PART I

The New Republic, 1830–1865

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The Early Republic: A Sketch

On Saturday, April 17, 1830, a three-hour battle was fought near the confluence of the Claro and Lircay rivers, just outside the town of Talca in the Central Valley of Chile. The smaller of the two armies was led by General Ramón Freire, the liberal-minded hero of the wars of independence who had been Chile's president a few years earlier. His adversary, General Joaquín Prieto, another veteran of independence, was the champion of the Conservatives who had recently seized power in Santiago, the capital, bringing to an end the series of false starts that had marked Chilean politics since 1823, mostly under the leadership of politicians calling themselves Liberals. With reinforcements brought by Colonel José María de la Cruz from Chillán, Prieto had assembled a force of around twenty-two hundred. It quickly overwhelmed Freire's seventeen hundred soldiers, many of whom fled for their lives across the little Lircay river, leaving behind them around two hundred dead.[1]

General Prieto's victory at the Battle of Lircay (as it became known) assured the triumph of the new Conservative regime. Eleven days earlier, the Valparaiso trader Diego Portales had taken over two of the three portfolios in the Chilean cabinet, thus becoming the most powerful figure in the country. At Portales's behest, General Prieto would soon be elected president of the republic. His victory at Lircay and Portales's rise to power ushered in more than a quarter century of Conservative rule in Chile. During these years and the few years that followed, the Chilean republican tradition was made. The way it was made, and the contest between order and liberty that lay at the heart of the politics of the period, would affect Chilean history from that day to this.

Agriculture, Mining, Trade

The Chile of 1830 was a poor country on one of the remotest peripheries of the Western world. Separated from the rich plains of Argentina by the

1 Barros Arana, *Historia*, XV, 564–71.

Cordillera of the Andes, and from Bolivia and Peru by a vast swathe of unfriendly desert, the fledgling republic was still very isolated from the rest of the world, an isolation only partly tempered by the widening of trade that had followed independence (1818), when foreign merchantmen began calling regularly at Valparaiso and other ports – about 200 each year in the late 1820s, well over 2000 by the 1850s. In the 1830s Chile was still usually more than three months by sailing ship from Europe or the eastern United States. In June 1843 the *Swallow* (famous for her fast passages)[2] furled her sails in Valparaiso bay, having done the trip from Liverpool in 107 days. Soon enough, however, sail began to give way to steam (for travelers at least), as nineteenth-century technology made its inevitable mark. In 1840 the British-financed Pacific Steam Navigation Company (P.S.N.C.) began a regular service between Chile and Peru. The arrival on Thursday, October 15, 1840 of its first two 700-ton paddle-steamers caused great excitement in Valparaiso and along ("down," as sailors in those days said) the coast to the north. The next day, for the first time, the Valparaiso newspaper *El Mercurio* proudly printed "Steamship *Peru* . . . Steamship *Chile*" at the head of its front-page shipping column. A one-way passage to Peru in the early years was advertised at 70 pesos;[3] passengers were asked not to wear shoes in bed.[4] A few years later, when the P.S.N.C. extended its route to Panama, it became possible (given a quick trans-isthmus connection) to reach Europe or the eastern United States in about forty days. *El Mercurio*, commenting on the completion of the first (unsuccessful) transatlantic cable in 1858, estimated that it normally took about thirty-six days for European news to reach Chile.[5]

Chile's effective national territory in the 1830s was the 700-mile strip between the Atacama Desert in the north and the so-called "Frontier" along the Bío Bío river in the south, beyond which the Mapuche (as they had called themselves since the eighteenth century) or Araucanians (as the Spaniards had called them since the sixteenth) still retained their stubborn independence, while also taking part in a thriving cross-frontier trade. Communications within the national territory were poor. Highways worthy of the name scarcely existed, apart from the well-used route between Santiago and Valparaiso, much traveled by *birlochos* (two-wheeled carriages) and a few larger coaches. When a local famine occurred in 1838–9 in the south, relief could not be shifted to the area in time to help. Though a certain amount of road construction (and improvement) took place with the creation of a

2 MV, No. 4459, June 7, 1843.
3 Throughout the period, the Chilean peso was worth about 45*d* (£0.3.9) sterling (18½*p*, post-1971) or about US$0.90, with only very minor fluctuations.
4 MV, No. 4071, April 26, 1842.
5 MV, No. 9373, September 25, 1858.

