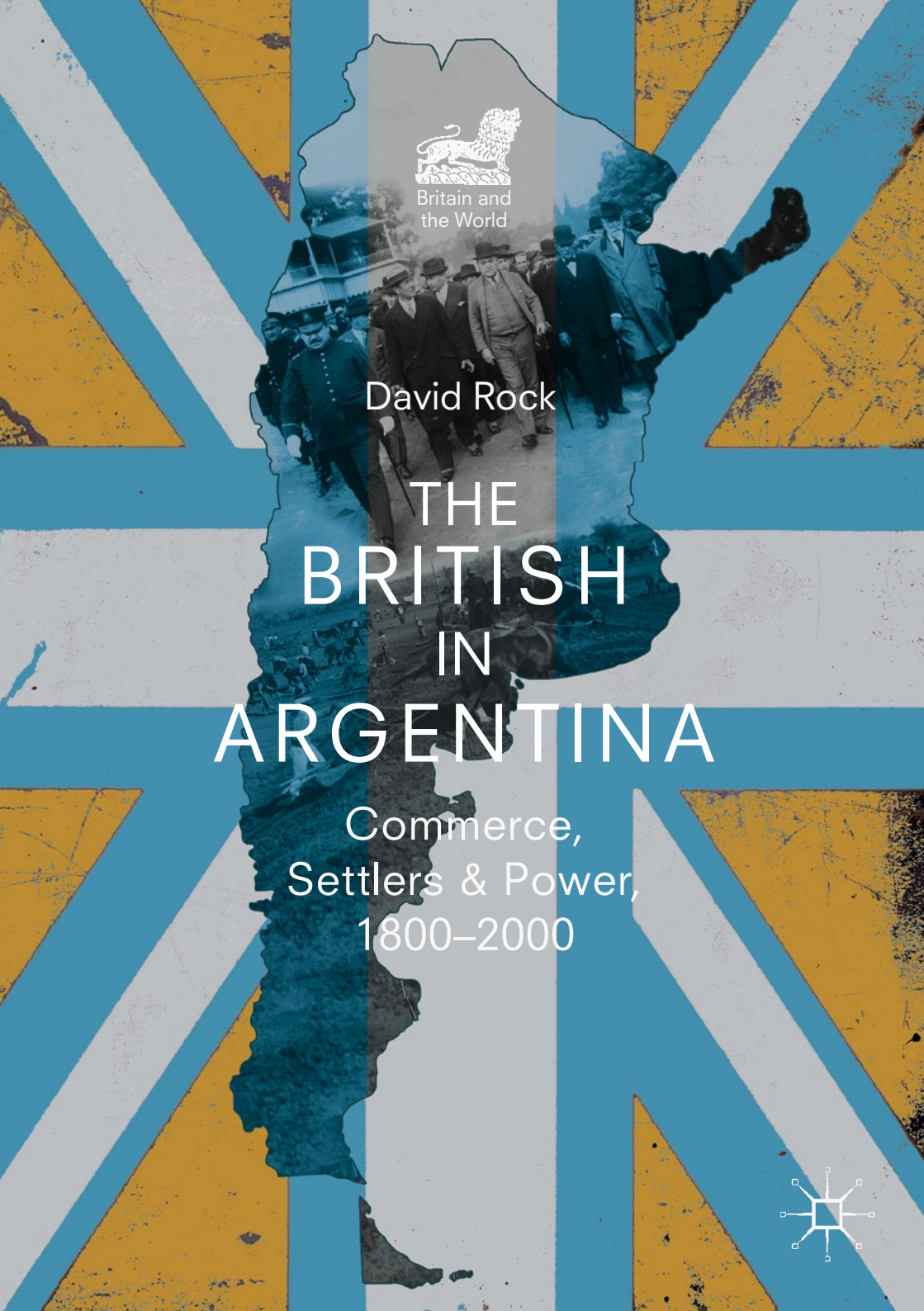

David Rock

THE BRITISH IN ARGENTINA

Commerce, Settlers & Power, 1800–2000

Britain and the World

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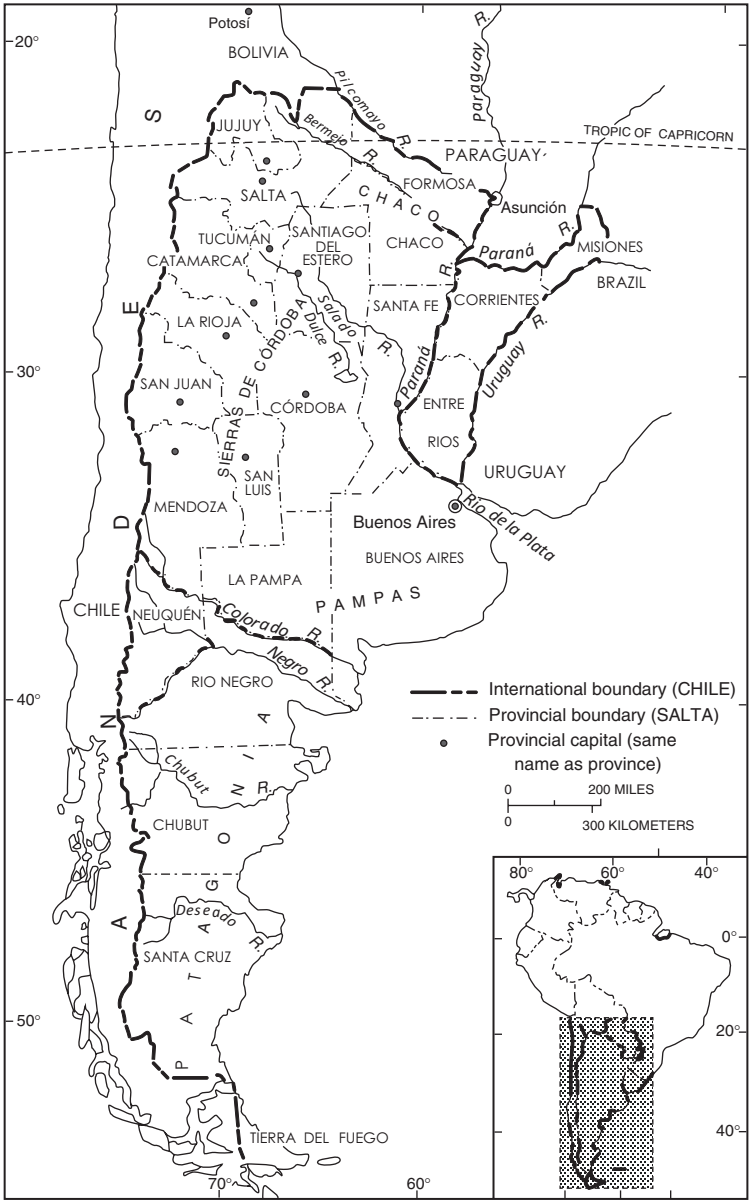
In memory of C.J.R., 1981–2004



