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Simon Collier

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PART I

THE GROWTH OF THE REVOLUTION

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I

BACKGROUND TO REVOLUTION

LATE-COLONIAL CHILE

Before considering the Chilean revolution itself, I must briefly set the scene.¹ At the end of the colonial period, the Captaincy-General, more formally known as the Kingdom, of Chile could still be regarded as one of the most distant outposts of European civilization. British colonization in the Antipodes had scarcely begun, while Chile was still the remotest of the dominions of the Spanish Crown in America. Nature had conferred on its territory a remarkable degree of isolation. To the North, the Captaincy-General was bordered by the Atacama Desert, whose immense riches were still largely unexploited. More permanent barriers—the Cordillera of the Andes and the Pacific Ocean—indicated the Eastern and Western boundaries of the province. Only to the South was there an element of doubt. Here the edge of Spanish settlement was roughly marked by the line of the River Bío-Bío, curving inland from Concepción. Beyond this line the Araucanian Indians preserved the separate way of life they had successfully defended against the Spanish Empire for two and a half centuries. The general situation along this Southern ‘Frontier’ was, by the eighteenth century, little more than a ‘stalemate broken by brief flurries of warfare’,² without the dramatic fluctuations in military fortunes that had characterized—and to some extent conditioned—Chilean history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even so, the Indians were not to be underrated as a potential menace. As a member of the La Pérouse expedition observed, while on a visit to the South in 1786, one of the easiest ways for a foreign power to overcome Spanish Chile would be for it to conclude an

¹ For a full account of Chilean society at the end of the colonial period, see Barros Arana, vi, 311–576, and Encina, *Historia*, v, 107–680. The first section of this chapter is no more than a very short summary from these and other authorities.

² Louis de Armond, ‘Frontier Warfare in Colonial Chile’, *Pacific Historical Review*, xxxiii (Berkeley, Calif., 1954), 132.

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offensive alliance with the Araucanians. Such an alliance might well prove to be invincible.¹

The total population of Chile at this period is difficult to estimate. The surveys undertaken in 1778 by Governor Jáuregui and in 1812 by the national Junta can hardly be regarded as comprehensive or particularly accurate even for the areas they affected to cover. It seems safest to say that the population around 1800 was well over half a million. If the Araucanians to the South of the Bío-Bío are taken into account, then it is entirely possible that there were roughly a million Chileans, of all varieties, at the time the revolution began.² Then, as now, the great majority lived in the rich and fertile Central Valley between Santiago and Concepción, though what is today referred to as the Norte Chico was also reasonably populated. It is worth remarking here that although Chile was long and narrow on the maps even in colonial times, its unusual degree of longitudinal extensiveness was not acquired until after independence, with the conquest of the Far North and the opening up of the Far South. In 1800, in fact, Chile was effectively no more than seven hundred miles long, less than a third of its present length.

Few Indians had survived North of the Bío-Bío. They had been assimilated by marriage, and an enormous class of *mestizos* had come into existence. *Mestizos* went to form well over half the total population of Chile in 1800. From their ranks were drawn the rural labourers, the itinerant workers on the land and in the mines, the peasant proprietors, the tenants of the big *haciendas*, and, not least, the sizable gangs of bandits, highwaymen and thieves. Most *mestizos* lived lives bounded by poverty and ignorance, though there was, perhaps, relatively little serious malnutrition in late-colonial Chile. Illiteracy, vagabondage, crime and drunkenness were widespread, and social evils such as these were

¹ Milet-Mureau, iv, 100-1.

² Barros Arana (vii, 315) claimed that the population in 1808 was 500,000. The leading Chileans of the time, except for Salas, generally used the round number of 1,000,000. Governor Jáuregui's survey only took in the Diocese of Santiago, and produced a total of 203,732. A very fragmentary survey of the Diocese of Concepción in 1791 resulted in a total of 105,114, certainly a gross underestimate. The patriot census of 1812, though defective, was more accurate. Its final total of just over 900,000 seems realistic. See Encina, *Historia*, v, 159-69, and x, 79-80.

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denounced in vivid detail by the more enlightened Chilean thinkers of the time, notably Manuel de Salas.¹ In contrast to some of the other provinces of the Spanish American Empire, Chile had very few negro slaves. Pure negroes were rare, and the total number of slaves at the start of the revolution did not exceed five thousand.² Nearly all of them were in domestic service, and the practice of manumission was fairly common. As for the Araucanian Indians South of the Frontier, they were to all intents and purposes a separate community. The missionary policy pursued by various religious Orders had been a conspicuous failure, and it was left to the Chileans of the second half of the nineteenth century to dispose of the 'Indian problem'.

