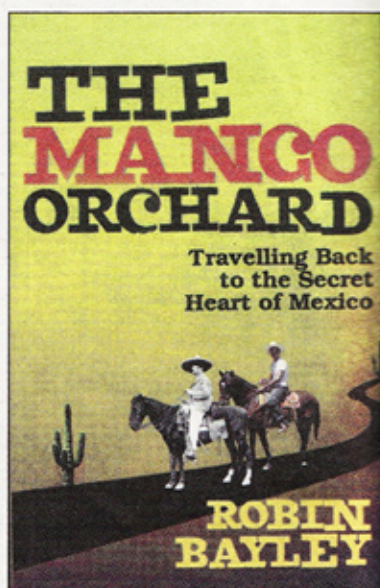


A Sheffield-born man who traced his great grandfather's travels in Mexico also discovered his secret family, reports **Ian Soutar**



A 2002 family reunion in Sheffield for, back row from left, author Robin Bayley, his mother Fleur Bayley and Javier Berecochea. In front are Arturo and Javier Berecochea, Ruth Jones, and Georgina and Enrique Berecochea. Above is the book cover

Making Mexican waves

A NEW book, *The Mango Orchard*, is Robin Bayley's account of how he set off in the footsteps of his great grandfather to the remote village in Mexico where he had lived and worked, only to discover he had left a secret family behind.

Bayley's childhood in Sheffield had been enlivened by hearing tales from his grandmother, Ruth Jones, about her father's adventures in Mexico at the turn of the 20th century. They ended when the cotton mill owner fled the Mexican Revolution with the help of some bandits whom he paid with bags of silver left in the fork of a tree in a mango orchard.

He had long been intrigued to find out more and the time came when the former Hunter's Bar Junior and High Storrs pupil's disillusionment with his job in business and finance in London prompted a thirst for a bit of adventure in his life.

The *Mango Orchard* is the story of parallel journeys a hundred years apart. Undaunted by the passage of time and a paucity of information – some letters and photographs in his grandmother's house in Ecclesall Road South were his only clues – the writer seeks out the places where his great grandfather Arthur 'Arturo' Greenhalgh travelled and lived.

Bayley's journey involved a detour to Guatemala. "I needed to upgrade my Spanish because it was important that I would be able to communicate with peo-

ple when I got there," he explains. Antigua in Guatemala is reputed to be the best place in Latin America to learn Spanish. Why? "There are a number of reasons," he says. "It's a beautiful place and it's cheap and you are taught in a simplified way, less complicated and easier to understand because they speak slower." He not only learned the lingo but fell in love with a Guatemalan beauty.

But he had to leave her behind when he set off for Mexico with only the knowledge that his great grandfather ran a cotton mill in a village somewhere near Guadalajara.

"Eventually I tracked down the village and discovered the factory is now a museum. Thankfully they recognised his name," he says.

That, as the curator informed him, was because nearly half the village have the name, even if it had lost a few letters over the years – Greenhal.

It turned out that Arturo had had a daughter who went on to produce 11 grandchildren creating a vast extended family.

Bayley's arrival was greeted with joy and a certain puzzlement. "The fundamental question my uncles asked was why you came looking when you didn't know we were here. The answer was it was a hunch that there was something there based on what my grandmother had told me.

"I have talked to a lot of people about it and there's a thing called inter-generational

memory theory. If you think that no-one is surprised that children of a tennis player or a singer inherit some of that ability, then why not an awareness, even if it's subconscious.

"One of the themes of the book is storytelling. I would never have gone to Mexico without my grandmother's stories and then found it because everyone over there had been told stories about their grandfather."

The *Mango Orchard* has taken several years to come to fruition, mainly because it is a complicated story that could be told in many ways, says the author. In 1898 Arthur Greenhalgh travelled out to Mexico where his Lancashire family owned a cotton mill. He sent for his future wife who joined him in New York where they were married. They lived in Mexico for three years and had their first child there.

"They came back to England and then my grandfather returned alone to Mexico and took up with his daughter's nanny during his four or five years there. Then he left and never returned."

You might have expected some resentment to both Arturo and his descendants. But it seems there was a belief that he had died on the Titanic attempting to return.

As to Robin Bayley, "I later discovered there were lots of conversations going on behind the scenes at first. It's a very conservative society and the fact I didn't look like 'a hippy' and spoke Spanish politely went in my favour.

"The important thing was they recognised my sincerity. They wanted proof I was who I said I was and I managed to get my grandmother in Sheffield to send a fax. It included a photo which was an exact copy of one that one of the uncles have."

And how did his grandmother take the revelation? "Part of her was shocked and her initial response was to think that it couldn't be real. But one day she just said, 'This Mexican malarkey, is it true?' Then after all this time when she was telling me stories and showing photographs, it was the other way round.

"After six months she said, 'You get to 89 and you think you know everything and you know nothing. Let's go to Mexico'. I think the discovery gave her a new lease of life."

And so at the age of 90 Ruth Jones travelled out to Mexico for an emotional meeting with her new extended family, some of whom have returned the compliment and come to Sheffield.

Ruth Jones died in 2004 but had the chance to read early drafts of the book and died a few days after hearing it had been accepted for publication.

Robin Bayley is going back to Mexico in June and has plans for a second book – although it is about an experience in another part of the world.

The author of *The Mango Orchard* (Preface £11.99) will be speaking at Waterstone's in Orchard Square on Wednesday.