

PART I

BIRTH OF A NATION-STATE, 1800S–1830S

Established by Spanish conquistadors in the 1540s, the “captaincy-general” of Chile developed as a small and neglected agrarian colony on the fringe of the Spanish American empire, its isolation enhancing what became after two-and-a-half centuries a distinctive embryonic national culture. The formation of great landed estates sharply stratified colonial society, the predominantly mestizo laboring poor dominated by an upper class modified by eighteenth-century immigration, much of it Basque (Chapter 1). The wars of independence brought the Chilean nation-state into being: its soldiers and sailors played a key role in the emancipation of the viceroyalty of Peru. The quest of the new nation’s early leaders for a suitable political order culminated in a comprehensive settlement by Conservative politicians in the 1830s. This gave the country a record of institutional continuity unusual in the upheaval-prone Spanish America of the nineteenth century (Chapters 2 and 3).

GOVERNMENTS

1817–23	General Bernardo O’Higgins
1823–26	General Ramón Freire
1827–29	General Francisco Antonio Pinto
1829–30	Junta
1830	Francisco Ruiz Tagle
1830–31	José Tomas Ovalle
1831	Fernando Errázuriz
1831–41	General Joaquín Prieto

## I

## Colonial foundations, 1540–1810

*The kingdom of Chile, without contradiction the most fertile in America and the most adequate for human happiness, is the most wretched of the Spanish dominions.*

– Manuel de Salas (1796)

The first Europeans arriving in Chile were charmed and captivated by its natural beauty and generally moderate climate. “This land is such that for living in, and for settling, there is none better in the world,” wrote Pedro de Valdivia, the Spanish conquistador who opened up the fertile Central Valley of Chile to European colonization in 1540.<sup>1</sup> It is easy enough to see how Valdivia and his men, coming from a fairly arid homeland, having marched southward from Peru through endless desert, should have taken pleasure in the softer tones of the Chilean landscape. From the first, however, the colonizers’ enjoyment of this scenery was bought at the price of isolation from the rest of the world. At no time was this truer than during the two and a half centuries that followed Valdivia’s successful invasion, the period when the deep foundations of modern Chilean culture and nationality were laid. If Chileans form, as they do, a distinctive branch of the Spanish American family, the key to understanding their distinctiveness is, precisely, their long isolation – mitigated to an extent by the steamship in the second half of the nineteenth century, and more so by the jet airliner in the second half of the twentieth.

<sup>1</sup> To Emperor Charles V, September 4, 1545. J. T. Medina, ed., *Cartas de Pedro de Valdivia* (Santiago, 1953), p. 42.

Aside from the Philippines, Chile was the most remote of all the Spanish possessions. When, in March 1796, a flotilla sailed into Talcahuano Bay in southern Chile after a voyage of ninety-five days from Cadiz, this was commented on at the time as an unusually fast passage. Before the Cape Horn route came into use in the 1740s, the journey (by way of Panama or Buenos Aires) took much longer. Moreover, Chile's isolation was not merely a matter of distance from the imperial metropolis. Even in South America the "long thin land" was lonely – separated from the Viceroyalty of Peru to the north by hundreds of miles of unfriendly desert, and from the pampas of the River Plate to the east by the towering Cordillera of the Andes. To the west, beyond the colony's beautiful coastline, the widest of the world's oceans was a fearsome expanse to be discreetly skirted rather than boldly navigated, although in 1574 the sea-captain Juan Fernández ventured farther from the coast than usual on a voyage from Peru and discovered the islands that now bear his name (400 miles offshore). Fernández later worked out how to take advantage of the wind systems in order to reduce the sailing time between Chile and Peru.

Only in the south did man rather than nature fix the boundaries of the new Spanish colony. For here the invaders were eventually checked by the indigenous inhabitants whose land they had come to conquer. The exact size of the native population of Chile at the time of Valdivia's arrival will never be known with certainty: Rolando Mellafe's judicious estimate puts the figure at between 800,000 and 1,200,000. Nor were the native Americans encountered by Valdivia's men a single nation, though most of them shared a common language. In the northern Central Valley, the Picunche peoples had earlier been assimilated into the great Inca empire of Peru, but full Inca rule stopped at the Maipo River (though exercised more tenuously at least as far as the Maule River, 160 or so miles farther south). In the more densely populated country south of the Maule, the Mapuche and other groups had fought off the Inca army and retained their independence. Here the peoples were proto-agricultural, living together in rather loosely organized, dispersed communities whose basic unit was the extended family. They were not concentrated in villages, still less in cities, and had none of the treasures that so excited the plundering instincts of the soldiers of Cortés and Pizarro in Mexico and Peru.

