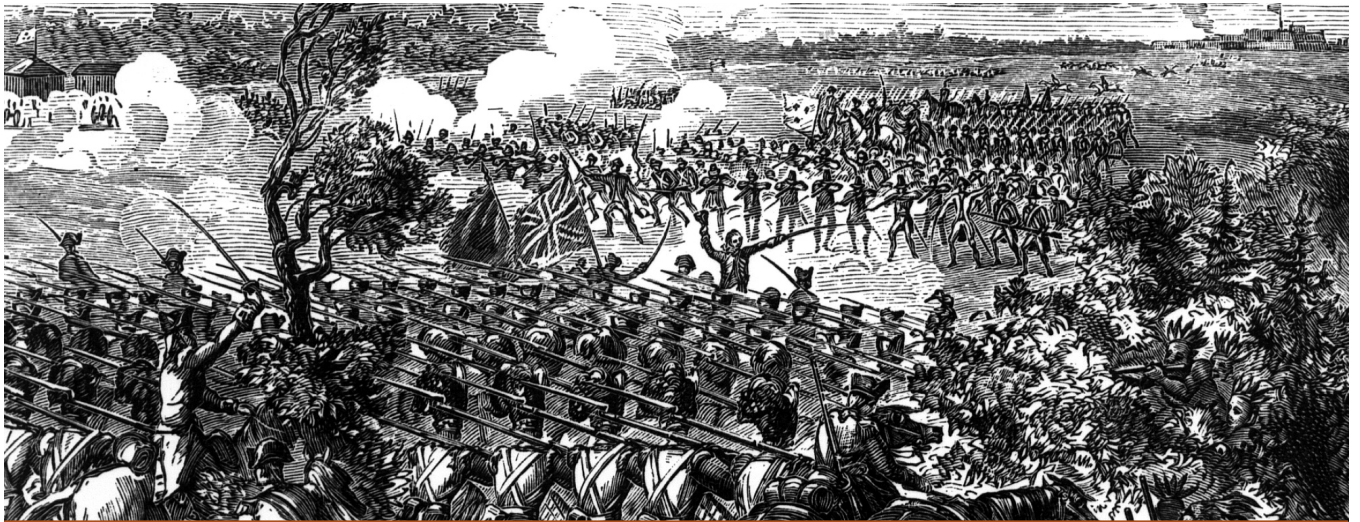


Glory! Steel! Onward!



A SHORT STORY BY

COLIN SNOWSELL

signature

TRANSCRIPTION OF KEYNOTE ADDRESS
DELIVERED JULY 20, 1958
ON THE OCCASION OF THE FEAST DAY OF NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE
AT THE PALACIO ROOM; THE MARITIME CLUB
BY THE HONOURABLE WALDEMAR HAENSCH BEJARANO

THE STORY OF OSCAR PALACIO JR. IS WELL KNOWN to all of us. In the July uprising in the year of our liberation, how many other of the glorious three hundred and fifty horsemen of whom our national anthem sings, the illustrious men of courage, who for two nights and a day rode their steeds from the capital to the port where the froth from their stallions' mouths anticipated the froth of the turbulent sea, backdrop to the siege of the Treasury building, where Spanish loyalists barricaded inside rolled out a welcoming carpet of grape shot and cannon fire, how many other of the immortal three hundred and fifty, stuffed their riding boots with the hair of our nation's daughters? We know that the stuffing of hair, so important to our national lore, was a gesture both symbolic and practical. Hair may not have been the ob-

vious choice for insulation, but, at the very least, it seems preferable to infested hay or infected rags. Perhaps its use was purely talismanic? Oscar Palacio Jr., as we all know, never explained.

As our history books tell us and I hesitate to tell you, as all of this is known to every schoolboy from the first district to the nineteenth, from the northern desert to the southern fields of ice, Oscar Palacio Jr., patriot of patriots, was a short, short man. How many others who that day and in that unforgettable and terrible battle that forged our nation, stood only 5 foot one inch, even upon 3 inch heels? We know this for his boots are forever on display next to his saber, his scabbard and two balls of hair (impossible to disentangle) – one from each boot – at the national museum. What

did his compatriots say to such a short person? Probably, “thank you” since around him and his steed laid a circle of Spanish corpses, felled by the sword of Oscar Palacio Jr. short of height, giant of heart.

Of Oscar Palacio Jr., the 17th signatory of our glorious and immortal national proclamation of Commerce, Dignity, Independence and Concord, so much has already been written that I watch you all now for nodding heads and heavy eyes. I hope that the satiety we all feel, after that most resplendent of banquets on this, our national day of feast, will not be aggravated by the memory of Don Oscar, without whom none of us would be here, without whom none of this could have happened.

