

OURO PRÊTO, THE POTOSÍ OF GOLD

The gold fever which is still sentencing Amazonian Indians to death or slavery is no novelty in Brazil. For two centuries after Brazil's discovery, the soil stubbornly denied metal to its Portuguese proprietors. In the first period of coastal colonization timber, or brazilwood, was commercially exploited; then sugar plantations were started in the Northeast. In contrast to Spanish Latin America, there seemed to be no gold or silver. Having found no highly developed and organized civilizations, only savage and scattered tribes who had no knowledge of metal, the Portuguese had to discover the gold on their own as they opened up the territory and exterminated its inhabitants.

The *bandeirantes** of the São Paulo region had crossed the great expanse between the Serra da Mantiqueira and the Rio São Francisco headwaters, and had observed small traces of alluvial gold in the beds and banks of several streams. The millennial action of the rains had eaten into the seams in the rocks and deposited gold in river beds, valleys, and mountain ravines. Beneath the layers of sand, dirt, or clay, the stony subsoil revealed nuggets that were easily removed from the quartz *cascalho*, or gravel; methods of extraction became more complex as the more superficial deposits were exhausted. Thus the Minas Gerais region entered history with a rush: the largest amount of gold ever discovered in the world till then was extracted in the shortest space of time.

"Here the gold was a forest," says the beggar one meets today, his eyes scanning the church towers. "There was gold on the sidewalks, it grew like grass." He is seventy-five years old now and considers himself part of the folklore in Mariana, the mining town where, as in nearby Ouro Preto, the clock has simply stopped. "Death is certain, the hour uncertain—everyone has his time marked in the book," the beggar tells me. He spits on the stone steps and shakes his head: "They had more money than they could count," he says, as if he had seen them. "They didn't know where to put it, so they built churches one next to the other."

* A *bandeirante* was a member of a *bandeira*, a band of Portuguese slave- or gold-hunters in the Brazilian interior. The São Paulo *bandeiras* were part of a paramilitary organization whose strength varied. Their expeditions into the jungle played an important role in the interior colonization of Brazil. (Trans.)

Once this was the most important region of Brazil. Now . . . “Well, there’s no life at all,” says the old man. “No young folk. They all go.” His bare feet move slowly beside me under the warm afternoon sun. “See that? On the front of that church, the sun and moon. That means that the slaves worked day and night. This church was built by black men; that one by white men. And that’s the house of Monsenhor Alipio who died right on his ninety-ninth birthday.”

In the eighteenth century Brazilian production of the coveted metal exceeded the total volume of gold that Spain had taken from its colonies in two previous centuries. Adventurers and fortune hunters poured in. Brazil had 300,000 inhabitants in 1700; a century later, at the end of the gold years, the population had multiplied eleven times. No less than 300,000 Portuguese emigrated to Brazil in the eighteenth century, a larger contingent than Spain contributed to all its Latin American colonies. From the conquest of Brazil until abolition, it is estimated that some 10 million blacks were brought from Africa; there are no precise figures for the eighteenth century, but the gold cycle absorbed slave labor in prodigious quantities.

Salvador de Bahia was the Brazilian capital of the prosperous North-eastern sugar cycle, but the “golden age” in Minas Gerais moved the country’s economic and political capital southward and Rio de Janeiro, the region’s port, became the new capital in 1763. In the dynamic heart of the new mining economy, camps bloomed abruptly into cities, described by a contemporary colonial authority as “sanctuaries for criminals, vagabonds, and malefactors,” in a vertigo of easy riches. The “Vila Rica de Ouro Prêto”^{*} had grown to city size by 1711; born of the miners’ avalanche, it was the quintessence of the gold civilization. Simão Ferreira Machado, describing it twenty-three years later, said that the power of Ouro Prêto businessmen surpassed by far that of Lisbon’s most flourishing merchants: “Hither, as to a port, are directed and collected in the Royal Mint the grandiose amounts of gold from all the Mines. Here dwell the best educated men, both lay and ecclesiastic. Here is the seat of all the nobility and the strength of the military. It is, by virtue of its natural position, the head of the whole of America; and by the wealth

^{*} The “Rich Town of Black Gold,” so called because the mined gold turned black on exposure to the humid air, due to the presence of silver. (Trans.)

of its riches, it is the precious pearl of Brazil."³⁵ Another writer of the period, Francisco Tavares de Brito, in 1732 defined Ouro Prêto as "the Potosí of gold."

