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by

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PREFACE

This book is, primarily, a political history. Even though it begins with an examination of the economy and society of the River Plate area in the period of transition towards Independence, this is because it appeared to us impossible to leave out of account the effective dimensions of the collective political entity of which this book attempts to trace the history. Its theme is not, therefore, very different from those which absorbed the attention of the founders of Argentina's tradition of historiography; that is to say, the growth of a centre of autonomous political power, controlled by a well-defined group of men, in an area where the very notion of political activity had been unknown to almost everybody until a short time before. Our greatest historians, however, did not state the problem in exactly these terms. As far as Mitre was concerned, the rise of this centre of power was merely the obvious outward sign of a change much broader in scope: the rise of a new nation within the frontiers of the territory which had been mysteriously predestined for that purpose. The men and the groups which took part in that process appeared to be connected, not so much by definable ties of affinity or hostility – of which, however, the historian did not fail to take account – as by their common participation in the building of a future which none could foresee and which all were preparing, and which provides the perspective from which the historian of later times considers and judges the participants.

López, in more than one respect, represents a diametrically opposite approach. The rôle of the historian of the rise of a new nation was of less interest to him than the nostalgic evocation of a liberal élite based on Buenos Aires, the destiny of which was, not so much to prepare the ground for the creation of a more broadly based national community, as to fill the gap left by the continuing absence of such a community, and to govern the area which destiny had placed in its charge in accordance with the rules of an art of politics and administration learned in the school of that finest of all sovereigns, Charles III. Nevertheless, he was in agreement with Mitre in considering the entire process of the foundation of the nation from the point of view of a development, with the fundamental characteristics of which he strongly sympathised: the consolidation of a sharply defined national state, bounded by frontiers that had not been in any way pre-determined by the pre-Revolutionary political order, and governed in a

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particular style and with particular objectives, appeared to him, as it did to Mitre, a sufficient retrospective justification of a historical process, though he took care to emphasise the darker side of the latter.

This outlook, shared by the greatest founders of Argentina's tradition of historiography, was, of course, related to the peculiar positions held by both men in the life of the nation. Even when both of them, when they wrote their most mature historical works, had already been excluded from the politically dominant faction, their allegiance to the basic principles underlying the political order in force in the country more than outweighed their differences with the group enjoying political control. Moreover, that order appeared to them more fragile and less securely consolidated than it does to the retrospective observer. The contingent elements of the historical process which they evoked appeared to them to have relevance for their own day and age. Their adherence to a particular concept of Argentina as a nation and to the historical process which gave rise to it was not so much a gesture of posthumous approval of an already irreversible development as a polemical stance *vis-à-vis* the present and the future. Of course, neither Mitre nor López would have gone so far as the alarmed José Posse, who from his native city of Tucumán proclaimed in 1879 the ultimate failure of the attempt to build a new nation, in which seventy years of effort appeared to have been wasted. It is, nevertheless, significant that both men were writing at a time when such thoroughgoing pessimism was still possible. Even though they fortified themselves against that attitude by affirming their faith in the destiny of the nation, the temptation to surrender to pessimism perhaps explains why the expression of that faith was so vociferous and frequently reiterated. Although the development, of which they fundamentally approved, appeared to them not as one of the many possible outcomes of the process initiated in 1810 (a particular outcome arrived at, by no means inevitably, as a result of a chain of historical events characterised by sharp fluctuations of fortune), but as the fulfilment of a destiny mysteriously foreordained from the beginning of time in the body and soul of the new nation, this was precisely because they felt the need for this over-emphatic justification in order to silence the doubts to which the fragility of the prevailing political order still appeared to give rise. Similarly, their hostility towards the supporters of political solutions other than the one which actually prevailed was not a merely posthumous condemnation: the virulence with which it was expressed would not be explicable if the defeat suffered by those supporters had really been considered as definitive.

This complex network of sentiments and attitudes which inspired our early historians is not, of course, capable of evoking a comparable response in historians of the present day. The political outcome, from the standpoint of which they judged the past, today appears both less threatened and less admirable. Rather than making another devout pilgrimage along that

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highway followed by the new nation in its historical development, historians are increasingly coming to prefer the sympathetic exploration of those alternative paths which were not taken, but at the end of which it is permissible to envisage a present very different from that which most present-day scholars – albeit from often conflicting motives – agree to be intolerable.

Having made these brief observations, we must point out that the purpose of this work is much more limited: its aim is to trace the vicissitudes of a political élite created, destroyed and then created again by war and revolution. This involves the consideration of a whole series of problems: what were, in the complex of social relationships existing before the rise of political activity, in the strict sense of the term, the relationships that were to provide a context for that new activity? What was the relationship between the political élite created by that process of social specialisation and the social and economic élites whose position and attitudes were, inevitably, seriously affected by the very changes that made the area both the scene and the subject of political struggles? How did that political élite use its recently acquired power to redefine its relationship both with the other sectors of the élite and with those popular groups without whose activity it would never have risen to power, but with which it was often reluctant to share the political influence it had acquired? Here, then, is a whole complex of problems, the importance of which is undeniable. The examination of them involves the exploration of fields which have been dealt with by previous historical research in extremely varying degrees of detail, and this factor has inevitably influenced the present work. Occasionally, it has been found impossible to submit certain aspects, and not always unimportant ones, of the general theme to an investigation sufficiently detailed to offset, to a satisfactory degree, that long neglect on the part of historians. At times, a more detailed investigation appeared to threaten the entire structure of the work: thus, the finances of the Revolutionary régime have been the subject of a separate study, the results of which I hope to publish in the near future.

It remains for me to add a few remarks concerning the origin of this book, for the circumstances of this origin have played some part in determining the final shape of the work. In 1957 I was invited by Don Arnaldo Orfila Reynal to write a history of Argentina in the first eighty years of the nineteenth century. I was soon to discover that I had been imprudent in accepting this offer with such alacrity. For over ten years – during which I was, moreover, busy with other work and with academic activities as time-consuming and disturbed as they would be in the unsettled Argentina of those years – I did my best to fulfil that commitment in which my ignorance and lack of caution had involved me. Eventually I realised that, in the form in which I had originally approached it, the task was impossible: I

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had neither the time nor the resources needed to deal with the questions which, in my view, required an answer if one were to write a history of that stage of Argentina's development on the basis of a unified and systematic approach to the problems involved. The present work is, therefore, one of the unexpected fruits of that prolonged and perplexed effort. In publishing it, I would like to express once again my thanks to Don Arnaldo Orfila for his initial confidence in me and his sustained patience. I would also like to thank all those who – often unknowingly – have helped me to formulate the thoughts expressed in this book – some of them were my colleagues and students in the Universities of the Littoral and of Buenos Aires, at a time which now appears to me almost as remote as that discussed in this book – and also those with whom, in so many other places, I have conversed about these matters.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.G.N. Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires
BIIH *Boletín del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas*
F.O. Foreign Office Papers (Public Record Office, London)

NOTE

All books, articles and MSS. cited in the footnotes are also included in the checklist of sources (p. 415). In the footnotes, the full name of the author or authors and the full title of the document are given when it is referred to for the first time, and thereafter it is referred to by the author's surname or surnames and, where necessary, by an abbreviated form of the title.