When I was a boy of 12 I learned, as did all of you, how Oscar Palacio Jr., patriot, statesman, ambassador to seven different nations throughout an exemplary diplomatic career that included postings in Japan, Bolivia and finally, before Don Oscar was recalled to the capital to serve the first of three terms in senate (as senior member of the fifth district), Chad, how he singlehandedly enforced his will in the taking of the Treasury Building. Who led the charge when defeat seemed imminent? Who galloped towards the enemy when others were turning to flee the bloody field? He is the saviour of our country; more, he is the saviour of my country.

How can we now fail he who failed us never?

Now, when certain of our poets and philosophers are attacking his legacy, saying things so scandalous I hesitate to repeat them, now is the time when all patriots must fight for Oscar Palacio Jr. We must fight with the same ferocity that he once fought for us. This is why I discuss him now.

I do not favour, as some of our nation’s young poets and new philosophers have lately suggested in the opinion columns of certain newspapers, the exhumation of Oscar Palacio Jr.’s corpse. What has laid undisturbed beneath the soil for 123 years this past February, has no obligation to answer the caprice of the curiosity of men who could not mount an ass in a bathhouse – pardon my French, I forget there are ladies here present and, while we are thinking about these, the mothers and daughters of our Republic, I raise my glass to you in a toast: health, happiness and harmony to you and yours – such men could never rush headlong into steely mouths of fire, astride a charging beast no more than I could stand idly by, on this the National Day of the Patriots, while the memory of one of this country’s most resplendent and effulgent heroes is sullied. And for what? Was Oscar Palacio Jr., Minister of War during our country’s finest hour, when our Maritime rights and our mineral wealth was secured against the incursions of foreign invaders, thereby preserving it for our grandchildren and our grandchildren’s grandchildren, was such a man as he other than who he said he was? Let us consider.

Have you seen the oil painting? Of course you have. All patriots have seen it. It hangs on the second floor of our national museum, where the union of the twin spiral staircases signifies the union of our native tribes and our European saviours. Some of our modern painters say this is a derivative work. They scoff at it, call it a third-rate imitation of second-rate Dutchmen. I say how can any painting on such a scale, portraying the moment when our national identity was forged in the blood of our patriots and the iron of our heroism, be anything less than magnificent? Go, observe, tell

me - and tell the memory of Oscar Palacio Jr. – if you think me wrong. Have you seen the saber Oscar Palacio Jr. waves at the men to his rear, as his stallion leaps a cowering Spanish battery? Have you stopped to observe the Catalan cowards? Have you seen how the flashing of the steel in the eyes of Don Oscar caused more grievous wounds to the hearts of the European tyrants than did all of their steel and all of their fire in the hearts of our patriots, even the 286 who died in that terrible struggle, most of them screaming, we are told, in voices so agonized their pitch sounded even above the gunfire, even above the crashing of the waves on the beaches beyond them? On this, the Feast Day of National Independence, we remember you who fell. I wonder, do we remember why?

These men died for us. Yes! Nonetheless, they live forever in the blood of our people. They live also in their likenesses, fashioned in poolside monuments across our bountiful country. As you may or may not know, it was Oscar Palacio Jr. who implemented this program during a largely unheralded role – immediately prior to accepting a lifelong position as Chief Justice of the Federal Reserve and Appellate Court, as Minister of Patriotism and Aquatics. As a child, I bathed every Saturday in the 173rd national pool, in the second city of our fifth district's primary seaside facility. What joy I felt as I backstroked in the shade cast by the Capricorn sun and the shadows of the statue of patriot horseman Ignacio Suazo Iguirre, about whom little is known other than the nature of his fatality: A gold bar entered his left temple and exited, halfway through his right.

For those who have not yet had the pleasure of visiting the fifth district I want to as-

sure you this was not how he was immortalized. Of course not. His statue is of him mounted and charging, the correct posture for all patriots. As all schoolchildren know, a group of Royal Fusiliers operating from behind the steel doors of the treasury itself had grown low on ammunition. Insolent and impish, as so many of their regiment were in this era of Spanish history, they shouted out to our charging three hundred and fifty, requesting the loan of some ammunition. Ridiculous! Naturally, our heroes did not answer. The Spaniards then proceeded to load their cannons with the contents of the safe. The initial hail of gold bars killed three. Much more fatal was the subsequent salvo of silver ten pieces, for the silver was poisonous. Maybe it is good to be born with a silver spoon in your mouth. It is not good to die with a muzzle load of silver coins in your intestinal cavity.