Map 1 Argentina: provinces and main physical features

Preface

Ill-feeling and conflict between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands have darkened memories of their once exceptionally close ties. From the Napoleonic wars into the 1950s, Argentina remained a major focus of British commerce, trade and investment, and British settlement there once climbed higher than anywhere else outside the Dominions and the United States. Led by several great railway interests, British businesses in Argentina included tram and gas firms, water and sewage works, along with meat packers, banks and insurance companies. Each year hundreds of British ships anchored off Buenos Aires on the Rio de la Plata estuary. British shippers, warehousemen and importers occupied prominent positions on the waterfront, while British shopkeepers sold British goods along the city's congested streets and avenues. Anglican and Presbyterian churches, cricket grounds and polo fields flourished in Buenos Aires and among interior towns and rural districts. British and Anglo-Argentine ranchers owned great estancias on the Argentine pampas. Welsh speakers lived (and still do) in Chubut province in Patagonia, while further south ranchers, commonly of Scottish descent transplanted from the Falkland Islands, owned vast sheep farms. When Ireland remained joined with the United Kingdom under the Act of Union, Irish sheep farmers settled in some of the richest counties of the province of Buenos Aires. Small British enclaves in different parts of the country included a few Scots Gaelic speakers in Entre Rios, north of Buenos Aires, and curiosities like the Leach family and their descendants, once of Rochdale, whose men became cricket-playing sugar barons in the far north-west. "Firms carry the mark 'Limited' to such an extent that one has the impression of dealing with a

British colony," observed a local commentator in 1911.[1] Yet Argentina was no colony. One of its most unusual features lay in its development as a great centre of British business, economic power and settlement while remaining an independent republic, free of the panoply of imperial rule.

When the British appeared on the Rio de la Plata in the early nineteenth century, they encountered a country of little apparent consequence, a mere gateway to the silver mines of Peru. In those early days, visitors revelled in galloping across the near-empty pampas. "Away and away again, with a fresh sweet breeze and a rising sun, the most delicious elements that a mortal man could desire," wrote one of them.[2] In the late nineteenth century, Argentina experienced explosive growth, a process in which the British became deeply implicated. The *Standard* of Buenos Aires, long a principal source of Argentine business news, regularly shipped 20,000 copies of its monthly supplement to British investors. Railways, artesian wells and windmills, paddocks, hundreds of miles of barbed wire fencing, pedigree cattle and sheep, and thousands of grain farms filled the landscape worked by tenant farmers, mainly Italians. In parts of rural Buenos Aires, estancia land appreciated to levels as high as anywhere in the world. Attracting hundreds of thousands of European immigrants, Buenos Aires became one of the world's great cities, Parisian in style and atmosphere but Chicagoan in energy. Political change reinforced the transition. Long dominated by petty warlords cannibalising meagre foreign trade revenues, Argentina crossed the threshold into respectable constitutional government. Expansion continued until World War I and in many respects until the Great Depression when instability, near-stagnation and bouts of authoritarian government supervened. As railway building and investment tailed away, the British population declined and the entire British connection weakened. From World War II, Juan Perón, a paladin for many but an arch villain for others, disrupted the liberal society the British helped to construct. By the time of Perón's fall in 1955, their once salient economic presence had shrunk to a negligible level from which it never recovered. The more recent history of the British in Argentina centred on the growth of multinational subsidiaries and, along with similar companies originating elsewhere, their impact on the social and political landscape. As it also

[1] Alberto B. Martínez, "Foreign Capital Investments in Argentina." *Review of the River Plate* 7 June 1918. Reproduced from a pre-war commentary.

[2] Thomas Woodbine Hinchliff. *South American Sketches; or, A Visit to Rio de Janeiro, the Organ Mountains, La Plata and the Paraná*. London: Longman, 1863, 134–135.

marked the progressive integration of the "Anglo" descendants of British settlers, the final period became dominated by the issue of the Falkland Islands.

