

The Ambassadorial Years: Some Insights

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It is fitting that J. Reuben Clark, Jr.'s, career as a public servant should end with his appointment as Ambassador to Mexico. Traditionally ambassadors have occupied a pre-eminent position in the world of diplomacy. As the personal representatives of the sovereign, they are protected by a substantial body of international law, and affronts to the ambassador have been treated as affronts to the sovereign himself. In American diplomatic practice, the ambassador is the personal representative of the president. He serves at the pleasure of the president, although his appointment must be confirmed by the Senate. Since the ambassador is presumed to be the personal choice of the president, the reputation and status of the ambassador is frequently regarded by the host country as an indication of the importance which the president places on the United States' relationships with the host country.

J. Reuben Clark's appointment to Mexico, judged by that criterion, was a clear signal to the Mexican government that the United States placed considerable value on amicable Mexican-American relations.¹ *Excelsior*, a Mexican newspaper with an English language section, headlined the story, reporting Clark's appointment as being the appointment of probably the best man to advance goodwill, understanding, and friendly relations between the United States and Mexico.² The Mexican ambassador to the United States welcomed Clark's assignment

¹The documents relating to Clark's appointment are found in his personal file in the National Archives, diplomatic section. The file is 123 Clark, J. Reuben Jr., hereafter cited as 123 Clark. Clark's appointment was made on 3 October 1930; he arrived in Mexico 11 November 1930. He had originally planned to arrive in Mexico City early in October but a telegram from Reed Smoot to Secretary Henry L. Stimson, dated 14 October 1930, which read in part: "Extremely necessary that J. Reuben Clark be permitted to return to Utah to participate in present Republican campaign, . . ." resulted in the delay until November. 123 Clark, J. Reuben Jr., p. 21.

²123 Clark, p. 18.

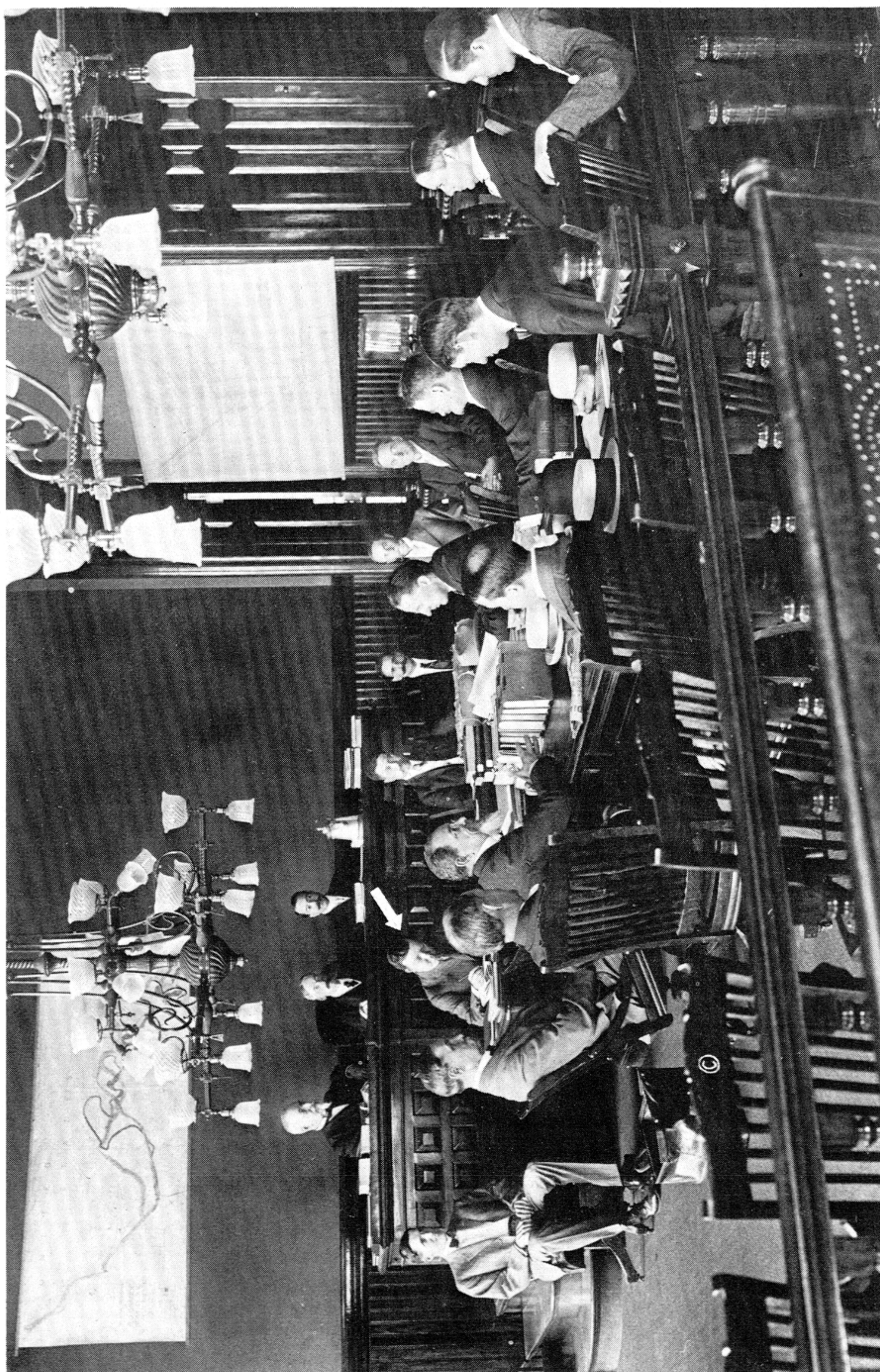
as a "very happy appointment."³ A full study of J. Reuben Clark's career as Ambassador to Mexico must await the definitive study of his life, which is now under preparation by David Yarn, but there are two documents which give some insight into Clark's tenure as ambassador, and which can stand alone, apart from a larger context.