small Corps of Engineers in the 1840s, overland journeys remained laborious until the Central Valley railroad began inching its way southward from Santiago after 1857, reaching Curicó (120 miles away) by 1866. Trains began running between Santiago and Valparaiso in September 1863. In many ways the easiest way of traveling up and down the country was by ship. By the 1850s and 1860s, the main ports were reasonably well connected by steamer. An electric telegraph linked Santiago and Valparaiso from June 1852 onward, installed by the American entrepreneur William Wheelwright, the creator of the P.S.N.C. A national telegraph network was gradually put together; by 1867 it reached both Concepción in the south and the mining town of Copiapó in the north. A reorganized post office introduced postage stamps in 1856. All of these things played their part in the consolidation of the republic.

The early Chilean censuses were only roughly accurate. The first (1835) gives a figure of just over one million. It was reported as a "common opinion" in 1850 that the population was in decline,[6] but it rose to about 1.8 million by 1865. These figures do not include the several hundred thousand Mapuche south of the Bío Bío. Beyond the Indian homeland (two hundred miles long, north to south), there were three small, miserably poor appendages of the new republic, around Valdivia and Osorno and on the island of Chiloé. A fourth appendage, a penal settlement, was added after the Chilean flag was raised on the Magellan Strait in September 1843. The bulk of the population was concentrated (as it always had been and still is) in the Central Valley between Santiago and the Bío Bío. The overwhelming majority of Chileans were both poor and illiterate. It is a fair assumption that illiteracy was still well over 90 percent in 1830. The 1854 census (accurate to within eight per cent according to its supervisor)[7] gives a literacy figure of 13.5 percent (17.3 percent for men, 9.7 percent for women). By the time of the 1865 census one fifth of the male (and one seventh of the female) population could officially read and write. (Such figures were not drastically different from those for southern Europe at the same period.) Not all of the supposedly literate could spell properly. A Santiago newspaper of 1856 reported a shop sign that read: "*Ay para senar asao ensalá i pescao frito*" ("*Hay para cenar asado, ensalada y pescado frito*") – or as it might be rendered in similarly misspelled English, "Fore dynning there is roste, sallad and fried fish."[8]

At least four fifths of all Chileans from the 1830s to the 1860s worked in the countryside, as *inquilinos* ("tenant-laborers" or "tied peasants") and casual laborers (called by a variety of names) on the haciendas, or scratching a

6 *Comercio de Valparaíso*, No. 741, April 9, 1850.
7 *Censo general . . . 1854*, p. 8.
8 FE, No. 63, March 5, 1856.

living as best they could at subsistence level, sometimes falling into banditry or cattle rustling, a concern to the authorities throughout the nineteenth century. The ownership of a hacienda (or *fundo*, as it was also termed) was the clearest badge of membership of the new republic's governing class. There were perhaps about a thousand haciendas in the 1850s, with two hundred or so prime properties, and together they occupied at least three quarters of all agricultural land. Most were self-contained communities; there were no Mexican- or Peruvian-style villages in the Chilean countryside. In the 1830s and early 1840s, many haciendas were rather unprofitable, with only restricted markets for their produce. Smaller farms, *chacras* (sometimes called *quintas*), often owned by the hacendados, supplied the towns with fruit and vegetables, and often did better. Landowners' prospects improved notably in the later 1840s and in the 1850s. With the gold rushes in California (which attracted thousands of Chileans northward) and Australia, hacendados were able to capitalize on Chile's position as the only serious wheat-growing country on the west coast of the Americas. This surge of prosperity for the landowners was extended, after the inevitable end of the gold-rush booms, by the export of wheat and barley to England, at least until the mid-1870s.

Chile's rural economy was stimulated by these mid-century export booms, with the digging of irrigation canals and reservoirs, the domestication of new crops such as rice, and the arrival of Merino sheep. Poplar trees, introduced at the time of independence, spread fast through the mountain-framed Central Valley, giving a gracious appearance to its countryside. Starting in the 1850s, a number of landowners planted French vines, laying the foundations of a great viticultural tradition that would later produce some of the Western hemisphere's most respectable wines. A newspaper of 1858 optimistically suggested that Chile was destined to become "the Champagne of South America," outstripping Southern Europe with its "tired old lands."[9] The cultivated land area in the Central Valley may have tripled (possibly even quadrupled) during the export booms, and the number of haciendas increased. Yet none of these developments implied deep change in rural society. Hacendados seem to have expanded *inquilinaje*, tightening up the conditions on which peasants were allowed to settle on haciendas. The peasants themselves lived much as they had always done, barely touched by education or even the ministrations of the clergy. Farming methods remained highly traditional. Rural laborers, thought an American visitor in the 1850s, had "an unconquerable aversion to innovations."[10] But what incentive had they? "We have the Middle Ages enthroned in the nineteenth century," declared a Concepción newspaper in 1859, "and