Outlines and fragments of the story are known, most of all perhaps during its early phases. Contact between the two countries began with two British military assaults against Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807. Their defeat stifled the hopes some entertained of building a British colony in the Plata. Soon afterwards during the independence era, British merchants selling textiles and buying Peruvian silver settled in Buenos Aires. For the next half-century, the antithetical figures of Bernardino Rivadavia, the liberal Unitario, and Juan Manuel de Rosas, the anti-liberal Federalist, one ostensibly pro-British and the other reputedly Anglophobic, dominate the story. The Rivadavia era of the 1820s is replete with colourful, informative accounts of the country by scarcely remembered British travellers and prospectors. Published literature in English of the Rosas period of the 1830s and 1840s includes W.H. Hudson's accounts of the birdlife and his memorable stories of the gauchos of the pampas. Following the destruction of the Federales soon after mid-century, the British re-engaged with Argentina as investors to build railways and many other businesses, and to strengthen the resident British community. Remnants of their presence include Anglican neo-Gothic churches, clubs with cricket squares and polo fields, and schools with names imported from the English Home Counties, whose pupils remain identifiable by their English-style school uniforms. Today, the historical British presence remains visible in commemorations of century-old sports heroes gilded on oak-panelled walls of some of the clubs, and in solemn observances of Armistice Day.

This book includes discussion of why the British first went to the Rio de la Plata and why contact took the form it did without any prolonged attempt at imperial possession. It addresses points of transition in the relationship such as the commercial collapse of the late 1820s. Another commercial breakdown fifty years later in the 1870s concluded in a great surge of British investment and railway construction. While it surveys the writings of travellers and explorers, Charles Darwin the best known among them, the book recalls the lives of almost unknown Irish and Scottish sheep farmers. It assesses the Baring crisis of 1890, a perennially fascinating subject for historians. Discussion of the twentieth century includes an assessment of the factors in British decline, the loss of manufacturing competitiveness, the rise of local Argentine industry and the eventually irresistible expansion of the United States. Later chapters examine Anglo-Argentine

relations during the era of Juan Perón, one of the best-known political leaders of twentieth-century Latin America. An epilogue explores the role of British multinationals in the political breakdown in Argentina of the 1970s, a process culminating in civil war, dictatorship and the closely interrelated war of 1982 over the Falkland Islands.

The book examines the nebulous issue of British power in Argentina. Textbooks cite the Anglo-Argentine relationship as a paradigm of "informal empire," the idea proposing that the British long dominated and profited from Argentina while deliberately sidestepping the burdens and expense of colonial government. Influential figures in Britain advocated such an approach even before the overthrow of Spanish colonial rule in 1810. Soon afterwards, critics of the British in the United States, notably John Quincy Adams, accused the British of practising indirect rule. In such cases, perception or propaganda sometimes fell short of reality. Noted historians have sometimes changed their mind on this elusive, perplexing issue. Long ago, H.S. Ferns embarked on his career with an article, "Britain's Informal Empire in Argentina." A decade later in *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century*, he disavowed the idea, questioning whether "the term imperialism [could] be applied to Anglo-Argentine relations? If we accept the proposition that imperialism embraces the fact of control through the use of political power, then the verdict for Britain is unquestionably 'Not Guilty'."[3] Ubiquitous yet impalpable, "empire" or "imperialism" when applied to Argentina evoke memories of George Bernard Shaw's aphorism, "There is only one religion though there are a hundred versions of it." Today, informal empire suffers from overuse and the protean, catch-all quality it has developed. Uncritical application has reduced its analytical utility.[4]

Concrete issues yield a more complex picture of Britain's quasi-imperial role in South America. The 1806 British military occupation of Buenos Aires for instance cannot be deemed an attack on Argentine sovereignty, which as yet in colonial times did not exist. With sovereignty over the ter-

[3] Salisbury, quoted in H.S. Ferns. *Britain and Argentina in the 19th Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960, 487. See also Ferns, "Britain's Informal Empire in Argentina, 1806–1914." *Past and Present*, No. 4, Nov., 1953, 60–75.

[4] A quite recent definition calls imperialism, in vague, unspecific terms, "the complex of intentions and material forces which predisposes states to an incursion, or attempted incursion, into the sovereignty of other states." P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins. *British Imperialism, 1688–2000*. New York: Longman, 1993, 43. The problems lie in terms like "intentions" and "predisposes."

ritory always in dispute, the Falkland Islands controversy can never be decided in favour of one side against the other, since the consent necessary to establish sovereignty can only be achieved politically by negotiation. The Anglo-French intervention in 1845 is conventionally viewed as an egregious case of British imperialism. The matter appears less clear-cut noting that Lord Aberdeen's instructions to his envoy Ouseley forbade any incursion against the sovereign rights of Buenos Aires. At the same time during this period, the local government used a leading British merchant in Buenos Aires as an interlocutor to propose a form of relationship with Britain identical to that of informal empire.

In other contexts, the British wielded power in Argentina subtly and selectively, preferring enticement, persuasion, example and certainly consent to coercion. During the Edwardian era, diplomats and businessmen promoted British interests using sports in part, in which imitation and emulation became a means to elicit deference and compliance. Argentines never became passive, inanimate victims of British domination, however avidly nationalists might argue to the contrary. When Argentina developed into a great artifice of British overseas investment, the material gains were shared. Argentina became the richest country in Latin America and likely the most egalitarian too. If this book seeks to illustrate multiple ways in which the British deployed power in Argentina, it also demonstrates that the Argentines retained extensive freedom of manoeuvre. Welcoming the British when it suited them, they also devised ways to resist them—by maintaining a tight grip on their own monetary system, for example—and thereby protecting their sovereignty. Nearly always open to wider external contact than with Britain alone, Argentina exemplified the great difference between free, independent states and closeted colonial subjects of the British Empire.

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Buenos Aires helped me select the book's illustrations, some of which also originate in the rich collection of the Archivo General de la Nación.

