

21 Orphans

©2008 by Howard L. Kaplan

(Note that the verse seems to modulate from A minor to D minor somewhere around the middle)

Moderately (♩=140)

Out of the har - bour of old La Co - ru - ña, A
sea - port where Cae - sar once walked, a - ges past,
Sailed a cor - vette, as the Ma - ri - a Pi - ta Set
out on a long - de - layed voy - age at last.
Eight - een o three was the year of de - par - ture, With
win - ter ap - proa - ching, No - vem - ber's last day.
Out towards the co - lo - nies, Spa - nish A - me - ri - ca,
Poin - ted her bow as she sai - led a - way.
Could you have seen what was be - ing trans - por - ted, You
might not have thought it of a - ny im - por - tance:
Nee - dles and glass - ware, some five hun - dred book - lets, A
staff of of - fic - ials, and twen - ty - one or - phans.

Out of the harbour of old La Coruña,
A seaport where Caesar once walked, ages past,
Sailed a corvette, as the *Maria Pita*
Set out on a long-delayed voyage at last.
1803 was the year of departure,
With winter approaching, November's last day.
Out towards the colonies, Spanish America,
Pointed her bow as she sailed away.
Could you have seen what was being transported,
You might not have thought it of any importance:
Needles and glassware, some five hundred booklets,
A staff of officials, and twenty-one orphans.



Figure 1: The Maria Pita

Francisco Xavier de Balmis y Berenguer,
Having once served with the army of Spain
As a physician's aide, stationed in Mexico,
On that corvette was returning again.
This time, however, he was a physician
Himself, having trained in the subsequent years.
Organized, eminent, confident, arrogant,
Armed with a knowledge of Spain's far frontiers,
He led this vital *Real Expedicion*.
What he'd proposed was precise and detailed,
Listing the staff, the equipment, the boys,
That must all be assembled before the ship sailed.



Figure 2: Balmis

Crossing from Spain meant a long ocean voyage,
This being the age before steam, before coal.
Young boys were needed, and orphans were plentiful:
They'd be ideal for filling this role.
Let's get our facts straight. We might call them "orphans",
But not all were children whose parents had died.
Some in a *Casa del Niños* would be
Expósitos, abandoned, rejected, denied.
Now their King needed them. All was made ready,
Provisions stowed safely, equipment inspected.
Then, when the hour of departure was imminent,
By the staff doctors two boys were infected.



Figure 3: Infecting a boy

Winds did their work as the crew set the sails.
The captain consulted his charts and his maps.
Each boy's infection became a small blister,
Slight fever. The doctors let ten days elapse.
Then they collected the lymph from the blisters,
And each of the next two boys served as a host,
Arm-to-arm transfers maintaining the potency
Till they could reach Venezuela's north coast.
Puerto Cabello's most eminent citizens'
Children were first to show signs of infection,
By their example encouraging others,
For had not King Carlos dispatched this protection?

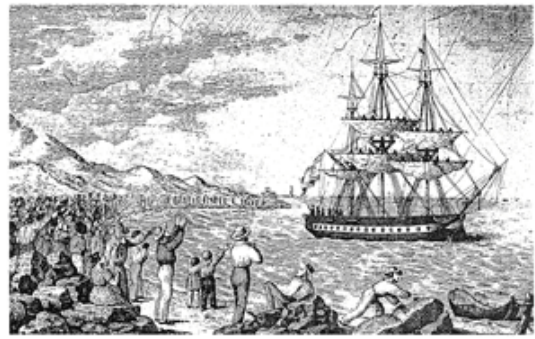


Figure 4: Colonists welcoming the ship

Balmis brought cowpox, the mild pox, the gentle pox,
Leaving the skin with a single, small scar,
Leaving the lymph that coursed under its surface
With power to fend off a worse pox by far.
No one receiving the cowpox *vacuna*
Need ever fear smallpox, the blister being healed;
Each one receiving the cowpox *vacuna*
Could serve as a donor, could share this strong shield.
Jenner in England had proven its value,
But some there opposed his attempts at promotion.
Spain's King and counsellors had no such doubts
And ensured it reached colonies over the ocean.



Figure 5: Cowpox

Getting more children by any means possible,
Keeping unbroken the arm-to-arm chain,
Balmis proceeded by sea and by land
To reach Mexico City, the heart of New Spain.
With him were orphans who'd crossed the Atlantic.
Their blisters were healed. Of what use were they?
What would now happen to Manuel María,
Vicente Ferrer, and little José?
In the King's councils, before the departure,
This question was posed, and the answer decided:
By the King's orders, and from the King's treasury,
Lodging and schooling would both be provided.



Figure 6: Offering native Americans vaccine

If you like history well-laced with irony,
You'll want to find the King's orders ignored,
No one ensuring the boys' education,
And only the streets for their bed and their board.
If you like stories with happier endings,
Then you'll want to hear that the orphans all thrived.
Based on one final dispatch to the King, five years later,
We know almost all had survived.
Four were at boarding school, while local citizens
Had thirteen others. These facts, simply stated,
Lead us to think the boys' fortunes were better
Than they would have known, had they not emigrated.



Figure 7: King Carlos IV

Primary references:

Michael M. Smith. The "Real Expedicion Maritima de la Vacuna" in New Spain and Guatemala.

Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Ser., Vol. 64, No. 1 (1974), pp. 1-74.

Gonzalo Díaz de Yraola, translated by Catherine Mark. The Spanish Royal Philanthropic Expedition: The Round-the-World Voyage of the Smallpox Vaccine, 1803-1810 (La vuelta al mundo de la expedición de la vacuna, 1803-1810), including a Spanish-language facsimile of the 1948 edition (Madrid: Instituto de Historia, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2003, ISBN 84-00-08172-2).

Unfortunaely, Balmis' own diary of these events was lost, possibly when Napoleon's troops sacked Balmis' house in Spain around 1809.

Figure sources:

Figures 1 and 2 were found at

<http://www.gefor.4t.com/arte/pintura/laexpediciondelavacuna.html>

Figures 3 and 5 were found at

<http://debiogeo.blogspot.com/2007/04/la-real-expedicion-filantrpica-de-balmis.html>

Figure 4 was found at

http://www.vacunas.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=708&limitstart=3

Figure 6 was found at

<http://www.alicantevivo.org/2007/09/la-expedicion-de-la-viruela.html>

Figure 7 was found at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Charles_IV_of_Spain.jpg

All of the figures appear to be taken from old sources now in the public domain, but no documentation of their sources was found on the web sites, except in one case. For Figure 7, the web page says that the image is a painting by Francisco de Goya for which the copyright has expired.

howard@thrinberry-frog.com <http://www.thrinberry-frog.com>
Performing rights administered by SOCAN
This songsheet was slightly revised in February 2009