

CHAPTER I

THE ENVIRONMENT

I. THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

URUGUAY is one of the smallest countries of Latin America, although it covers an area considerably larger than that of England and Wales; and it is among the most peaceful and progressive of all the twenty Latin American republics. But until the beginning of the twentieth century, this was one of the most turbulent districts of a turbulent region.¹ The reasons for that chronic state of instability can be traced, for the most part, to the origins of Uruguayan nationhood in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and even as far as the beginnings of Uruguay as a settled territory in the time of the Spanish Empire in America.

The country's full name, the Eastern Republic of the Uruguay, describes its situation in that corner of South America tucked in between the River Uruguay and the Atlantic Ocean. On the north Uruguay has a frontier with Brazil; while on the south the River Plate, into which the Uruguay flows, forms a natural boundary with Argentina. This position has great strategical importance, since it commands the entrance to the River Plate and with it the shipping routes to Buenos Aires and up the affluents of the Plate, the Paraná and the Uruguay, leading to the Argentine and Brazilian interiors and to Paraguay. Uruguay's friendship is important, too, to any nation with interests in the South Atlantic. Finally, she is a buffer state between two considerable powers, Brazil and Argentina, which tower in strength above their South American neighbours, and which are now taking their place among the influential countries of the world.

This position as a buffer was, indeed, the first great factor in Uruguay's history. In colonial times the Banda Oriental, as the

¹ S. G. Hanson, *Utopia in Uruguay*, p. 3.

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territory was called (the Eastern Bank, that is, of the River Uruguay), became a bone of contention between the owners of the two empires in South America, Portugal and Spain. Uruguay's fertile soil and the great herds of wild cattle and horses which grazed over her rolling ranges and drank at the wooded banks of



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her streams combined with her strategic position to form the incentives behind the struggle for what was in other respects an empty land.

Uruguay is fortunate in her topography and climate. She is well



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watered, provided with good ports and water communications on all but her Brazilian frontier, and she has no great mountains, deserts or swamps (features only too apparent in other Latin American countries) to impede internal communication. The climate varies from temperate to sub-tropical as one goes from south-east to north-west, from the Atlantic seaboard open to the Antarctic winds and current, to the hot interior of the continent. But nowhere is it impossible for white men and for cattle to live in all seasons; and cattle especially thrive in the past in a country of good grass lacking large predatory animals. The 'native' or 'creole' unimproved cattle were in fact not indigenous, but were the wild descendants of the few released by early Spanish visitors, and they found the Banda Oriental so favourable that they had increased to millions, it was said, before the middle of the eighteenth century.¹

Yet the Banda Oriental, although discovered by the Spanish explorer Solís in 1516, was not settled even in part for over a hundred years. The Spanish conquistadores were not deeply interested in this land because it was inhabited by primitive and warlike Indians (Solís himself was killed by men of the Charrúa tribe at the moment of discovery), and, more to the point, because neither the country nor the Indians possessed or produced anything of value: no gold, silver, domestic animals, fruits, crops, nor even useful slaves.

The Banda Oriental, however, had water and wood for the ships arriving from Spain on their way up the rivers to Paraguay, where the Spaniards had settled by the middle of the sixteenth century. So the authorities in the Paraguayan capital, Asunción, made attempts to establish small posts on the Uruguayan coast, though they were at first unsuccessful owing to the bitter hostility of the natives. Nothing was known of the interior, since no explorer had ventured beyond the coastal district. But with the rise

¹ P. Blanco Acevedo, *El gobierno colonial en el Uruguay y los orígenes de la nacionalidad*, pp. 35-6.

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of Buenos Aires on the other bank of the River Plate, towards the end of the sixteenth century, settlement began in the Banda Oriental.

Spain realised at the beginning of the seventeenth century that the administrative area of Paraguay was too large, embracing as it did all the River Plate besides Paraguay proper. Buenos Aires had been founded in 1580 after an abortive attempt forty years before, and so in 1618 the whole territory was divided into two *gobernaciones*: Paraguay, ruled from Asunción, and the River Plate, with Buenos Aires as capital. The Banda Oriental fell within the province of Buenos Aires, though we may well wonder how the tiny Spanish colonial population had the energy to undertake its settlement.¹

Friendly relations with the Indians were at first fostered by means of gifts and entertainment, and then a few peaceful missionaries, Franciscans, were sent to prepare the way for more permanent contacts. In 1624 they set up a church and missionary village at a place which they called Santo Domingo Soriano, on the lower Uruguay, near the mouth of the Río Negro, and here the small local tribe, the Chanás, accepted Christianity and Spanish rule with it. An attempt to impose the strict discipline of the Jesuit mission, the *reducción*, which was having such success in the Paraguay Missions, failed here since Spanish settlers too quickly followed the missionaries and occupied the neighbourhood; and then Spaniards and Indians living in a community inevitably mixed their blood, so that quickly the Chanás lost their tribal identity together with their language and customs. Other missions were established by the Franciscans at Las Víboras and Espinillo, but that typical device of the Spanish conquistadores, the *encomienda* system of ensuring native tribute and labour, did not grow up here since tribes which were not completely assimilated,

¹ The population of the *Gobernación del Río de la Plata* at this time was 2730 whites and 4899 friendly Indians, for an area including the present Argentine provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe and Entre Ríos, as well as Uruguay (J. Torre Revello, *Los gobernadores de Buenos Aires (1617-1777)*, p. 468, in H.N.A., vol. III, part 2, chap. VIII).