I am grateful to the Fulbright Commission and to the Academic Senate of the University of California at Santa Barbara for research funding. The Department of History provided a supportive milieu throughout my long tenure at Santa Barbara teaching Latin American history. I received several fellowships and research appointments for this work in Britain: at St Antony's College, Oxford University thanks to Alan Knight, at the London University Institute for the Americas thanks to James Dunkerley and at the Cambridge University Centre of Latin America Studies thanks to Charles Jones. As an organiser of two conferences, Matthew Brown provided opportunities to write early versions of small sections of this book. Martin Farr and Molly Beck assisted my approach to Palgrave Macmillan for publication of my book; Oliver Dyer capably handled the details of publication. I acknowledge special help from John Hodgson at the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester, who introduced me to the Robinson/Hodgson Archive, and from Jessica Handy at the Unilever Archive at Port Sunlight on Merseyside.

My work began with an invitation by Robert Bickers to contribute a chapter on the British in Argentina to a collected volume on British communities in different parts of the world. The book has a second distant provenance from my contact with eminent historians of an earlier generation during student days at Cambridge University. David Joslin, D.C.M. Platt, Ronald Robinson and John Street became pioneers in this or cognate fields. H.S. Ferns, a non-Cambridge member of the fraternity of senior scholars whom I knew, deserves special mention. His *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* published in 1960 stands above other work in the field. Almost sixty years after Ferns I have followed him with a new outlook and a longer time span, using many sources unavailable to him at the time he was writing. Throughout my career, ties and friendships with historians in Argentina led by Ezequiel Gallo and Tulio Halperín Donghi provided another major source of support and inspiration.

I prefer older usages when referring to Argentina and its people. Thus *Argentines* live in the country subject to the *Argentine* government. The term "River Plate" has largely fallen into disuse; "Rio de la Plata" replaces it. I often refer to the people of British descent in Argentina as Anglos as an abridged alternative to Anglo-Argentines.

I dedicate my book to Rosalind, my companion in many adventures in Argentina that began in 1968 as we sailed on the SS Arlanza from Tilbury to Buenos Aires.

Wetheringsett, Suffolk.

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CHAPTER 1

Soldiers and Merchants

His love of freedom was ardent and grand. He once said, that if he should live a few years, he would go over to South America, and write a Poem on Liberty.
Reporting John Keats *circa 1820*

In two volumes published in 1838 and 1843, John Parish Robertson and his younger brother William Parish Robertson recounted their careers as British merchants in the cities of the Rio de la Plata: Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Corrientes and Asunción del Paraguay. John Robertson first took a ship to South America from Scotland in 1806 with his father at the age of 14. He travelled as a powder monkey, a youth who serviced the cannon crews on board a warship. Hoping to establish a mercantile house in Buenos Aires, the father planned to train his son in the business and to employ him there as his representative when he returned to Scotland. The Robertson family had an extensive background in finance and foreign trade, and typified a particular echelon of early nineteenth-century Scottish and British society. Robertson senior had been employed at the Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh. His wife, although Scottish in background, was born in Hamburg, where members of her family, the Parishes, were prominent in

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Baltic commerce.[1] William Robertson, another aspiring merchant, followed his brother out to Buenos Aires in 1813. Together, the two young men continued their father's quest to develop a mercantile firm in South America. Using Buenos Aires as a base, they aimed to form a network of partnerships and family connections typical among British merchants of this period to trade with British, South American and European Continental ports.[2]

Warfare in both Europe and in South America spurred the Robertsons on their voyage. In 1806, the Napoleonic Empire crested following smashing military victories against the British-subsidised Fourth Coalition led by Prussia, Austria and Russia. In an eighteen-month campaign, Napoleon overran his continental enemies, first Austria at Ulm in October 1805, Russia at Austerlitz in December 1805, then Prussia at Jena-Auerstädt in November 1806 and finally Russia once more at Friedland in mid-1807. The treaty of Paris of February 1806 closed the North Sea and Baltic ports including Hamburg to the British and annexed the kingdom of Hanover to France. In the Berlin Decree of November 1806, Napoleon imposed the Continental System to block trade between Britain and mainland Europe. As European commerce plummeted, British merchants and manufacturers scoured the Americas for alternative markets, seeking advantages from Horatio Nelson's victory over the Spanish and French fleets in the recent battle of Trafalgar.[3] In light of recent events, Lord Fitzwilliam, Lord

[1] J.P. and W.P Robertson. *Letters on Paraguay. An account of a four years' Residence in that Republic under the Government of the Dictator Francia*. In two volumes. London: Murray, 1838. and *Letters on South America, comprising travels on the banks of the Rio Parana and Rio de la Plata*. In three vols. London: Murray, 1843.

[2] For recent literature, see Aaron Graham, "Mercantile Networks in the Early Modern World," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56, 2013, 279–295. Also Patrick K. O'Brien, "Merchants and bankers as patriots or speculators? Foreign policy and monetary policy in wartime, 1793–1815," in John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan. *The Early Atlantic Economy*, 250–277. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Peter Mathias, "Risk, credit and kinship in early modern enterprise," in McCusker and Morgan, *Atlantic Economy*, 15–37; Vera Blinn Reber. *British Mercantile Houses in Buenos Aires, 1810–1880*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979; Stanley Chapman. *Merchant Enterprise in Britain. From the Industrial Revolution to World War I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; D.C.M. Platt. *Latin America and British Trade, 1806–1914*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1972 outlines the topic in the early nineteenth century. A biography of J.P. Robertson appears in *Standard* (Buenos Aires) 21 Mar. 1897; see also R.A. Humphreys, "British merchants and Latin American Independence," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 51, 1965, 151–174. On the Robertsons in Buenos Aires, see Wylie to Hancock 7 Mar. 1809, University of Glasgow. Archive of John Wylie. 28/1/1.