The great mass of the population was dominated by a small oligarchy of creoles (and European Spaniards) consisting of upwards of two hundred families who regarded themselves (and were regarded) as noble. Many Chilean creoles had ancestries which contained more than one infusion of Indian blood, but not in sufficient quantities to render them *mestizos*. Originally, the aristocracy had been composed of the descendants of early settlers, but from the end of the seventeenth century onwards a substantial Basque element incorporated itself. Some of these newer members of the creole oligarchy had made their money in trade, but used it to acquire estates, land being the basis of all wealth in the colony. By and large, they were, to use Alberto Edwards' description, 'sensible, parsimonious, with regular and orderly habits'.³ To the Basque-Castilian aristocracy there had also been added, in the early part of the eighteenth century, a barely noticeable but nonetheless important element of foreign blood, mainly French.⁴ The family spirit of this Chilean oligarchy was particularly notable, and it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the country was dominated by a network of great

¹ Villalobos R., 'El bajo pueblo', p. 38. Manuel de Salas Corvalán (1754-1841); one of the outstanding figures of the period; syndic of the Consulado from its foundation; founder of the Academia de San Luis; member of the 1811 and 1823 Congresses; exiled to Juan Fernández, 1814-17.

² Feliú Cruz, *Abolición*, pp. 39-40; Encina, *Historia*, v, 162.

³ *La fronda aristocrática*, p. 9. The Chilean aristocracy was less well off than its counterparts in Peru or Mexico: see Gómez de Vidaurre, II, 287.

⁴ Fuenzalida Grandón, *Evolución social*, chs. 7-8.

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families, the most widespread and powerful of which, the enormous Larraín clan, was to play a prominent part in the early development of the revolution.¹ The aim of the aristocracy was to ensure the permanence of its superior position in society by retaining control of its *haciendas* and by emphasizing its social leadership. This it did in two ways: by instituting *mayorazgos* (strict entails) and, where possible, by purchasing or otherwise acquiring Castilian titles. There were some fourteen *mayorazgos* at the end of the colonial period, seven of which had been created during the eighteenth century. There were some twelve Castilian titles in existence as well.² The *mayorazgo* and the title of nobility represented ideals of considerable importance to the Chilean aristocracy. Those who failed to secure either (and they were, of course, the majority), had to content themselves with becoming members of Orders of Chivalry or with making full use of any military rank they gained as a result of service in the local militias.³

The social structure of late-colonial Chile, then, was fairly simple. The creole aristocracy, with a small Peninsular Spanish element attached (there is no reason to differentiate between the two racial groups at this stage), was invested with social prestige and economic power. The creoles, it is true, lacked the additional advantage of possessing political control, and this, as will be seen, was one of their major grievances. Below the aristocracy in the social hierarchy was the vast lower class, either directly dependent on the aristocracy for its existence or eking out a precarious livelihood on its own abject *minifundia*. This basic division of Chilean society into two classes—leaving aside the Araucanians—was not complicated more than fractionally by the existence of a small creole and Peninsular Spanish ‘middle class’ of soldiers, lawyers, minor bureaucrats, small traders, and owners of such medium-sized rural properties as there were. The ‘middle class’ seems to have had largely aristocratic aspirations, and cannot be considered a potential third force.

With certain exceptions it was from the ranks of the creole

¹ See Amunátegui Solar, *Teatro político*, chs. 3–4.

² Amunátegui Solar, *La sociedad chilena*, contains detailed accounts of all the families which had *mayorazgos* and titles of nobility.

³ Encina, *Historia*, v, 239–40 and 533–55.

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aristocracy that the leadership of the Chilean revolution was later to be drawn. No picture of the revolution which ignores this basic fact can be said to be accurate. The creole leaders were to speak the language of the rights of man, of representative government, of popular sovereignty; and they meant what they said. But at the same time they did not—and could not—cease to be what they had been in the colonial period: aristocrats, landowners, the leaders of society. The effect of this on their political theory, and above all on the application of their political theory, was bound to be considerable. This is perhaps the place to observe that the great creole families who came to dominate the revolutionary process directly or indirectly, were a relatively close-knit and homogeneous group. Their economic interests were substantially similar. The geographical area they covered was by no means unmanageable. Chile never saw the dangerous racial rivalries or regional tensions that affected the post-revolutionary performances of some of the other American provinces. Chile in 1810 was socially and geographically compact, and this must help to account for the brevity of political disorder and the speedy transition to orderly government. It might almost be said that no other Latin American country possessed the advantages of geographical compactness and social homogeneity in the same measure as Chile. Chile was extremely well placed to achieve the stability and progress that *was* achieved after 1830.