9 FE, No. 929, December 21, 1858.
10 Smith, p. 102.

feudalism at its apogee amongst us." The sharp-eyed Vicente Pérez Rosales described the inquilino as "a true serf from the times of feudalism," and was doubtless correct in assuming that his precarious situation, subject to the hacendado's whim, meant that he "neither increases his comfort nor uses his labor except very superficially."[11] The landowners, according to Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, were no better, working with "*une pénible langueur*" (as he wrote in an 1855 pamphlet for French readers), and with no real interest in improving their estates. A progovernment newspaper denounced them in 1854 for their "habits of idleness and unthinking routine," and two years later Manuel Miquel urged (to no avail) "the education of hacendados" as a national priority.[12] The slow-moving, patriarchal society of the countryside, the world of master and man, remained the deep background to the somewhat livelier culture of the cities, changing only slowly until the rural upheavals of our own time swept it away for ever.

Yet the Central Valley was by no means the only face of Chile. The much more thinly populated northern provinces of Coquimbo and (after 1843) Atacama had been developing since colonial times as a mining area, whose fortunes were greatly boosted after independence by significant strikes and new international markets for Chilean silver and copper. Mining became the real pacesetter of the economy. In June 1832, a La Serena newspaper reported "an amazing discovery of silver mines"[13] at Chañarcillo, in the arid hills to the southeast of Copiapó. In 1846, it was reported that there were 110 mines in operation there (with thirty-nine starting up), worked by thirteen hundred laborers.[14] Numerous fortunes were made at Chañarcillo, one of them by Miguel Gallo (d. 1842), Chile's first millionaire. Other, smaller silver strikes were made in later years, most importantly at Tres Puntas, to the north of Copiapó (1848). Copper over the years was even more profitable, and made the fortune of entrepreneurs such as José Tomás Urmeneta (who made his big strike in 1852) and José Ramón Ovalle. The largest fortunes of the time all came from the mining zone. Chile's first railroad (1851), locally financed and linking Copiapó to its port, Caldera (fifty-one miles away), was an eloquent symbol of the new wealth of the north, and another achievement of the enterprising William Wheelwright.

Mining operations changed only slowly. Most mines were small and shallow. They also were numerous – more than a thousand in Atacama and

11 *El Correo del Sur*, February 19, 1859, reprinted in Grez Toso, "Cuestión Social," p. 160. Pérez Rosales, *Memoria*, p. 135.

12 Vicuña Mackenna, *Le Chili*, p. 53; *Mensajero*, No. 193, January 10, 1854; Miquel, p. 32.

13 *Bandera Tricolor*, No. 40, June 8, 1832.

14 Intendant of Atacama to Interior minister, May 16, 1846 AMI, Vol. 211.

Coquimbo Provinces in the early 1860s.[15] The high-grade ores were not too difficult to mine, and it was in the processing of ores that the most important technical changes occurred. In copper smelting, for instance, the remarkable Franco-British entrepreneur Charles Lambert introduced (just before 1830) the reverbatory furnace long used in South Wales. From the 1840s onward, several large smelters were established both in the mining zone and in the south near Concepción, where coal mining began to develop in that decade. These plants were Chile's first "industrial" enterprises, along with the technically up-to-date flour mills on Talcahuano Bay and the Maule river, established at the time of the wheat booms. There was little or no manufacturing industry as such before the later 1860s. Interior minister Antonio Varas told the British *chargé d'affaires* that he doubted if Chile had anything to send to the Great Exhibition of 1851, and in fact Chile sent nothing.[16] Apart from a few reaping and threshing machines, Chile's own small National Exhibition (1854) displayed nothing in the way of industrial manufactures. By 1861, however, there were at least 132 steam engines in use in the country, only thirty-eight of these on the railroads.[17]