The Spaniards came to refer to the native peoples of southern Chile as "Araucanians." Their military prowess (they soon adopted the

horse and became formidable cavalrymen) was extolled by Alonso de Ercilla, the soldier-poet whose epic of the conquest, *La Araucana* (3 parts, 1569–89), was the first literary work (in fact the first work of any kind) to bring Chile to the attention of Europe. Praising the adversary, of course, is not uncommon in the literature of imperialism, but thanks in part to Ercilla's poetic skill, Caupolicán and Lautaro, the two outstanding Araucanian leaders of the time, were long remembered in story and song far beyond the boundaries of Chile. Their names and those of other Araucanian heroes, such as Galvarino and Tucapel, are still sometimes given to Chilean boys (and Chilean girls have sometimes been called Fresia, an "Araucanian" name almost certainly invented by Ercilla). Such names are much better recognized today than those of the Spanish governors who ruled Chile after the death of Pedro de Valdivia at the hands of the Mapuche in December 1553.

The overriding preoccupation of Valdivia's immediate successors was warfare, in a colony that was not only outnumbered but also over-extended. It was the great Araucanian offensive after December 1598 that fixed the final dimensions of colonial Chile, by closing off the well-watered southern half of the Central Valley and forcing the Spaniards to abandon their main settlements, their "seven cities" south of the Bío Bío River. The last to be evacuated was Osorno, in March 1604. From then onward the gently curving Bío Bío (a "river of history" if ever there was one) became a stable if at times bloody "Frontier" between unconquered, independent Araucania and the Spanish colony growing up farther north. "Indomitable Araucania" was in effect a separate country (reluctantly recognized as such by Spain) which outlasted Spanish imperial rule.

The Chilean colony was never important enough, strategically or economically, for the imperial government to contemplate a full-scale invasion of the trans-Bío Bío territory. From the early seventeenth century a small standing army (rather unusual for the Spanish empire) was stationed in the south to patrol the Frontier, repelling Indian raids (*malones*) while often staging profitable little forays of its own (*malocas*). Chile came to enjoy the reputation of being "the Flanders of the New World," as the Jesuit chronicler Alonso de Ovalle put it in the 1640s: "the arena and dueling-ground of greatest valor in America, both for the Spaniard in his conquest and for the Araucanian in his

resistance.”<sup>2</sup> There was a touch of hyperbole here. Warfare along the Frontier lessened in intensity during the seventeenth century, and still more in the eighteenth. Cross-frontier trade developed rapidly during these centuries, the Mapuche supplying cattle, horses, and ponchos (among other things) in exchange for hardware, wine, or a variety of European manufactures. Missionaries (Jesuits, and later Franciscans) attempted to win Araucanian hearts and minds, with much persistence but without much success.

