The seventeenth century (from, say, about 1590 to about 1700) was the period of travail and gestation for the “old” Mexico made familiar to us in the works of Lucas Alamán and Alexander von Humboldt—the Mexico of the great landed estate, of the classical hacienda. The period contains few exciting events, few great names, at least in comparison with the Homeric sixteenth century. The military and spiritual conquest had long since come to a halt, except on the remote frontiers. It was a period of shrinking economy and a shrinking or stagnant population. Undistinguished bureaucrats in church and state were slowly molding public life into a suffocating routine, and corruption, nepotism, and time-serving make the records of the day dismal reading. So historians have tended to bypass this dull hiatus and get on to more rewarding times, leaving the impression that little happened in it worthy of note. And yet during that long quietness a new society was forming whose norms of conduct were set by a raw nobility of landed gentry—norms which have persisted to this day. The evolution
of this aristocratic society is the theme that François Chevalier has undertaken to explore in his thoughtful and challenging book. Without pretending to have exhausted any one aspect of his subject, he has gathered a massive amount of information from the national and provincial archives of Mexico and the Archives of the Indies at Seville, and presents a boldly conceived and convincing account of a society in the making.

There is little that is startling or unexpected in the book, and, indeed, there could hardly be. The patriarchal “big house” of old Mexico, with its swarms of cousins, compadres, huge families, in-laws, vaqueros, priests, retainers, serfs, and hangers-on, is sufficiently well known to eliminate surprises. Chevalier is interested in discovering how that landed aristocracy came into being and what purposes, if any, its members had in mind when they transplanted to the New World the medieval manor of the Old. His approach is philosophical; it gives his book method and architectural coherence. He ignores the silly row between the “scientific” and the “literary” schools of historiography. He marshals a great abundance of evidence, selects what is pertinent to his design, discards the irrelevant, and keeps his exposition within bounds and understandable. He has spared himself no pains in verifying his information, but he allows himself plenty of room for wise and pertinent commentary. In a word, Chevalier has written a book, not just another monograph.

Its plan is conventional enough. Chevalier outlines the familiar human and physical geography of Mexico and Spain, characteristically giving the greater emphasis to culture and social habits. The hacienda, or manorial estate, and the mission, its religious counterpart, were, he thinks, inevitable growths deriving from the ancient traditions of Spaniards and Mexicans.

The Crown and its great agency, the Council of the Indies, were fully aware of the dangers inherent in this New World feudalism and put formidable blocks in the way of those who would acquire the huge holdings necessary to its growth. Land titles bristled with restrictive clauses. Agricultural grants, which were the only ones originally made in fee, seldom exceeded two caballerías (of about 105 acres each) to a grantee. Those made to Indian communities were, moreover, inalienable. Grants of land for stock raising (estancias de ganado mayor y menor, of 6.7 and 3 square miles, respectively) were
hardly more than permits to graze stock. But Spanish ingenuity was equal to the challenge, and within a century of the conquest a very large part of New Spain was legally in the hands of the cattle and sheep barons—inevitably, for the economy of New Spain had become dependent upon stock raising and its attendant industries, which could not have operated without permanent title. "Les seigneurs de troupeaux," as Chevalier calls them, became, quite literally, lords of the land. In southern Mexico alone, that is, between the Chichimec Frontier (see map) and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, cattle and sheep estancias covered an estimated 90,000 square miles by 1620. In the enormous empty expanse to the north of that line the great hacienda became the typical and predominant form of landholding.

There were many motives behind its growth. Each mining community (real de minas) required a base of supply, and it was the hacienda principally which furnished the necessary food and hides and animals. The miners themselves, in the long depression of the seventeenth century, became hacendados, just as the hacendados had frequently been mine operators, for the crisis in mining, which began to be apparent in the last decades of the sixteenth century, forced the miners to look to the land for a living—and perhaps they needed no forcing. The limited tenure of mining grants, the Crown's monopoly of quicksilver (used in the amalgam process) and the ruinously high prices at which it was sold, the fixed price of bullion, the miners' endemic insolvency, and the scarcity and high cost of labor—all these factors were active in the miners' drift to the land.