The first is a dispatch which Ambassador Clark sent to the Secretary of State concerning the reporting style of the consular officers in Mexico.⁴ The ambassador is, after all, responsible for all of the political reporting which is carried on by the consular offices under his jurisdiction. He supervises the consuls and consular officers through the office of the supervising consul general who is a member of his personal staff. The reports which consular officers send to the Department of State are routed through the embassy and the ambassador has an opportunity, if he has time, to have a fairly clear idea what his subordinates are reporting. If he will take the time to read the reports, they will give him a good idea of the way that the consular officers approach their task in terms of the conceptual categories through which they screen the information they receive. This dispatch shows how seriously Ambassador Clark took his responsibilities and how familiar he was with the reporting being done by his subordinates.

Because of his own long service in the Department of State, Ambassador Clark was acutely aware of the need of the Department for accurate information about the development of local politics throughout all of Mexico. Obviously, he would not expect diplomats to suppress meaningful information, but on the other hand, he knew that no diplomat worth his salt would want to put a lot of meaningless information into the pipeline. After all, that might simply constitute static which would drown out the real message which he wanted to convey. He was, therefore, concerned to find that many of the reports submitted by the consular officials under his jurisdiction showed the reporting officer to "have been more or less erroneously informed and credulous. The transmission of such inaccurate information," he wrote, "is easily explainable but rarely excuseable."⁵ The Ambassador noted that in addition to reporting highly speculative stories to the Depart-

³Ibid.

⁴National Archives, Diplomatic Section, File LC 812.00/29783.



President Clark and other State Department officials in negotiations with the President of Mexico.

Photograph by Courtesy of J. Reuben Clark, III.

ment of State, some reporting officers were not giving the source of their information.

When the source of such reports is given, both the Department and the Embassy may form an estimate of the value of the information, but when, as often happens, no source whatever is given and the report is made as if statements were matters of the consul's own knowledge, both the Department and the Embassy are likely to obtain erroneous impressions.⁶

The Ambassador pointed out that while he could not call every erroneous and speculative report submitted by the consular officials to the Department's attention, he wished the Department officers to understand that it was very difficult to obtain reliable information in Mexico, and that all reports which did not provide a source should be treated with a good deal of skepticism.

The hard-headed approach which President Clark took to the problem of diplomatic reporting in Mexico is starkly revealed in the following passage from a dispatch to the Department:

The conditions obtaining in Mexico for the last twenty years have been such as to make it very difficult for any foreigner to make accurate summaries of the real situation at any given time, and impossible to do more than guess at what might happen even in the immediate future. My own observation is that few, if any, Mexicans have accurate information. The reports they give you are almost always colored either by hope of reward or fear of reverse. Sources which would in the United States, and perhaps in other foreign countries be considered as entirely trustworthy, must here be considered as practically valueless. This is particularly true of the reports furnished by members of foreign colonies resident here. In Mexico City one can get almost as many estimates of the characters and the intentions of public officers as one consults persons. I have sometimes felt that the unreliability of information sources increases in the ratio of the length of time the person has lived in Mexico,—the longer the residence, the less reliable the information.⁷

That passage tells the reader much about the cast of mind of Ambassador Clark: his unwillingness to treat as fact what was essentially rumor and innuendo; his determination to try

⁶Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

to see the realities of Mexico as they actually existed and not as screened through the self-serving eyes of either Mexican nationalists or foreigners resident in Mexico. This realistic approach to the problem of political reporting also reflects Ambassador Clark's understanding that Mexico at that particular juncture in time was a country in which political life was highly unstable and in which accurate information was very difficult to obtain. It was only natural, therefore, that rumors were apt to run rife, and that there were likely to be as many rumors as there were interested parties.