The vast majority of Chileans, of whatever social class, lived in the countryside. The only city worthy of the name was Santiago, with a total population of rather more than thirty thousand in 1810. Architecturally, Santiago was recovering from the disastrous earthquake of 1730, and public works were carried out on a reasonable scale throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century, inspired or at least encouraged by such zealous Governors as Ambrosio O'Higgins. To some extent the Southern city of Concepción formed an alternative centre of power and influence in the Captaincy-General, but its population was little more than six thousand, much the same as that of La Serena, shortly to become the capital of the new Province of Coquimbo.¹

¹ Created by the first national Congress on 23 September 1811.

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Valparaíso, a fortress as well as a port, was still far from impressive as a town, though it was to expand dramatically during the revolution as a result of foreign trade. One other town may be briefly referred to here. Talca, with perhaps as many as six thousand inhabitants in 1810, was already showing signs of that civic spirit for which it has rightly become famous in Chile. In the last years of the colonial period, a group of cultivated creoles and foreigners was giving a notable stimulus to primary education there.¹ Urban life was characterized in general, Luis Galdames has written, by its 'rigidity and passiveness. An unalterable rhythm carried men and women day by day to their work or to their religious devotions.'² Public diversions of an elevating kind were virtually unknown, despite a few attempts to stage dramatic performances, though private celebrations were, if travellers' tales are to be believed, as gay as the naturally boisterous Chilean temperament permitted. Captain George Vancouver noted in Santiago: 'Such a degree of levity is observable in the conduct of the *ladies*. . . as to give a stranger, and particularly an Englishman, no reason to entertain a very exalted opinion of their virtue, but rather to impress him with notions prejudicial to the female character.'³ The sailors of the La Pérouse expedition found much the same thing to be true on a different social level in Concepción: 'Wine is very common in Chile; and. . . the women of the people are as complaisant there as they are in Tahiti.'⁴

The Catholic Church naturally wielded an enormous influence in the colony. Its established position reinforced the civil government, and it administered its own justice without interference from the secular courts or the Audiencia. By issuing *bandos* concerned with public morality, and complex regulations affecting saints' days and other festivals, the Church exercised a powerful control over much of the ceremonial of the time. Disputes between Bishop and Governor were as much a part of Chilean history as they were in other provinces of the Empire,⁵ but in general these were on the wane in the eighteenth century.

¹ Encina, *Historia*, v, 214–17.² Galdames, *Evolución constitucional*, p. 10.³ Vancouver, iii, 434–5.⁴ Milet-Mureau, ii, 70.⁵ See Amunátegui, *Precursores*, I, 159–225.

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Though a majority of the Bishops of Santiago and Concepción in the final century of colonial rule were Spaniards or Peruvians, some, including the most illustrious (Manuel Alday of Santiago), were Chileans. The authority of the Inquisition, represented in Chile by a special commissioner, was still powerful, but less pervasive than in former times. While it continued to fulfil its major tasks—the eradication of superstition on the one hand, and the suppression of irreligious and subversive thought on the other—its position at the end of the eighteenth century was weakening considerably.

The role of the Church in such education as there was in Chile was especially notable. The majority of primary schools were run by the parishes, though a number of lay primary schools were set up in the eighteenth century. In 1803 there were some nine lay schools in Santiago alone, attended by nearly four hundred children,¹ not to mention the various church schools. Primary education was thus by no means non-existent but probably made little impression on the overwhelming mass of the population. The better creole families, of course, employed private tutors. Secondary and higher education was in a still more precarious state. There were only three establishments purveying secondary or higher learning: the Royal University of San Felipe, which had opened its doors in 1758; the Convictorio Carolino, established in 1778 as a replacement for the main Jesuit college in Chile; and finally the Academia de San Luis, founded in 1797. The University provided what Encina has described as ‘a mediocre professional training enveloped in a semi-scholastic culture which was backward even in relation to its own time’.² The study of law and theology predominated. Of the 299 doctorates produced by the University up till 1810, the overwhelming majority were in these two subjects. It was Manuel de Salas who best appreciated the need for a new and more technical education in the Captaincy-General. He attempted to realize his vision in the Academia de San Luis, which was very largely his inspiration and which he helped

¹ Encina, *Historia*, v, 553.