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as were the Chanás, were too wild for any form of civilised life, and lived in liberty and more or less intermittent hostility towards the settlers.

It was the wealth of cattle which they found that attracted the Spaniards and led them to explore the rest of the Banda Oriental and slowly spread the area of occupation. Before this discovery, the people of Buenos Aires had regarded the Banda Oriental as a source of wood and charcoal, which they badly needed since the Argentine side of the Plate was bare of natural timber. Now that the wild descendants of the cattle brought by early explorers had multiplied throughout the country, Buenos Aires found that the Banda Oriental was even more profitable as a source of hides, tallow, fat and other products of cattle-killing than as a fuel reserve. Cattle formed the only important economic resource of the River Plate area, and the Banda Oriental was discovered to be the richest in them of all the districts of the *gobernación*.¹

A Scottish traveller of the first years of the nineteenth century, J. P. Robertson, gives the atmosphere of this primitive industry in a description of one of its centres, typical of many, although this one was in the Argentine province of Santa Fe. The place

might have been called the Golgotha of cattle; for I found it strewed not only with their skulls, but their carcasses. It was quite surrounded by slaughter-grounds and corrales; or rather, instead of these *surrounding* the town, they constituted part of it. The ground was soaked with the blood of the animals; and the effluvia from their offal, from large piles of hides, and from manufactories of tallow, emitted under the hot rays of a burning sun with tenfold intensity, were nearly insupportable. The air over the site of those corrales was almost darkened by birds of prey. Vultures, carrion-crows, and carrion-gulls, hovered, skimmed, and wheeled their flight round the carcasses of the slain. Here were a dozen clamorous assailants fixing their talons, and thrusting their curved beaks into the yet warm flesh of an animal, which had yielded its hide and tallow (all for which it was deemed valuable) to the Gaucho executioners of the matadero [slaughter-ground]. There, so many pigs were

¹ For the spread of cattle see Blanco Acevedo, *op. cit.* pp. 33-5, and *A.A.*, tomo 11, prologue by J. E. Pivel Devoto, pp. ix-x.

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contending for mastery in the revels, and close by, some ravenous dogs were usurping and maintaining an exclusive right to the prey. Ducks, fowls, turkeys, all seemed to prefer beef to anything else; and such a cawing, cackling, barking, and screaming, as were kept up by the heterogeneous family of quadrupeds and winged creatures which were voraciously satisfying the cravings of nature, was never heard out of Babel.¹

Buenos Aires drew revenue from the new industry by establishing a system of taxes on it. The slaughtering parties which left the Argentine side to make a bloody harvest in the Banda Oriental had to obtain licences from the Buenos Aires Cabildo (town council) for a specified number of animals, and a third of their supposed value was paid in tax. The wild cattle were considered Crown property, in the same category as the precious mines of other parts of America, and therefore they could not legally be used without some payment, such as this, to the Crown. The inevitable result was that the Banda Oriental came to be regarded as a sort of large ranch leased to Buenos Aires; and this attitude and the exploitation which sprang from it continued to the end of colonial days, and in some respects beyond. The reaction of the people of the Banda Oriental, as they grew more numerous and more conscious of themselves as a community, caused friction between the two sides of the River Plate, especially after the beginning of the eighteenth century. The whole question, indeed, encouraged the growth of what may be termed a community persecution-mania in the Banda Oriental, which led directly to attempts at emancipation from Buenos Aires even before the revolutions of the early nineteenth century, and to the autonomous designs of Uruguayan leaders, particularly the national hero, Artigas, during these later struggles. This feeling is clearly the second great factor in the development of the country.

Some of the more immediately apparent effects of the cattle boom were also far-reaching. They included the exploration of the

¹ J. P. and W. P. Robertson, *Letters on Paraguay*, vol. 1, pp. 226-7.

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country by the marauding parties of cattle-hunters from Buenos Aires or from local settlements and from Brazil to the north, which led to the establishment of villages, at first makeshift but later more permanently built, in convenient places on the coast or on rivers: the *Arroyos* (streams) de Pando, Solís Grande, Maldonado Grande and Maldonado Chico, the *Laguna* (lake) de Rocha, and other natural features attracted communities in this way, and as this movement went forward, so the country was opened up and these features named.