President Clark's understanding of the problems of political reporting in Mexico, however, went much deeper than an understanding of the way rumors multiply in a society where the means of obtaining information are unreliable and the political situation volatile. In another passage he outlines for the Department the reasons why people in Mexico, and particularly foreigners residing in Mexico, are unable to understand Mexican politics and Mexican life. In detailing these reasons for the Department, Ambassador Clark reveals a sure grasp of the distortions that result when diplomats are insensitive to the problems of cultural bias. This first cause which President Clark listed as distorting the way diplomats and other aliens perceived Mexico, was that many people failed to understand and appreciate that in Mexico aliens were subject to Mexican laws, and that aliens do not have extra-territorial rights in Mexico. The expectation that foreigners, particularly United States citizens, had of special treatment in Mexico, including the expectation that Mexican law would not apply to them, or even going beyond that, that they were really only subject to American law, even though they were residents in Mexico, is a reflection of the arrogant assumption of superiority which has long alienated Latin Americans from North Americans. It is generally assumed that the sensitivity of North Americans to this problem is of recent origin, stemming from the period after World War II when the United States began extensive foreign aid programs in Latin America. It is interesting, therefore, to find how perceptive Ambassador Clark was in his understanding of the Latin American mind and the way in which North Americans misinterpreted their experience in Mexico.

Ambassador Clark also thought that American and foreign attitudes towards Mexico and the understanding of Mexican af-

fairs was clouded by the fact that they did not understand that "Mexican ethical, moral, and legal standards are different from those in the United States, but not necessarily lower, and at any rate are controlling here." One might have expected, perhaps, to find such a sensitive understanding of different life styles on the part of a man who had spent much of his life abroad, but it is rare to find an American with no cross-cultural experience who could so effectively transcend his own culture to understand the life style of others, as this passage reveals that Ambassador Clark had done.⁸ He was unwilling to judge Mexican moral, ethical, and legal standards in terms of those accepted in his own culture. He realized that being different is not necessarily being inferior. But most impressive is President Clark's clear understanding that Mexican life was governed by these norms regardless of whether foreigners thought them to be optimal.

There is a clear relation between Ambassador Clark's understanding of the ways in which cultural bias can distort the perception of aliens resident in Mexico and his own philosophical approach to the problems of foreign policy. His preference for American policy was one of political isolationism. That isolationism was not, as has been pointed out in other articles in this series, a fortress American concept, but the notion that each nation should have the right to determine its own internal affairs.

The corollary of that proposition is that if the United States wished to enjoy the right to determine its own internal affairs, it had to extend the same privilege to other nations. He clearly saw that American interference in the internal affairs of other states provided the basis for a similar interference in the internal affairs of the United States.

Finally, President Clark, with his sense of realism, concludes the dispatch to the Department with the comment that "foreigners coming to Mexico must take the advantages they have here—and those advantages are great—cum onere."⁹ His own deep sense of individual responsibility, which clearly

⁸Some observers argue that diplomacy is distinguished from other government service by the fact that it occurs in a cross-cultural context. The process of becoming a diplomat, therefore, involves the mastery of the implications of this environment. In these terms Ambassador Clark very rapidly mastered the central task of the diplomat. See the article by Robert Rossow, "The Professionalization of the New Diplomacy," *World Politics*, 14:563 (July 1962).

⁹123 Clark, p. 18.

comes from his religious heritage which stressed the responsibility of the individual, as well as from his experience on the American frontier where the consequences of one's acts clearly had to be borne, made President Clark scornful of those who wished to reap economic advantages in Mexico without bearing the burden which the attainment of those advantages entailed. One senses in this passage a rejection of the philosophy that the American government ought to help its citizens gain personal wealth in Mexico while relieving them of the responsibilities which Mexico had every right to impose.

The second document is a dispatch to the Secretary of State describing the farewell accorded to Ambassador Clark by the Mexican government and the Mexican people upon his departure from Mexico.¹⁰ To understand the impact of this dispatch, one has to understand that it was written by Arthur Bliss Lane, a diplomat of some fifteen years experience who was to be America's Ambassador to Poland in the period immediately following the Second World War.¹¹ Lane had seen ambassadors come and go. He had been in Mexico during the tenure of Dwight Morrow, Clark's immediate predecessor, who had been a successful ambassador. Therefore, he could not be easily impressed; yet what emerges from the dispatch is a sense almost of amazement at the sincere regret with which the Mexican officials saw the departure of President Clark, and the genuine warmth with which they regarded him as an individual. The document speaks for itself, but it is all the more impressive when one keeps in mind that the writer of the dispatch could have had no personal motive in exaggerating the events which he described, and that he had a life time of experience in the diplomatic service against which to assess them.