Ignacio Suazo Iguirre, in your shadow - and that of the high diving board – I became a man and to you I raise my glass. May a temple filled with gold be your resting place with God, who favoured us on that immortal day in the July of our independence. Thanks to the wisdom of Oscar Palacio Jr. and his patriotic swimming pools I understand that strength comes from the endurance of healthy lungs, the power of well-toned muscle and allegiance in perpetuity to our founding fathers.

I have heard those who favour exhumation say that the past is a foreign country. Nonsense. Peru is a foreign country. Bolivia? Definitely. I have never seen a passport bearing a customs stamp from The Past. The past is where we are great and in our devotion to it, our remembrance of it, this is where we become greater still. I do not understand metaphysics. I am amongst friends so I may as well admit

this: I do not even understand physics. How is it possible, our poets and our philosophers say, for a man so short to have, as he and the history books claim, descended from pure Castilian blood? They say that no man from that country - without physical deformity or musculature and skeletal aberration - has ever stood less than 5 foot 6, 5 foot 7. When I read this sort of nonsense in the editorial pages of our so-called best newspapers I have to shake my head in sorrow.

What, I say? Oscar Palacio Jr. is no longer a patriot because he stood shorter than the men he killed by the dozen? Let us not forget that this short patriot killed, not because he suffered from what I have even heard some people refer to as "little man syndrome." No. Oscar Palacio Jr. killed so that all of us may enjoy the freedom we squander by doubting and lamenting the qualities of humanity that gave us the freedom to indulge ourselves in such infelicitous speculation. I do not say we should not have such freedom.

Bash your head against brick walls. Lie in bed all day staring at your ceiling. Scratch the weak chin on your pallid face. Play your guitar, guitar player. To me, it matters not. I will be on the verandah with my grandchildren and my cafecito. The sun, when it sets, will warm me all the more because I know that when it rises, I, and those like me, those who forbid the peril of travel to the recesses of the mind, will still be here. And one day, as surely as Oscar Palacio Jr. grew his own facial hair and did not paint his mustache on with charcoal and boot black, as some of these same unfortunate yet inevitable detritus of democracy now insinuate, men who are too complex to enjoy the simple pleasures of life, that Oscar Palacio Jr.'s heroic charge made possible, will not.

Oscar Palacio Jr. was the originator of the Izquetoluche Accord. Without this accord, we have no economy. Without this accord we are not even a country. As you know, the Izquetoluche Accord offered the southern treaty tribes one wooden bungalow per nine-person family unit plus free and compulsory education to all males between the ages of five and fifteen. This education was conducted at immaculate and centralized educational housing facilities in two modern and antiseptic locations, places easily accessible by rail. By the way, and since we are on the subject, our rail system exists, of course, because of the coastal mesa route earlier devised by Oscar Palacio Jr. who served a two-year term as special steam engine consultant appointed to the Deputy Minister of Transportation's office – an interim position. We offered our loyal native tribes all of this in exchange for a tract of land consisting of 30 million hectares of evergreen forest. There are some who say this deal was a swindle. To people like this what use are words? Roll your eyes and roll your "r"s as you call them ridiculous, a single word before you show them your back.

This deal made us a country. It gave us goods to export. It gave us funds with which to build. It made us who we are. Naturally, as all of us who have worn the wool from the sheep raised in our supple south or dined on the succulent lamb that is now exported to all corners of the world and served in the finest restaurants anyone cares to name, knows, the cultivation of this land exceeded the skill and knowledge of these treaty Indians. And on this, our national day of Feast, let us drink to our native brothers and sisters, who so generously share their ancestral lands with us. Marvelous people. We also salute you German immigrants.

In the hands of willing German immigrants our unproductive southern forests were razed in a matter of decades. Our national herds of sheep are second only, I understand, to New Zealand. I say, why stop there?

Now the same people, who tell us The Izquetoluche Accord was nothing more than thievery, have another idea. They have proposed the great experiment; the exhumation. Our poets and philosophers tell us there is the possibility that this national hero was himself a member of one of the southern treaty Indian tribes. Before we can reply they insist that this is only a possibility. Be calm they say, as though they are talking to slow schoolchildren, as though what they are saying is not an insult to everything we, as a people, hold dear.

To quell our outrage they tell us all of this is only in the interest of science. They tell us the accomplishments of Oscar Palacio Jr. can never be diminished. Let science have its day. They say to us, what are you so afraid of? If you are sure you are right, why not relax in tranquility? They tell us we can eliminate this possibility easily by simply agreeing to the exhumation of his corpse.