Frequent complaints and protests reached Lisbon about the sinful life in Ouro Prêto, Sabará, São João d'El Rei, Mariana, and the whole turbulent mining district. Fortunes were made and lost overnight. It was commonplace for a miner to pay a fortune for a black who played a good trumpet and twice as much for a mulatto prostitute, "to abandon himself with her to continuous and scandalous sins." Men of the cloth behaved no better: official correspondence of the time contains many complaints against "bad clergymen" infesting the area. They were accused of using their immunity to smuggle gold inside little wooden images of saints. It was said that in 1705 Minas Gerais did not contain one priest who was interested in the Christian faith of the people, and six years later the Crown banned the establishment of any religious order in the mining district.

In any case, there was a proliferation of handsome churches built and decorated in the baroque style characteristic of the region. Minas Gerais attracted the best artisans of the time. Outwardly the churches looked sober and austere, but the interiors, symbolizing the divine soul, glistened with pure gold on their altars, reredoses, pillars, and bas-relief panels. Precious metals were not spared, so that the churches could achieve "the riches of Heaven," as the monk Miguel de São Francisco recommended in 1710. The price of religious services was astronomical, but everything in the mining area was exorbitant. As had happened in Potosí, Ouro Prêto devoted itself to squandering its sudden wealth. Processions and spectacles provided occasions to exhibit splendid robes and adornments. A religious festival in 1733 lasted over a week. There were not only processions on foot, on horseback, and in triumphal mother-of-pearl, silk, and gold chariots, with fantastic costumes and dazzling settings, but there were equestrian tournaments, bullfights, and dancing in the streets to the sound of flutes, flageolets, and guitars.

The slaves spent their strength and their days in the gold-washing installations. "There they work," wrote Luis Gomes Ferreira, a doctor who lived in Minas Gerais during the first half of the eighteenth century, "there they eat, and often there they have to sleep; and since when they work they are bathed in sweat, with their feet always in the cold earth,

on stones, or in water, when they rest or eat their pores close and they become so chilled that they are susceptible to many dangerous illnesses, such as very severe pleurisies, apoplectic and paralytic fits, convulsions, pneumonia, and many other diseases."³⁶ *The capitães do mato* of Minas Gerais collected rewards in gold for the severed heads of slaves who tried to escape. Disease was a blessing from heaven because it meant the approach of death.

The slaves were called the "coins of the Indies" when they were measured, weighed, and embarked in Luanda in the Portuguese colony of Angola; in Brazil those surviving the ocean voyage became "the hands and feet" of the white master. Angola exported Bantu slaves and elephant tusks in exchange for clothing, liquor, and firearms, but Ouro Prêto miners preferred blacks shipped from the little beach of Ouidah on the Gulf of Guinea because they were more vigorous, lasted somewhat longer, and had the magic power to find gold. Every miner also needed a black mistress from Ouidah to bring him luck on his expeditions.³⁷ * Ouro Prêto's appetite for slaves became insatiable; they expired in short order, only in rare cases enduring the seven years of continuous labor. Yet the Portuguese were meticulous in baptizing them all before they crossed the Atlantic, and once in Brazil they were obliged to attend mass, although they were not allowed to sit in the pews or to enter the chancel.