[3] For the British context in 1806–1807, see O'Brien, *Merchants and Bankers*; François Crouzet, "America and the Crisis of the British imperial economy, 1803–1807," 278–315, in McCusker and Morgan, *Atlantic Economy*. British exports to continental Europe report-

President of the Council, proclaimed "the end of the old world [and] we must therefore look to the new."[4]

In September 1806, the British public learned of the capture of Buenos Aires three months previously by Sir Home Riggs Popham, an audacious naval commander. In messages home Popham announced the opening of the city to British trade and invited merchants and manufacturers to use it as a gateway into Spanish South America. Starved of trade, he reported the "Buenos Ayreans" eagerly awaited the merchants' arrival. As a foretaste of the fortunes to be made in South America, he sent a large cache of silver to England seized from the Spanish viceroy. Thirty years later, John Robertson recalled the riches he and his father anticipated when they reached Buenos Aires. "The natives, it was said, would give us uncounted gold for our manufactures while their warehouses were well stocked with produce, as their coffers filled with precious metals."[5]

On news of Popham's feat, the British government equipped large naval and military forces to consolidate his victory. In the initial plan proposed by War Secretary William Windham, one fleet would reinforce Popham and the other sail round Cape Horn to Chile to attempt further conquests on the Pacific coast. The plan scarcely looked practical. Expecting the two forces to move inland and join forces, Windham seemed to overlook the barrier posed by the Andes where mountains like

edly fell from £10.3 million in 1805 to £2.2 million in 1808; and re-exports from £14.4 million in 1802 to £7.8 million in 1808. Martin Robson. *Britain, Portugal and South America in the Napoleonic Wars: alliances and diplomacy in economic maritime conflict*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, 14.

[4] Earl Fitzwilliam to Lord Grenville 3 November 1806. Quoted in John D. Grainger. *The Royal Navy and the River Plate, 1806–1807*. Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996, 140. Grainger (p. x) attributes to Fitzwilliam the dictum associated with George Canning in the 1820s about the "new world being called in to balance the old." For broader context, see Adrian J. Pearce. *British Trade with Spanish America, 1763–1808*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007, 211–230; Carlos Marichal. *Bankruptcy of Empire. Mexican Silver and the Wars between Spain, Britain, and France, 1760–1810*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. The British expeditions to Buenos Aires marked an abrupt commercial switch to the Americas, although within a long-term gradual transition over the eighteenth century. By one estimate, British trade with Continental Europe fell from 74 per cent of total trade in 1714–1717 to 33 per cent in 1803–1807. Cain and Hopkins. *British Imperialism,* 90.

[5] Robertson, *Paraguay*, 94. The standard British history of the Napoleonic wars dismisses Popham as a treasure hunter and prize seeker. See J.W. Fortescue. *A History of the British Army. Vol. V 1803–1807*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1921, 367. "British troops, which should have been employed in Europe, were diverted far overseas by the avarice and self-seeking of [a] charlatan, Home Popham."

Aconcagua climbed beyond 20,000 feet.[6] Elsewhere in Britain, Popham's appeal met enthusiastic responses. The city of Manchester, for example, proclaimed the "commercial advantages [of capturing Buenos Aires] are extensive beyond calculation and in the present state of continental trade… hold out a peculiar degree of importance."[7] Throughout Britain, manufacturers began contracting agents to transport goods to South America. The young men they hired, who were often their own relatives, began commissioning ships, loading them with textiles and hardware, and preparing them to follow the flotillas into the South Atlantic.

As the British started making their plans, the position in Buenos Aires changed. Popham controlled the city for only forty-seven days until 12 August, when a Spanish militia attacked and forced his men to surrender. When the news reached Britain in November, the government resolved to deploy all its forces to the Plata to retake Buenos Aires. As the warships departed, the hundreds of merchants following them included the Robertsons, who sailed in December on the *Enterprise* from the Scottish port of Greenock. Adding up the entire naval and merchant personnel, auxiliaries and camp followers, the British expedition totalled up to 25,000 people.

* * *

In 1806, Buenos Aires had many features typical of Spanish colonial cities. Its racially mixed population numbered between 40,000 and 60,000. Porteños, as the city's inhabitants were known in South America, included white Spaniards and white Creoles, some with high standing in trade and

[6] Instructions to British commanders in late 1806 and early 1807 are reprinted in Grainger, *Royal Navy and the River Plate*, 159–163. For summaries of the planned campaign in the Southern Cone, see Christopher D. Hall. *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War, 1803–15.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, 146; Charles J. Esdaile. *Napoleon's Wars. An International History, 1803–1815.* New York, Viking, 2007, 265.

[7] Quoted in Grainger, *Royal Navy and the River Plate*, 102. British objectives were listed by the prosecutor in the court martial of Sir John Whitelocke: "new markets for our manufactures…new sources of treasure…the [current] state of Europe, and the attempt to exclude us from our accustomed intercourse [by Napoleon]." See John Whitelocke. *The trial at large of Lieut. Gen. Whitelocke, late Commander in Chief of the forces in South America,* by a general court martial, held at Chelsea Hospital, on Thursday, 28 January, 1808, and continued by adjournment to Tuesday, 15 March, taken by Blanchard and Ramsay, short-hand writers to the court, and published from their notes; with a correct copy of the defence, as delivered into Court, and the Right Honourable, The Judge Advocate's reply; Also all the documents produced in defence. London, 1808, 5.

government, and in larger numbers mixed race Creoles either born locally or migrants from adjacent regions. Imported Africans working mostly as artisans and house servants constituted the largest ethnic group. At around one third of the population, the presence of blacks reflected the recent major expansion of the slave trade in Buenos Aires.[8] Contemporary descriptions of the city highlighted the ethnic variety of the city's population. They noted slave laundresses at work on the riverside, numerous water and milk carriers on wooden carts in the streets, and beggars who plied their trade by horseback. The shallow riverbed of the Plata estuary enabled fishermen to wade out hundreds of yards by horseback and drag their catches ashore.[9]