More likely, they say to us in soothing voices, that he suffered from a rare disease. Lumbago. I don't know. Growth stunted from smallpox, a type of peninsular measles. They tell us the great Patriot's greatest achievement could well be yet to come. I have heard – and I know many of you have as well – a certain senator say Oscar Palacio Jr. would, were he alive and with us today, lead the charge on the occult areas of science the same way he led the three hundred and fifty patriots in the July siege on the treasury in the year of our independence. I know why they say this. I know what they want. Already they have said it.

These days when people hear the name Oscar Palacio Jr. now, they stop and they wonder.

Why are they doing this? Journalists, intellectuals, artists. Leave us alone! Oscar Palacio Jr. is Oscar Palacio Jr. That's it! Case closed. Isn't it enough that they have ruined the future with their free love and their tight trousers? Now they want to ruin the past too? No, I say that far and no further. They tell us shocking things. Historians tell us they've been investigating. They tell us things no good person should think much less believe. They tell us what? I don't want to say! But we've all seen the papers. We all know the absurd allegations, the depths of our new national depravity. They tell us that Oscar Palacio Jr. was not a man. They tell us that he was a woman dressed like a man!

Shocking! But it doesn't stop there. Scientists tell us Oscar Palacio Jr.'s DNA sequencing is that of a native woman. Literary detectives tell us of new discoveries in the archival fonds of Oscar Palacio Sr. They tell us things that - look at me! I'm shaking before you! I'm yelling! I'm sorry. Let me drink some water.

There. Please. This is a holiday. We will continue this celebration deep into the night. But these charges upon my heart lay heavy. I must speak my mind even though, as you can see, my prepared notes lie unused before me and I speak from a troubled place. Our men of letters say they have evidence of what? Of a love affair between Oscar Palacio Sr. and the woman who called herself Oscar Palacio Jr.!

So let me get this straight.

They think: was his name really Sancha Watupe? Was he really a her? Was Oscar Palacio Jr., at the time of the siege of The Treasury Building, really a fifteen-year-old Indian girl, orphaned by Oscar Palacio Sr. whose

“son” she became? Was the character of Oscar Palacio Jr. a gift bestowed as mere redress for the old man’s regret? Did the old man adopt this girl as his son, later his mistress?

All of this they say because Oscar Palacio Jr. was short and he was brave. I say to you, any of you with short sons, feed them beef and stretch them out on a rack at night before you let them fall asleep. Otherwise, my God! Next thing you know, to be a man will no longer be a question of what side you dress on, it will become a question of what size your suit is and if you say smaller than 36 may God help you. Long haired metaphysicians you have never met will suckle at your breast and call you mama.

Let Sancha Watupe lie where she is. Let Oscar Palacio Jr. charge forever atop the twin staircases of our national gallery and let the past alone. Nothing you unearth can change this. Nothing I can say to you here can stop them from failing to realize that we war not with our history but with the ideas of a new world that wants to prevent us from preparing against the defeats of regret, the funeral pyre of introspection. They say our civilization is built on cruelty, injustice and greed. They say that if Oscar Palacio Jr. can be proven to be Sancha Watupe a true national reconciliation can begin.

I say, what national reconciliation? We came to these parts long ago to build new worlds in the image of the old. The cost was sometimes terrible, yes. But do we tarnish the legacies of those who fought so that we no longer must? We, who have everything, do not have this: the right to judge those whose steel gave us such luxury. What, after all, will the inculcation of guilt give to those whose world we ended? Like the immortal oils capturing

Oscar Palacio Jr., we must charge and charge forever. I said I do not want to dwell on Oscar Palacio Jr, and on what every schoolchildren knows and indeed I do not. I want just to ask this: why did he stand in boots filled with women’s hair?

Like every true patriot, as I grew older, I reflected on this hair, on the hair of the daughters of our nation stuffed in our greatest patriot’s boots. I came to understand that, in all likelihood, they were trophies, snippets from the bordello. And why not? We know the history of our nation. We know the passionate blood of our men; we understand – do we not? – that patriots will seek consolation in the arms of the angels; and which nation’s women are more angelic than our own? I say this, having just returned from a trip to the North. In all confidence, I want to tell you – Venezuela the answer is not.