Another result of the boom, and one which was sinister from the point of view of the Spaniards, was an increase in the interest in the Banda Oriental shown by the Portuguese established in Brazil. Equally sinister, though, as things turned out, less dangerous, was a change in the customs of the wild Indians, who quickly learned the value of the wild cattle as sources of food and of various useful materials, and the use of the wild horses which had spread with them. The Indians had acquired something new which helped them to withstand the Spanish advance more easily and for longer than they could have done in their primitive state: they could now attack swiftly and effectively, and disappear just as swiftly before their pursuers. Now, too, they could find better food, and with less trouble than they had had before as hunters, on foot, of small game. There was little temptation to come to terms with the invaders, so that the outcome was a long series of Indian wars, in which the settlers and their friends gradually annihilated the savages, though the process lasted well into the nineteenth century, and at times whites and Indians became allies in the face of a common foe.¹

Perhaps the most important result of the cattle exploitation was its social effect on the people who lived by it – who were the large majority of the people of the Banda Oriental until near the end of colonial times. Agriculture was neglected for the easier life and more immediate profits of ranching or merely killing the wild

¹ Blanco Acevedo, *op. cit.* p. 9.

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cattle.¹ Consequently the population grew slowly, since ranching needs far fewer men than does agriculture, apart from the influence on the rate of natural increase of the free, nomadic, bachelor life of the cowboy and the settled, domestic life of the farmer. The Uruguayan historian Bauzá, writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, blamed on this lack of people much of his country's instability until his day;² and in this he followed the Argentine Sarmiento's idea that the large, almost empty tracts of land of those countries created barbarism. He believed, with another, slightly earlier, Argentine thinker, J. B. Alberdi, that 'gobernar es poblar' – to govern is to populate.

Not only the quantity of people, but their quality as human beings was deeply affected. 'La agricultura es sedentaria y civil; la ganadería es ecuestre y guerrera', writes an acute Uruguayan observer³: it was the old contrast between Cain and Abel. Ranching, especially the mere exploitation of the early centuries of Uruguayan history – and the same could be said for Argentina and large areas of Venezuela and of Mexico, not to go beyond the Spanish world – made the individual free, independent, and irresponsible. Food was plentiful, and to get it was simply a matter of lassoing the nearest cow, or bringing it down with the *boleadoras* (thongs loaded with heavy balls which were thrown so as to entangle the animal's legs), killing it, cutting out a choice part, roasting it over the camp fire and eating it with knife and fingers. The hides of cattle and horses supplied almost every other need of the early Uruguayan – as, indeed, of many other Latin Americans – clothing, boots, saddlery, bed, even tents and huts, doors and windows. They also supplied the medium of exchange for buying the few necessities which a man could not make for himself: tobacco, drink, knives. Education, and even the rudiments of civilised living, were neglected. They were impossible where the population

¹ F. de Azara, *Memoria sobre el estado rural del Río de la Plata y otros informes*, pp. 3–5.

² F. Bauzá, *Historia de la dominación española en el Uruguay*, vol. 1, p. 145. He added that the land only supported 50 persons where it should support 2,000.

³ A. Zum Felde, *Evolución histórica del Uruguay*, p. 14.

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was so sparse, and where men cared for nothing but their own manliness. The dangers and fatigues of hunting and killing cattle inured the countrymen to a life of perpetual campaigning. In fact, Indian attacks, and brushes with the Portuguese or occasionally with the Spanish authorities created a perilous state of anarchy. Men brought up to such a life made perfect material for revolution or war, whether civil or against a foreign enemy.

Life was primitive in the scattered settlements and even in the capital, Montevideo, newly founded in 1724. Until well on in that century it was the roughness and rural simplicity of life which gave the dominant note of colonial Uruguay, and it will be best to examine the country districts closely before going on to describe the development of the most important city and of the Banda Oriental's complicated relations with Buenos Aires and Brazil.

The basis of the population was Spanish, with a not very large admixture of Indian blood. Some Portuguese came and stayed, particularly after their foundation of Colónia do Sacramento on the shore of the River Plate opposite Buenos Aires, in 1680. There were almost no other foreigners, since, apart from the exclusion laid down in Spanish law, there was little in the country to attract them. The Spaniards' descendants were called *criollos*, *creoles*, as elsewhere in Spanish America, and they formed the bulk of the population, which was therefore mainly white. By the end of the eighteenth century there was possibly more African than Indian blood in the Banda Oriental, after the introduction of black slaves which began about 1756. However, negroes and mulattoes were more common in and near Montevideo than in the country districts, where more *mestizos* (half-breed of white and Indian) than mulattoes existed.¹

The owners of ranches had a degree of rude comfort in their estancia houses. The Scot, J. P. Robertson, as a young merchant, dined in an affluent country house in a place near the Uruguayan frontier, a part of present-day Argentina which had much in

¹ H. Arredondo, *Civilización del Uruguay*, tomo I, pp. 35-9.