Viewed from the river, Buenos Aires stood on a thirty-foot-high bank tapering away into marshland to the leftward, south-eastern direction. In 1806, the city stretched twenty-two squares along the river, about a mile and a half. It contained a few churches with spires, a cathedral, a fort and a barracks, and La Residencia, currently the city gaol although long the domicile of Jesuits until their expulsion from the Spanish Empire in 1767. Extending about a mile westward behind the waterfront, nondescript flat-roofed buildings faced one another on straight narrow streets laid out in the Spanish American gridiron fashion.[10] A few years later in 1818, James McIntyre, a visiting Scot, described the houses in Buenos Aires as of "one storey and flat on the roof. Those of better order contain a place for walking on the top…to enjoy the prospect of the river and surrounding country."[11] Four slaughter houses or mataderos stood at the city's southern edge, grotesque sites replete with cattle skeletons and rotting carcasses, plagued by carrion birds and foul

[8] Alex Borucki, "The Slave Trade to the Rio de la Plata, 1777–1812: Trans-Imperial Networks and Atlantic Warfare," *Colonial Latin American Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2011, 81–107; Marisa Pineau ed. *La ruta del esclavo en el Rio de la Plata: aportes para el diálogo intercultural*. Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero, 2011. Borucki (pp. 85–88) estimates the arrival of 70,000 slaves in the Rio de la Plata (Buenos Aires and Montevideo combined) in 1777–1812, with numbers peaking in 1800–1806. The lower population figure of 40,000 for Buenos Aires, and a slave population of only 6772, is based on estimates by Emilio Ravignani quoted by Ferns, *Britain and Argentina*, 28.

[9] Descriptions of Buenos Aires include one by watercolourist E.E. Vidal. See *Picturesque Illustrations of Buenos Ayres and Monte Video Consisting of Twenty-four Views Accompanied by Descriptions of the Scenery and of the Customs, Manners etc. of the Inhabitants of those Cities and their Environs*. London: R. Ackermann, 1820. Vidal frequently cites Félix de Azara. *Descripción e historia del Paraguay y del Rio de la Plata*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Bajel, 1943.

[10] A detailed map of Buenos Aires of 1814 by Pedro Cerviño is reproduced as Map 16 in Fortescue, *British Army*, vol. 5.

[11] McIntyre, 1818–1821 NLS Ms. 11,000. (National Library of Scotland).

odours. A place of little consequence until thirty or forty years previously, Buenos Aires grew and prospered following the Spanish imperial reforms of the late 1770s making it capital of the new viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata. Subsidies and trade from Potosí, the site of the silver mines of Upper Peru, flowed into the city attracting a new population and enriching its economy.[12]

* * *

In 1806, the Spanish authorities in Buenos Aires suspected an outside attack was imminent, but believed it would come from Brazil, reactivating hostilities between Spain and Portugal from five years before.[13] Connections with the British, past and present, were slender. Almost a century before in 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht authorised the British South Sea Company to sell slaves in Buenos Aires. The traffic continued for about twenty years but yielded little profit in a country with neither plantations nor heavy demand for slave labour. Continual friction between Britain and Spain in Europe undermined the company's berth in Buenos Aires, and in 1739 it was expelled.[14] In later decades, the only notable contact between the British and the Plata occurred in 1763 when Spanish cannons destroyed the *Lord Clive*, an East India Company warship, killing most of its crew, at Colonia del Sacramento directly across the estuary from Buenos Aires.[15] In the late eighteenth century, Buenos Aires contained only a minute British population, the likely survivors from the 1763 conflict. When Spain declared war on Britain in 1780 during the American Revolution, the authorities ordered

[12] Lyman L. Johnson. *Workshop of Revolution. Plebeian Buenos Aires and the Atlantic World 1776–1810*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011 discusses slavery and housing along with economic conditions. Johnson opts for the figure of 60,000 against the traditional figure of 40,000 for the population of the city. According to Vidal writing around 1818, the population of Buenos Aires "used to be estimated at 40,000 [but] is now reckoned at about seventy thousand." Vidal, *Buenos Ayres*, 9. Population counts in the mid-1820s reveal figures of 70,000 respectively for the city and its surrounding rural area. See Miron P. Burgin, *The Economic Aspects of Argentine Federalism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1946, 26, (quoting the *Registro Estadístico*).

[13] The Portuguese plan "is and always has been no less than to take away your Majesty's entire empire in South America." Félix de Azara, "Informe sobre la petición hecha por el virrey de Buenos Aires para contrarrestar a los portugueses." In Azara, *Del Paraguay y del Rio de la Plata*, 239.

[14] Sergio Villalobos R. *Comercio y contrabando en el Río de la Plata y Chile, 1700–1811*. Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1965, 31–37, noting the meagre profits of the early eighteenth-century slave trade.

[15] The episode is outlined in *The Sunday Times* (London) Jan. 29, 2017. Multiple web sites report impending treasure searches on the sunken wreck.