But what if what they say is true? I know it is not, for how could a 5’1 Indian woman rise to our nation’s very cabinet, as of course Oscar Palacio Jr. did. For two coalition governments, stretching over ten years, he served. Wouldn’t a woman have raised some attention in the parliamentary water closet? What they say is not practical. How did she bind her breasts? Why did not our most esteemed national morticians advise us earlier that Oscar Palacio Jr. was not, in the strictest technical sense, biologically a man? Such a series of omissions would point to a conspiracy no patriot can even allow himself to consider. But if it were true – I know, brothers, I know sisters, remain tranquil, indulge me for one brief moment – if it were true, what would it mean?

Why did Sancha Watupe collect the hair of women? Already the curious men have removed this hair from its permanent place be-

hind armoured glass in the national museum and have subjected it to the most rigorous of microscopic examination. Already they are saying in its molecular structure, all of it is hair belonging to the known DNA sequences - listen to me! Talking about things I do not understand but which I am told have become essential areas of knowledge for the modern man; next, I suppose, I will be discussing with you space travel and laws of nuclear fission, words I know only from the dictionary and certain newspapers - they tell us now that this hair belongs, every last strand, to the same tribe they say Sancha Watupe belonged to. Sancha Watupe – what were you doing with all that hair?

Was it all just padding? Or was it mementoes of the women in your village slaughtered in the raid of pillage led by your surrogate father Oscar Palacio Sr.? You couldn't have loved these women, whose hair you took. If you did, wouldn't you have had to turn your steed and fight against those who did this to them, to you, the same thing they'd now taught you to do to others with whom you had no particular quarrel?

Sancha Watupe you are always Oscar Palacio Jr. and you are forever a patriot, a hero and a never-ending instructor to the future of the great nation you, with the grace of God, called into being. The hair in your boots was the locks you could never wear. You saw that those who did were not allowed to live; and you, Oscar Palacio Jr., knew the great lesson of this new world, that life at any cost, is better than no life at all.

If you are who they say you are, then your life remains to us the most valuable lesson of all. In a strange and defenseless land we ended your world. In our new world, we built markets for foreign men upon whom we'd later turn arms. We learned that to loathe everything we once were and to embrace everything we've become is practical and patriotic. Like you, Oscar Palacio Jr., horseman of the July uprising and like the hair in your boots, memory of the past and absence of all regret, defines who we are.

Patriots, your glasses, raise them high. Oscar Palacio Jr. and the 350 horseman of the July uprising of our independence.

Glory! Steel! Onward!

Colin Snowsell holds a MA in Communications Studies from the University of Calgary. He is finishing a PhD through the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. An interview he did with Chuck Klosterman in Spin Magazine, on Morrissey and his Latino fans, now appears in Chuck Klosterman IV: A Decade of Curious People and Dangerous Ideas (2006). Snowsell believes a line from that article – “Frankly, Snowsell doesn't know why all this happened, either” – continues to summarize his intellectual endeavours, but perhaps not in the way Klosterman intended. The more one reads and the more one thinks, the more questions one raises and that, Snowsell would like to remind Klosterman, is kind of the point of the whole thing. Presently, Snowsell is thinking about Canadian cowboy mythology, steakhouses and diners. Maybe he is just hungry.

Always, Snowsell thinks about Raymond Chandler and Los Angeles in the 1930s, the decline of Britpop, the appeal of shoegazing, Nightmare Alley, The Wire, the short stories of John Cheever, Swedish indiepop, and who would win in fights between: Gene Tierney and Linda Darnell; Alain Delon and Buck Owens; Montgomery Clift and The Clash; 50 Cent and David Caruso. Despite his fondness for pop culture, Snowsell still thinks Theodor Adorno was right.

Snowsell's essays have been published in *This Magazine*, *Maisonneuve* and *PopMatters*. Earlier versions of Snowsell have appeared on MuchMusic (in the role of Calgary alt-indie impresario), obtained a journalism diploma from the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology and worked in corporate communications at Greyhound Canada's head office in Calgary.

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Bash your head against brick walls. Lie in bed all day staring at your ceiling. Scratch the weak chin on your pallid face. Play your guitar, guitar player. To me, it matters not. I will be on the verandah with my grandchildren and my cafecito. The sun, when it sets, will warm me all the more because I know that when it rises, I, and those like me, those who forbid the peril of travel to the recesses of the mind, will still be here. And one day, as surely as Oscar Palacio Jr. grew his own facial hair and did not paint his mustache on with charcoal and boot black, as some of these same unfortunate yet inevitable detritus of democracy now insinuate, men who are too complex to enjoy the simple pleasures of life, that Oscar Palacio Jr.'s heroic charge made possible, will not.

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