² *Ibid.* 592–3. For the three institutions of higher education in general, see Barros Arana, vii, 494–502; Fuenzalida Grandón, *Desarrollo intelectual*, chs. 1–3; and Medina, *Historia de la Universidad*.

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to sustain with his own funds.¹ Though the Academia was a failure, Salas did not abandon his educational idealism, and was given further opportunities to put it into operation during the revolution.

Chile was, for reasons of policy as well as of geography, essentially a 'closed' country, no more so in theory than the other American provinces, but perhaps slightly more so in practice. Foreigners were excluded, at any rate on paper. The strict regulations on this subject were, however, only fully enforced in time of war. At all other times foreigners (if they were lucky) could enter Chile, settle, marry Chilean girls, and win the approval of the local creole aristocracy. The well-known example of George Edwards, an English doctor who settled in La Serena just before the revolution, and who founded the distinguished Edwards family, amply illustrates this fact. Nevertheless, the total number of foreigners living in Chile at the start of the revolution was fairly small. When in 1809 Governor García Carrasco tried to round up all non-naturalized foreigners, he was only able to find some seventy-nine,² and while there were doubtless many more than this, his result is a fair indication of the real numbers involved.

Similar considerations applied to the Chilean economy. Agriculture and stock-raising were the dominant preoccupations of the creole oligarchy, together with a certain amount of mining in the North of the country, but such external trade as there was existed within an imperial framework. Chile traded either with the Spanish motherland or with the neighbouring provinces of the Empire. There were substantial commercial links with the River Plate, as well as the more voluminous and traditional commerce between Chile and the Viceroyalty of Peru to the North. The relaxation of trade restrictions inside the Spanish Empire which occurred under Charles III had a delayed effect in Chile, as a result of the War of American Independence. Eventually, however, there was a heavy importation of expensive consumer goods for which, in the last resort, Chile could not pay.

¹ Amunátegui, *Manuel de Salas*, I, 79–113.

² 21 Portuguese, 18 Italians, 10 North Americans, 9 French, 6 English, 4 Irish, 2 Swedish, 1 Russian, 1 German, 1 Maltese, 1 Austrian, 1 Dane, 1 Hungarian, 1 Scotsman, and 1 Netherlander (Amunátegui, *Crónica*, II, 333).

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But, although the creoles were denied the right (except under special circumstances) of trading outside the Empire, they were able to indulge in contraband. Since smugglers do not normally publish statistics, it is impossible to say with any certainty what percentage of Chilean imports arrived illegally in this way. Contraband may have accounted for as much as twenty or even thirty per cent of all Chilean imports in a 'good' year—a year, that is, when fewer cargoes from Spain arrived than was usual—but, in reality, historians can do little more than speculate about the precise quantity. Contraband, however, was certainly a deeply rooted habit by the end of the colonial period. It involved many of the most respectable creoles from time to time, and it was organized on a highly businesslike basis.¹ Smuggling was a significant breach in the wall of Spanish exclusivism.

From the creole viewpoint Spanish exclusivism operated most forcibly in the domain of government and politics. By and large, Chile was very well governed at the end of the colonial era. It enjoyed the status of a Captaincy-General, administratively independent of Peru after 1798,² and subject to the immediate authority of a Governor and a Royal Audiencia. Under the reforms of Charles III, Chile was now divided into two Intendancies (Santiago and Concepción) as well as into twenty-two districts (*partidos*) presided over by a *subdelegado* or district governor. Though the machinery of colonial government worked with reasonable efficiency in the Chilean case, the most important political and administrative posts were still in the hands of Peninsular Spaniards. The creole aristocracy, possessing as it did a full measure of social and economic power, found it peculiarly galling to be excluded in this way from the higher levels of the government machine. Chile was, however, extremely fortunate in the quality of its late-colonial Governors. Agustín de Jáuregui (1773–80), Ambrosio de Benavides (1780–7), Ambrosio O'Higgins (1788–96), Gabriel Avilés (1796–9), and Luis Muñoz de Guzmán (1802–08) were all capable and intelligent administrators, well

¹ See pp. 36–7.

² Peru had previously exercised certain limited powers of supervision. The administrative separation of 1798 was largely due to the economic conflict between the two provinces.