"all subjects of the King of England" in Buenos Aires to register as enemy aliens. Threatening anyone who disobeyed with the loss of their property, the edict flushed out only seven middle aged men of British origin.[16]

* * *

In 1806, Spaniards and Porteños had no inkling that a decade of secret planning and discussion in Britain preceded Popham's assault on Buenos Aires. Military strategists began mulling an attack on the city in 1796, the year republican France defeated Bourbon Spain, forcing it into an alliance against Britain.[17] Among various British plans, two projects in 1800 by Sir Thomas Maitland, a Scottish military officer employed by the East India Company, stood out. One of them aimed to capture Buenos Aires alone, while the second, more ambitious and less plausible, proposed attacking both Buenos Aires and Chile, the latter from India, as a prelude to campaigns against Spanish Peru. Maitland emphasised any invasion of Buenos Aires could only succeed if it won the support of the Porteños, dividing them from the Spaniards. To achieve that, the British would have to promote a movement for independence. If successful, the plan promised extraordinary rewards. Victory would "open an immense source of commercial benefit and at the same time make the government of Spain tremble for the fate of its possessions in the New World."[18]

Maitland and other British schemers focused on Buenos Aires as the port of exit for silver mined in Upper Peru at Potosí. When Spain switched alliances in 1796, the British grew anxious to prevent South American silver being diverted to the French. Under their own control, it would serve several purposes such as funding new military campaigns in

[16] Archivo General de la Nación: Justicia. Legajo 9, Expediente 183, 1780.

[17] British projects first appeared in the 1740s. See Carlos Roberts. *Las invasiones inglesas del Rio de la Plata (1806–1807) y la influencia inglesa en la independencia y organización de las provincias del Rio de la Plata*. Buenos Aires: Jácobo Peuser, 1938, 22. Invasion plans in the late 1790s are detailed in Klaus Gallo. *Las invasiones inglesas*, 45–48. Other sources include Bartolomé Mitre. *Historia de Belgrano y de la independencia argentina*. Vol. 1. New edition Buenos Aires: Losada, 1947, 160–163. A listing of invasion plans appears in Andrew Graham-Yooll. *Ocupación y reconquista, 1806–1807: a 200 años de las Invasiones Inglesas*. Buenos Aires: Lumière, 2006, 17–28; also Robson, *Britain, Portugal*, 83. For wider context, see Michael Duffy. "World-Wide War and British Expansionism, 1793–1815," 184–207 in *Oxford History of the British Empire* edited by P.J. Marshall. *Volume 2. The Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[18] See Rodolfo H. Terragno. *Maitland y San Martín*. Bernal, Province of Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1999, reproduces Maitland's two plans in English and elucidates his sources.

Continental Europe and relieving pressing current bullion shortages in Britain. Silver greased the wheels of British trade in India and China, where precious metals were in great demand. Pursuit of silver explained the interest of the East India Company in the Rio de la Plata manifest in the *Lord Clive* episode.[19] Various groups in Britain perceived other benefits from the takeover of Buenos Aires. Naval men regarded the city as a potential base to protect shipping routes to the Pacific around Cape Horn. Leather and candle-makers viewed the cattle hides and tallow in the Plata as a major new source of raw materials.[20] Finally, control over Buenos Aires would strengthen the British merchant marine by opening new avenues of trade to shipping.

In the late 1790s the Spanish Crown again reformed its imperial trade regulations to take account of the wartime disruption of Spanish exports to the Spanish colonies. Although it terminated the former blanket exclusion of British goods from colonial markets, it upheld the existing ban on transporting them in British ships. Sales of British goods in Spanish America increased but ships from neutral countries alone—principally commissioned in the United States—were allowed to deliver them.[21] Any British subjects who ventured into the Plata continued to face a hostile reception. In 1804, for example, the merchant John Mawe arrived in Montevideo, the city across the estuary from Buenos Aires. Although he arrived with all the necessary paperwork, he was arrested and incarcerated aboard a prison ship. "I was an Englishman and on that account could not be too harshly treated."[22] William Jacobs, another British merchant engaged in Spanish American trade, urged the British government to seize

[19] For context, see C.A. Bayly, "The First Age of Global Imperialism, c 1760–1830," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1998, 32–36, linking shortages of resources in Britain to the fall of silver production in Mexico and the tribute levied by Napoleon on defeated European states. On Spanish silver subsidies to the French, see Roberts, *Invasiones Inglesas*, 57–59, Pearce, *British Trade*, 209–250. In October 1803, Spain agreed to pay an annual subsidy of £2.8 million to France. See also John Lynch, "British Policy and Spanish America, 1783–1808," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May, 1969, 1–30; A.W. Ward and G.P. Gooch. *Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy: 1783–1919*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923, 333–334. Specie payments in Britain were suspended in February 1797.

[20] For an example, see *The Times* 13 Sept. 1806.

[21] The system is described more broadly in Pearce, *British Trade*, 246. During Popham's trial, Thomas Wilson reported he had traded with Buenos Aires since 1798 in neutral vessels. He wanted the British to take over Buenos Aires to allow the use of British ships. See Sir Home Popham. *A Full and Correct Report of the Trial of Sir Home Popham*. Second Edition. London: J. and J. Richardson, 1807, 180.

[22] John Mawe.

Spanish colonial ports to prevent such incidents. He accused US nationals employed by the Spaniards in the carrying trade of damaging British shipping interests and causing unemployment in the textile industry. He claimed that capturing Buenos Aires would benefit both British trade and the British shipping industry, and inflict a major blow against several enemy or unfriendly powers: Spain, France and the United States.[23]

In this fashion, Buenos Aires became "an object of particular interest… to the first commercial nation in the world."[24] When the three-year truce in the war between Britain and Spain negotiated under the treaty of Amiens ended in 1804, Popham urged Prime Minister William Pitt to authorise an attack on Buenos Aires. He enlisted the support of Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville, the powerful secretary of war who was closely connected to the East India Company. Dundas too regarded Buenos Aires as "the most important position on that side of South America" because of its role in the silver trade.[25] At the time, Pitt was manoeuvring to persuade Spain to resume its earlier alliance with Britain, and failed to reach any decision. Possibly too, he hesitated to launch the attack Popham urged against Buenos Aires in light of British defeats in the Americas of recent years, notably the disastrous Caribbean campaigns at Saint Domingue in the mid-1790s.[26] Some influential figures shared Pitt's concerns. Believing British military resources were insufficient to seize entire Spanish colonies, they opted to deploy British naval superiority to capture coastal bases alone. Popham himself conceded that "the idea of conquering South America [was] totally out of the question." Seeking trade rather than territorial conquest, he urged seizing control over "all its important points, alienating [them] from [their] present European connexions, fixing on some military position and enjoying all its commercial advantages."[27]

How the British proposed to govern Buenos Aires if they won control remained uncertain. Standard practice in pursuit of maximum gain at min-

[23] Quoted in Germán O.E. Tjarks and Alicia Vidaurreta de Tjarks. *El comercio inglés y el contrabando*. Buenos Aires: J. Héctor Matera, 1962, 5.