Mining and agriculture were the foundation of Chile's foreign trade, on which the Conservative regime after 1830 pinned its main hopes for prosperity. While protectionist impulses never disappeared from the official mind (or public opinion), government policies were tailored to increase the flow of trade. Successive customs ordinances (1834, 1842, 1851, 1864) lowered the level of the basic external tariff (25 percent in 1864), with a range of items (often machinery) taxed at lower levels or not at all. In order to boost Valparaiso's growth as an *entrepôt* for the eastern Pacific, Manuel Rengifo, the Conservative regime's first serious Finance minister, regularized the system (introduced earlier) of bonded public warehouses (*almacenes fiscales*) where goods could be stored at low cost for (after 1833) up to six years before being imported into Chile or dispatched to other countries. Valparaiso became the nexus of a large regional market, its commercial tentacles reaching up the South American coast and out across the Pacific to Tahiti and beyond. This Pacific market shrank somewhat after the 1850s, with the development of Callao in Peru and San Francisco in California. Valparaiso's traders were vaguely aware that the building of a Panama Canal might some day undermine their prosperity. Such a canal, reasoned the newspaper *El Progreso*, might consign the port to the diminished status of the Mediterranean cities after the Portuguese discovery of the sea route to Asia. To fend off this challenge, an intermittent dream of the period (never realized) was for a fleet of steam tugs to tow sailing ships through the Magellan Strait, thus enabling

15 *Anuario estadístico*, entrega cuarta (1862), pp. 449–51.
16 TRI, No. 304, May 10, 1850. See also Mayo, p. 68.
17 *Anuario estadístico*, entrega cuarta (1862), p. 457.

them to avoid the stormy Cape Horn passage. Others were more sanguine about a possible Panama Canal. "Fortunately for us," as Valparaiso's great organ *El Mercurio* explained in 1858, it would almost certainly never be built, owing to "the unhealthy climate of the isthmus."[18]

Chile's external trade grew in value from an annual average of 18.6 million pesos (£8.3 million or $20.6 million) in 1844–50 to 42 million (£19 million or $46.6 million) in 1861–5. From the mid-1840s to the late-1850s, the country experienced boom conditions. At the end of the 1850s, there was a serious recession, caused by two bad harvests, the fading of the Australian market for wheat, and a downturn in silver production, all of which was made worse by the international recession of 1857. The recession led to numerous bankruptcies and flattened the trade figures for three or four years, but high growth resumed by the mid-1860s and ended only with the more devastating economic crisis of ten years later. Government revenues, about two thirds of which came from commercial imposts, rose from around 3 million pesos in the early 1840s to more than 6 million in the early 1860s. In conventional economic terms, the record of the early republic was an impressive one. With banks and joint-stock companies appearing in the 1850s and 1860s, as well as railroads and telegraphs, with a new Commercial Code (1865) smoothing the path for entrepreneurs and traders,[19] it seemed obvious that Chile was acquiring many of the outward and visible signs of nineteenth-century modernity. Commercial expansion was probably a significant factor in the consolidation of the republic. Positive business prospects could sometimes distract the upper class from politics. Had Chile experienced the stagnation common in so many of the other Spanish American countries in the half century after independence, the story might possibly have been different.

Urban Life and Civilization

In many ways, Valparaiso, the focus of the expanding export economy, was the republic's liveliest city. Ever since independence it had been a fast-growing port, visited by the sailors of half the world, flocked to by the foreign (not least British) traders whose several dozen import-export houses (along with a dozen or so Chilean firms) held the commanding heights of the export economy and an important position, too, in the mining

18 "Revolución obrada por el vapor," PR, No. 3, November 12, 1842, and the series "Navegación y colonización del Estrecho de Magallanes," PR, Nos. 6, 7, 9, 11 and 16, November 16, 17, 19, 22, and 28, 1842; MV, February 1852; José Casimiro Mena, CN/D, July 1858; see also Véliz, pp. 74–75. For the canal prediction, see English Part, M(V), No. 101, July 15, 1858.

19 For an excellent analysis of the *Código del Comercio*, see Cavieres, "Anverso," pp. 47–56, and for a succinct overview of economic history, Ortega.

industry through the *habilitación* business, the extension of credit to mine owners. Valparaiso was sometimes the springboard for mighty non-Chilean enterprises: the Frenchman Antoine-Dominique Bordes, who arrived there in 1835 and ran an import-export house, would later build one of Europe's largest fleets of sailing ships.[20] Valparaiso was not an ideal port. Until the building of wharves (1870s–1880s), ships could not tie up. Before breakwaters jutted out into the bay (1910s–1920s), there was no protection against northerly winds, which could wreak havoc among the ships at anchor and dash them on to the beach. Heavy rains could bring mudslides from the encircling hills behind the foreshore. An English visitor in 1845 was "much disappointed both with the town and people," and found the port "a disagreeable place."[21] It was ahead of Santiago, however, in its municipal improvements – daily newspapers, bookstores, a fire brigade, a proper theater (1844), gas lighting, and water supply; the last two of these were further ventures by the amazing Wheelwright, who thoroughly deserved his statue in the port (1877). By the mid-1850s, a poet could write:

> *. . . es bello . . . mirar tus naves,*
> *Tus aguas cristalinas, tus banderas,*
> *Tus calles populosas, tus vergeles,*
> *Tus paseos, tus teatros, tus hoteles.*
>
> . . . it is beautiful . . . to see your ships,
> Your crystalline waters, your flags,
> Your crowded streets, your orchards,
> Your walks, your theaters, your hotels.[22]

Another English visitor around this time admired the "stately houses" and "other buildings of even more imposing aspect" that lined the main street, but did not fail to note "sailors' boarding houses and gambling hells of the dirtiest and most pernicious description."[23] Brothels (licensed by the municipality) could be found downtown easily enough. *El Mercurio* in 1860 thought this a disgrace to "the Pearl of the Pacific," and recommended that they should be relegated to the hillsides.[24]

Valparaiso's population rose to about seventy thousand in 1865. Its cosmopolitan nature set up some interesting contrasts. A trader visiting in

20 For *habilitación*, see Cavieres, *Comercio*, ch. 4; for Bordes, Barbance, chs. iv–vi.

21 *Recollections of a Ramble*, pp. 12, 18.

22 Francisco Palma, "A Valparaíso," *Mensajero*, No. 739, November 12, 1855. For interesting photographs of Valparaiso in 1860–1, see Alvaro Jara, *Chile en 1860. William L. Oliver. Un precursor de la fotografía* (1973), pp. 70–78.

23 Cornwallis, II, 17–18.

24 MV, No. 9805, May 12, 1860.

1828 thought of it as more "a foreign factory than a Chilean city." Fourteen years later, *El Mercurio* described it as more "a Hanseatic city" than part of Chile. Another of the port's newspapers found Valparaiso society "English, almost."[25] This was never really true, although English was the foreign language most often heard in the streets. In fact, while the commercial quarter closest to the Customs House came to remind travelers (it still does) of a small corner of London, the teeming Almendral district to the north was never less than completely Chilean in character.

By mid-century Valparaiso had long since supplanted once-proud Concepción as Chile's second city. Relatively isolated from Santiago, and the focus of the southern economy in later colonial times, Concepción remained an important military center, with its garrison watching over the Frontier, something that gave its inhabitants, the *penquistas*, illusions of power. Twice in the 1820s, Concepción's military muscle had overthrown governments, with General Ramón Freire's revolt against the liberator-dictator Bernardo O'Higgins in 1823, and again with General Joaquín Prieto's Conservative pronunciamiento of 1829. Concepción's third attempt, in 1851, was a failure. An earthquake in February 1835 completely devastated the city: "a state of complete ruin, not a single building standing," observed some British sailors passing through.[26] Ten years later, the main plaza was still full of "piles of stones and bricks."[27] Concepción revived fairly notably with the coming of the wheat booms and the milling industry, but even in 1865 its population was still no more than fourteen thousand, much the same as that of flourishing Copiapó in the north or the sleepy Central Valley towns of Talca and Chillán.

Nobody remembering the colonial era would have found the republic's capital dramatically changed in the 1830s and 1840s, although its view of the glittering snows of the Cordillera invariably provoked gasps of admiration from foreign visitors. Nearly all its houses were still one story, of adobe construction, with barred windows and secluded patios, sometimes incorporating rented shops facing the street. Santiago's population rose from about seventy thousand in the mid-1830s to nearly 120,000 in 1865. Its main avenue, the Alameda, planned by the liberator O'Higgins, developed into a handsome, poplar-shaded boulevard in the decades after independence. An 1847 guidebook praised its benches (some stone, others brick) and its two parallel streams of running water, whose murmur made it "doubly agreeable . . . , particularly on summer nights."[28] The historian Father José

25 Moerenhout, p. 24; MV, No. 4206, September 13, 1842; *Gaceta del Comercio*, No. 1072, July 22, 1845.
26 *Diary of the Wreck*, p. 76.
27 Domeyko, *Mis viajes*, II, 631.
28 *Guía general 1847*, p. 293.