The gold explosion not only increased the importation of slaves, but absorbed a good part of the black labor from the sugar and tobacco plantations elsewhere in Brazil, leaving them without hands. The miners were contemptuous of farming, and in 1700 and 1713, in the full flush of prosperity, hunger stalked the region: millionaires had to eat cats, dogs, rats, ants, and birds of prey. A royal decree in 1711 banned the sale of slaves occupied in agriculture, with the exception of those who showed "perversity of character."

By the middle of the eighteenth century many miners had gone to look for diamonds in Serra do Frio. The crystalline stones the gold

* In Cuba, medicinal powers were attributed to female slaves. According to onetime slave Esteban Montejo, "There was one type of sickness the whites picked up, a sickness of the veins and male organs. It could only be got rid of with black women; if the man who had it slept with a Negress he was cured immediately."³⁸

hunters had tossed aside while exploring the riverbeds had turned out to be diamonds; Minas Gerais had both diamonds and gold in equal quantities. The booming camp of Tijuco became the center of the diamond district and there, as in Ouro Prêto, the wealthy sported the latest European fashions, bringing luxurious clothes, weapons, and furniture from across the ocean for their hour of delirium and dissipation. A mulatto slave, Francisca da Silva, or Xica da Silva, won her freedom by entering the bed of millionaire João Fernandes de Oliveira, the uncrowned king of Tijuco; she was ugly and had two children, but became "the *xica* who gives orders."³⁹ As she had never seen the sea and wanted it near her, her *cavalheiro* made her a large artificial lake on which he floated a ship, complete with crew. In the São Francisco foothills he built her a castle with a garden of exotic plants and artificial waterfalls; in her honor he gave sumptuous banquets with the finest wines, balls that never ended, and theater and concert performances.

In 1818 Tijuco could still manage a large-scale celebration of the prince of Portugal, but ten years earlier the Englishman John Mawe had visited Ouro Prêto and had been startled by its poverty. He found empty and worthless houses with futile "for sale" signs, and ate wretched and meager food. Tijuco did not take long to meet the same fate. The crisis had at first led to rebellion. José Joaquim da Silva Xavier, known as "Tiradentes"—the "toothpuller"—was hanged and quartered after being tortured, and other fighters for independence had disappeared from Ouro Prêto into jail or exile.

WHAT BRAZILIAN GOLD CONTRIBUTED TO PROGRESS IN ENGLAND

The gold began to flow just when Portugal signed the Methuen Treaty with England in 1703. The treaty crowned a long series of privileges obtained by British merchants in Portugal. In return for some advantages for its wines in the English market, Portugal opened its own and its colonies' markets to British manufactures. In view of the existing inequality of industrial development, this proved disastrous for local Portuguese manufactures. It was not with wine that English textiles were paid for, but with gold—Brazilian gold—and in the process Portuguese

looms were paralyzed. Not content with killing its own industry in the bud, Portugal destroyed the seeds of any kind of manufacturing development in Brazil: until 1715 sugar refineries were banned, in 1729 it was made a criminal offense to open new roads in the mining region, and in 1785 local looms and spinning mills were ordered burned.

England and Holland, the leading gold and slave contrabandists, amassed fortunes in the illegal "black meat" traffic and are said to have illicitly garnered more than half the metal the Portuguese Crown was supposed to get from Brazil in *quinto real* tax. But Brazilian gold was channeled to London by licit as well as illicit methods. The gold boom, which brought a host of Portuguese to Minas Gerais, sharply stimulated colonial demand for industrial products and at the same time provided the means to pay for them. Just as Potosí silver rebounded off Spanish soil, Minas Gerais gold only reached Portugal in transit. The metropolis became an intermediary. In 1755 the Marquis de Pombal, Portugal's prime minister, tried to revive a protectionist policy, but it was too late. He declared that the English had conquered Portugal without the trouble of a conquest, that they were supplying two-thirds of its needs, and that British agents controlled the whole of Portuguese trade. Portugal was producing almost nothing, and the wealth brought by gold was so illusory that even the black slaves who mined it were clothed by the British.

