



La Belle Créole: The Cuban Countess Who Captivated Havana, Madrid, and Paris

Alina García-Lapuerta

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Known for her beauty and angelic voice, Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo, la Belle Créole, was a Cuban-born star of nineteenth-century Parisian society. She befriended aristocrats and artists alike, including Balzac, Baron de Rothschild, Rossini, and the opera diva La Malibran.

A daughter of the creole aristocracy, Mercedes led a tumultuous life, leaving her native Havana as a teenager to join her mother in the heart of Madrid's elite society. As Napoleon swept Spain into the Peninsular War, Mercedes' family remained at the center of the storm, and her marriage to French general Christophe-Antoine Merlin tied her fortunes to France. Arriving in Paris in the aftermath of the French defeat, she recreated her life, ultimately hosting the city's premier musical salon. Acknowledged as one of the greatest amateur sopranos of her day, she nurtured artistic careers and daringly paved the way for well-born singers to publicly perform in lavish philanthropic concerts. Beyond her musical renown, Mercedes achieved fame as a writer. Her memoirs and travel writings introduced European audiences to nineteenth-century Cuban society and contributed to the debate over slavery. Scholars still quote her descriptions of Havana life and recognize her as Cuba's earliest female author.

Mercedes epitomized an unusually modern life, straddling cultures and celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic. Her memoirs, travel writings, and very personal correspondence serve as the basis for this first-ever English-language biography of the passionate and adventuresome Belle Créole.

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