The constantly diminishing labor supply, certainly up to the middle of the seventeenth century, also serves to explain the hacendado's preoccupation with stock raising. Without people, the vast, semi-arid stretches of the north could not be farmed and were almost valueless. The northern hacienda was a fortified manor surrounded by a trackless waste. Overgrazing and glut made stock raising frequently an uneconomic activity, but in the great stagnation of the seventeenth century there was little else to which the hacendado could turn his hand.

A curious and, possibly, an equally powerful motive in the formation of the hacienda was purely psychological. Chevalier cites instance after instance of the aggrandizement of estates for the sake of size alone—a mania which at times went to the extreme of the hacendado's buying
up land and mines and keeping them out of production. Everyone, it seems, hankered after nobility, a state which required the cachet of land—the more land the more nobility—a phenomenon remarked by Humboldt in 1803, all this regardless of its utility.

The new noblemen had the most diverse and unlikely origins and lacked the patina of antiquity and high birth, but they made out. An important nucleus of the emerging hacendado class was supplied by the "first conquerors" and their descendants, whose services the Crown had rewarded with encomiendas of Indian tributes. They deserve a paragraph to themselves.

Changing conditions and the vanishing native population had reduced the encomenderos' income from tributes and quite early obliged them to look for other means of support. From their ranks came the first line of hacendados. Although the encomienda was not a land title, it should not be inferred that the encomenderos could not hold land. On the contrary, large numbers of grants were made to encomenderos and their descendants, even within the limits of their encomiendas. The encomenderos, to be sure, protected their Indians' land from the encroachments of other Spaniards, for the very good reason that without land the Indians could not pay tributes, a consideration that did not restrain the encomenderos from joining the ranks of the landed aristocracy.

Although the Crown signally failed to prevent the rise of this dangerous feudalism in the New World and thus forged the instrument of its own eventual destruction, there were nevertheless some very real limitations to the growth of the hacienda. In the more densely inhabited agricultural country to the south, the native community, protected by the Crown, the encomenderos, the church, and sometimes effectively by the natives themselves, as in the case of Tlaxcala, kept the hacienda from absorbing all the Indian lands. Another barrier was the Spanish community (the villa), whose citizens had been given considerable tracts in the vicinity as an inducement to settling. Some of these citizens sold their land to the hacendados, but probably most of them clung to their holdings and formed the typical communities of, for example, the Spanish Bajío.

The greatest obstacle, however, to the spread of the hacienda was very likely the agricultural estates of the Dominicans and Jesuits, which, in this Dark Age of New Spain, were a necessary source of the urban
food supply. The religious orders had several important advantages over the hacendados. The most obvious was tenure: hacendados died; the orders lived on. Besides, they were not interested in holding vast tracts of idle land merely to tickle their vanity, but put it to work raising crops for the market. They made it pay. Their estates were not plastered with mortgages, nor did they have to support the sumptuous town houses that advertised to the world the social prestige of the great families. On the contrary, the orders were soon in a position to lend money, and they made no small part of their income later on by operating the bankrupt haciendas of their rivals. They were not plagued with labor shortages, for the religious, living on the premises, were under no such pressure to sweat their labor as were the hired managers of the haciendas. They were, in short, scientific farmers.

I have tried to give some notion of the scope of M. Chevalier’s distinguished book. His timely study of the evolution of the hacienda lifts the dense curtain that hid many aspects of this most significant of Mexican colonial institutions, the recrudescence of which (in other guises, to be sure) is an interesting phenomenon of contemporary Mexico.

In the editing, owing to limitations imposed by cost, I have had to omit the voluminous footnotes and scholarly apparatus, which in any event the specialist will prefer to consult in the original.

The Diego Rivera drawing on the title page appeared originally in Mexican Maze (Philadelphia, 1932), by Carleton Beals, who generously gave me permission to reproduce it.

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