Celso Furtado has noted that Britain, following a farsighted policy with respect to industrial development, used Brazilian gold to pay for essential imports from other countries and could thus concentrate on investments in the manufacturing sector. Thanks to this historical graciousness on the part of the Portuguese, Britain could apply rapid and efficient technical innovations. Europe's financial center moved from Amsterdam to London. According to British sources, the value of Brazilian gold arriving in London reached £50,000 a week in some periods. Without this tremendous accumulation of gold reserves, Britain would not have been able, later on, to confront Napoleon.

No result of the dynamic stimulus of gold remained on Brazilian soil except churches and works of art. By the end of the eighteenth century, although the diamond supply was still not exhausted, the country was prostrate. Furtado calculates that at that time—the low point of the whole colonial period—the per capita income of the 3 million-odd

Brazilians did not exceed \$50 a year in today's buying power. Minas Gerais drowned in a long wave of decadence and insolvency. Incredibly, a modern Brazilian author expresses gratitude for the favor and submits that the capital the English derived from Minas Gerais "aided the great banking network that built international trade and made it possible to raise the living standards of peoples capable of progress."⁴⁰ Inexorably condemned to poverty so that foreigners might progress, the "incapable" mining communities moldered in isolation and could only resign themselves to scraping a livelihood from lands already despoiled of metals and precious stones. Subsistence farming replaced mining. Today the Minas Gerais countryside, like the Northeast, is the kingdom of the latifundio and the "hacienda colonels," a dauntless bastion of backwardness. The sale of Minas Gerais workers to haciendas in other states is almost as common as the slave traffic in the Northeast. Recently, Franklin de Oliveira toured Minas Gerais. He found collapsing wooden huts, villages without water or light, prostitutes of an average age of thirteen on the road in the valley of the Jequitinhonha, and crazed and famished people along the roadsides.⁴¹ Minas Gerais was once accurately described as having a heart of gold in a breast of iron, but its fabulous "iron quadrilateral" is being exploited today by a joint Hanna Mining Company-Bethlehem Steel enterprise: the deposits were surrendered in a sinister deal in 1964. The iron, in foreigners' hands, will leave no more behind than did the gold.

Only the explosion of artistic talent remains as a memento of the gold delirium, apart from the holes in the ground and the abandoned cities; nor could Portugal salvage anything creative except for the aesthetic revolution. The convent of Mafra, pride of Dom João V, lifted Portugal from artistic decadence: in its carillons of thirty-seven bells and in its solid gold vessels and candelabra, there still glints the gold of Minas Gerais. The Minas churches have been extensively plundered and few sacred objects of portable size remain in them, but monumental baroque works still rise above the colonial ruins—façades and pulpits, galleries, reredoses, human figures designed, carved, or sculpted by Antônio

* The author, Augusto de Lima Jr., derives great happiness from "the expansion of colonizing imperialism which ignorant people today, inspired by their Moscow masters, describe as a crime."⁴⁰

Francisco Lisboa—"Aleijadinho"—"Little Cripple," genius son of a female slave and a famous artisan. The eighteenth century was coming to a close when "Aleijadinho" began carving in stone a group of large sacred figures in the garden of the Bom Jesus do Matosinhos church in Congonhas do Campo. The work was called "The Prophets," but there was no longer any glory in prophesying. The gold euphoria was a thing of the past; all the pomp and gaiety had vanished and there was no room for hope. This dramatic final testimony, like a grand monument to the fleeting gold civilization that was born to die, was left to succeeding generations by the most talented artist in all Brazil's history. "Aleijadinho," disfigured and crippled by leprosy, created his masterpiece with chisel and hammer tied to fingerless hands, dragging himself on his knees to his workshop every morning.

Legend insists that in the Nossa Senhora das Mercês e Misericórdia church in Minas Gerais, dead miners still celebrate mass on cold rainy nights. When the priest turns around, raising his arms from the high altar, one sees the bones of his face.