[24] Vidal, *Buenos Ayres*, iii.

[25] Dundas quoted in Popham, *Trial*, 163.

[26] David Geggus, "The cost of Pitt's Caribbean Campaigns, 1793–1798," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1983, 699–706 estimates losses of more than 30,000 British troops.

[27] "Memorandum by Sir Home Popham," in "Miranda and the British Admiralty," in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1901, 513. Quoted in Gallo. *Great Britain and Argentina*, 20–32. See also John Street. *Gran Bretaña y la independencia del Rio de la Plata*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1967, 20–46.

imum expense pointed to temporary occupation—in effect mere pillage. When war concluded, the British would barter away their conquests for concessions by Spain elsewhere. South American exiles in London like Venezuelan insurgent Francisco de Miranda pressed for a different course, that of attacking the Spanish colonies to trigger independence movements. Pitt showed little enthusiasm for this approach, fearing it could lead to a proliferation of Francophile South American republics.[28] A possible third option lay in seizing Buenos Aires as a permanent British colony. This practice remained rare, since governments feared the expenses of possession might exceed the profits of occupation. Throughout the Americas, Trinidad, captured from Spain in 1797, provided the single example of recent times in which the British converted a captured foreign colony into a permanent possession. The island represented an exceptional case. Easy and inexpensive to defend, it lay close to the wealthy mainland market of New Granada. It therefore combined prospects of low costs with exceptional profits from contraband.[29]

Popham himself viewed Buenos Aires as a second Trinidad. He described it as "the finest country in the world…the greatest acquisition to Great Britain she ever had" because of its position in the silver trade.[30] Its fertile, temperate rural hinterland on the pampas led him to suggest forming British agricultural settlements near Buenos Aires. A publication in Britain in 1806 celebrating his victory argued that "free and voluntary labourers could be employed [to colonise the area]. Poor emigrants from the Highlands of Scotland, and from Ireland, would find a real asylum."[31]

[28] On Pitt's opposition to British support for independence movements, see Popham, Trial, 169–171; also, Karen Racine. *Francisco Miranda. A Transatlantic Life in the Age of Revolution*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003.

[29] Islands captured and bartered by the British in the eighteenth century wars are listed in Paul M. Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing, 1982, 129–130.

[30] Popham to Marsden 30 April, 1806, in Grainger, *Royal Navy and the River Plate*, 36–50.

[31] Quoted in "Summary Account," an anonymous publication of 1806 following news of Popham's conquest. In Malyn Newitt ed. *Revolution and Society in the Rio de la Plata, 1808–1810: Thomas Kinder's Narrative of a Journey to Madeira, Montevideo and Buenos Aires*. London: Signal Books, 2010, 13. The emphasis on a "free" colony reflected current debate before the abolition of the slave trade by Britain in 1807. An agrarian colony won support among members of the 1807 expedition. "Were the Pampas of Buenos Ayres a few years in the hands of the British, truly might they be called the Garden of the World." George Monkland. *Account by a Junior Officer George Monkland of the Secret Expedition to the River*

In early 1806, the debate and uncertainty in Britain found reflection in a newspaper commentary published in Philadelphia. Six months before the attack on Buenos Aires, returning US merchant sailors reported Popham had already taken the city. The information originated from a brief halt he made at Rio de Janeiro in late 1805, where he divulged his intention to attack Buenos Aires. A Philadelphia journalist speculated whether the British intended to seize new colonies in Spanish America or whether Popham would attempt to provoke a movement for Spanish American independence.[32]

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A year before Popham's attack on Buenos Aires, Pitt ordered him to sail to southern Africa (via Brazil) to support a planned British attack on the Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope. When he completed his mission, he should then proceed east to India. After British forces won a swift victory at the Cape in early 1806, Popham ignored his orders to sail east and turned west, (an action that resulted in his later court martial).[33] With assistance from Sir David Baird, the British commander at the Cape, he recruited a few hundred men from the 71st Highland Regiment, to whom he added a few hundred more men from the British garrison on the island of St. Helena. Mostly Scots and Irish, his troops included men of varied backgrounds, among them Chinese artillerymen previously in Dutch service at the Cape. While retaining naval control over the force, Popham placed his soldiers under Major General William Carr Beresford, formerly Baird's second in command at the Cape.

Writing from St. Helena in April 1806 to correspondents in Britain, Popham laid out several rationales for his prospective voyage to the Rio de la Plata. One message portrayed the expedition as a mere reconnaissance. He would report on "the true situation of the country…and the extent to which its exportations may be carried [by British merchant ships]; with [an estimate of the] scale of the consumption for the manufacturers of

Plate under the Command of Brigadier General Crauford and the Subsequent Withdrawal under the Command of Lieutenant General Whitelocke. Mimeo.

[32] Charles Lyon Chandler, "United States merchant ships in the Rio de la Plata (1801–1808) as shown by early newspapers," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, February 1919, 29.

[33] The standard narrative in English of the invasions of 1806–1807 appears in Fortescue, *British Army*, I: 310–318, 368–436.