The Honorable
The Secretary of State,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

As reported in my telegram number 28 of February 14, 1933, 8 p.m., Ambassador Clark left on that evening for

¹⁰123 Clark, p. 83.

¹¹Arthur Bliss Lane was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1894; he joined the Diplomatic Corps in 1916 and in 1925 was assigned to Mexico as First Secretary of the Embassy and in 1930 became Counselor of Embassy. He held that position during Ambassador Clark's tenure in Mexico. Prior to his appointment as Ambassador to Poland in 1944, he had served as ambassador in Nicaragua, Estonia, Yugoslavia, Costa Rica, and Colombia.

the United States. The last few weeks before the Ambassador's departure and particularly the farewell demonstration which was given him at the station were characterized by many expressions of good will and affection, not only on the part of the Mexican Government and the Diplomatic Corps, but from the American Colony as well. Persons who have been associated with Mexico for many years and in whose veracity I rely inform me that they do not recall that any departing representative has ever received such a remarkable expression of esteem from all classes of officials and private individuals. . . .

Editorials in praise of Mr. Clark's work as Ambassador were published in *EL NACIONAL* of February 11th and *EL UNIVERSAL GRAFICO* of February 14th. The particular attention of the Department is invited to the editorial which appeared in *EL NACIONAL* of February 11th, this having an especial significance because of *EL NACIONAL*'s being the organ of the National Revolutionary Party, and consequently purporting to represent, in a general way, the collective view of those now governing Mexico.

I am told by a person who has been in close association with General Calles for years, that he had never heard General Calles speak more affectionately of anybody, either foreign or Mexican, as he recently did of Mr. Clark. It is my understanding that both President Rodríguez and General Calles have expressed themselves as wishing that Mr. Clark might continue in office under the incoming administration, and that General Calles has gone so far as to inquire what steps might be taken to suggest to the incoming administration that Mr. Clark be retained as Ambassador.

I accompanied Ambassador Clark when he made his calls on President Rodríguez and on those members of the Cabinet who were in town the days preceding his departure, and am in a position to say that the warm expressions of friendship and even affection impressed me as being remarkable. Ministers Elias and Villa Michel, Attorney General Portes Gil, ex-Provisional President of the Republic, and Mr. Sáenz, Chief of the Central Department of the Federal District, went out of their way to show unusual courtesy in receiving the Ambassador and in escorting Mr. Clark to the stairway or elevator in their respective offices. While these expressions may appear trivial to those who are not conversant with Mexican procedure, they indicate to us here a desire on the part of high government officials to show the high esteem in which they hold Mr. Clark. This sincere expression of cordiality seems particularly significant in Mexico, where diplomatic representatives are almost invariably treated with studied courtesy but are very rarely made the object of affectionate display on the part of government officials.



Ambassador Clark with the National Agrarian Commission and Embassy Staff in Mexico City, March 27, 1931.

Photograph by Courtesy of J. Reuben Clark, III.

The reception given by the Minister for Foreign Affairs was in itself unique. It is the custom in Mexico for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to tender to a retiring Ambassador a banquet at the Ministry at which it is usual to invite the Ambassador and his wife together with other chiefs of foreign diplomatic missions accredited to Mexico and their respective wives. In Mr. Clark's case, however, the Minister invited not only the chiefs of mission and their wives, but also the members of the Cabinet, and informed the Ambassador, in my presence, that the President and General Calles particularly desired that an extraordinary demonstration should be given to Mr. Clark to show the esteem in which he is held.

The Ambassador, in thanking Doctor Puig personally for the kindness to him, stated in his customary modest way that he did not consider that the demonstration which was to be tendered to him by the Mexican Government should be considered for him personally but rather as a tribute to his Government and to the policy in foreign affairs which the administration of President Hoover had followed with respect to Mexico.

Subsequent to the dinner, a brilliant reception was held at the Foreign Office to which over five hundred guests were invited, including high government officials and persons important in Mexican political life, and a concert was given by some of the most notable performers now in Mexico.

I am told by those who have attended many functions at the Foreign Office that it was the most brilliant affair ever given there in their memory. Certainly since I have been in Mexico I have never attended such a brilliant reception.

At the station a large crowd, consisting of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Mrs. Puig, and of other members of the Mexican Government, of the Diplomatic Corps, and of the Anglo-American colony—and estimated by the local correspondent of the *NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE* to have been more than three hundred—assembled to bid good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Clark.