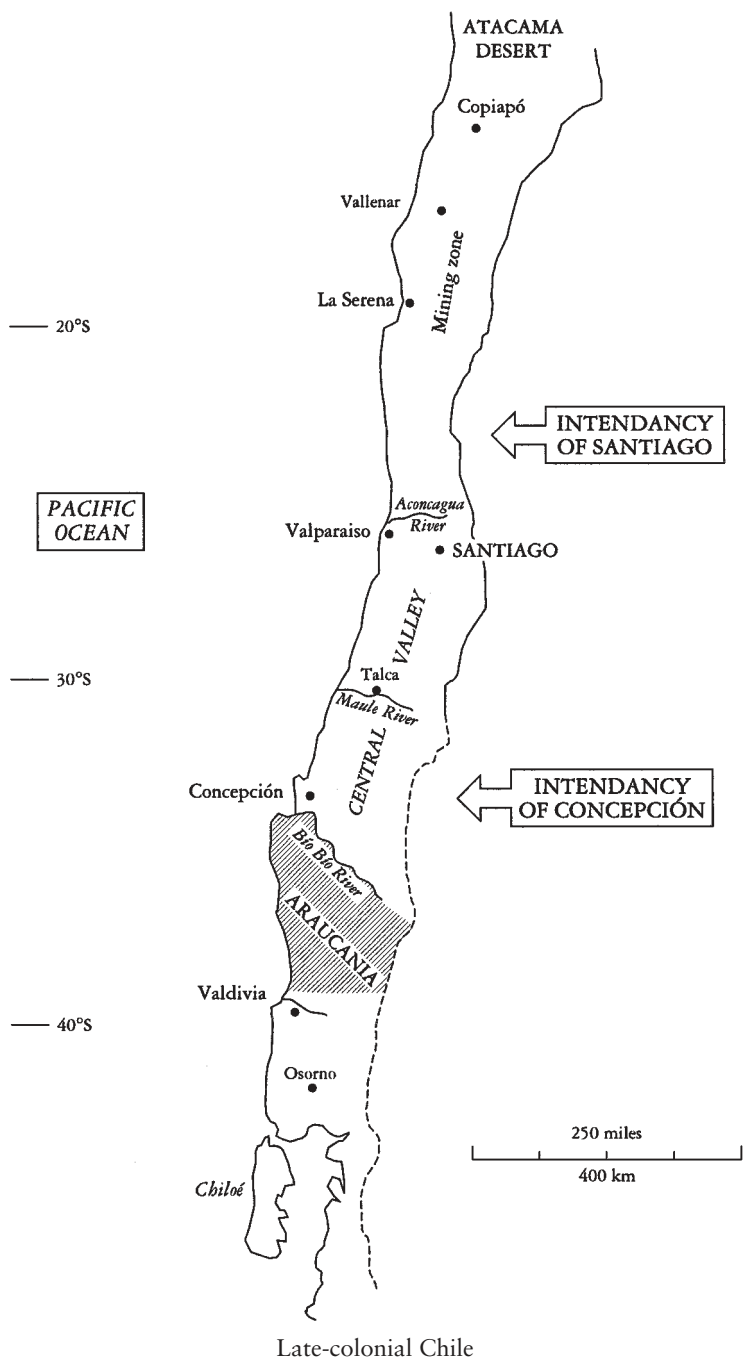
#### DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL SOCIETY

If the Amerindians below the Bío Bío retained their independence, those to the north were altogether less fortunate. We do not know how many made their way across the Frontier to freedom. Those who remained took their place in the developing pattern of colonial society, and it was to be a strictly subordinate place. The conquistadors were the arrogant and confident champions of an empire fast approaching its peak. They did not doubt that the fact of conquest gave them rights over the peoples and lands they had conquered. Valdivia's lieutenants and their successors aspired to a seigneurial way of life patterned on that of Spain. Their Spanishness had given them a preference for urban life: hence the urban nuclei that formed the pattern of Spanish colonization, as everywhere in America, and the importance the invaders gave to founding townships (“cities”) – establishing them with prescribed ceremony, forming the first *cabildos* (municipal councils), and tracing out urban blocks for division among themselves. Santiago, the capital of the new Chilean colony, was founded by Valdivia in just this way on February 12, 1541, at the northern end of the Central Valley, on the then densely forested banks of the Mapocho River, at the foot of a hill the natives called Huelén and the conquerors the Cerro Santa Lucía. The colony's two other main townships were established soon afterward: La Serena (December 1543) some 300 miles to the north, in the semi-desert country of what we now call the Norte Chico, and Concepción (March 1550) in the south, on the shores of Talcahuano Bay, close to the Frontier itself.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Hanisch SJ, ed., *Histórica relación del Reyno de Chile* (Santiago, 1974), p. 101.

Colonial foundations, 1540–1810

7



No less urgent for the conquerors was the mobilization of Amerindian labor. Valdivia, like all conquistadors in America, apportioned natives among his followers in what were known throughout the empire as *encomiendas*: each *encomendero* (holder of an *encomienda*) was, in theory, to civilize and Christianize his natives, in return for (and this was no theory) their tribute or work. Initially, “work” chiefly meant panning gold from the rivers. Respectable amounts of gold were panned (and later mined) in sixteenth-century Chile, but the exhaustion of many deposits (and the loss of others after 1599) forced the settlers to fall back on agriculture and (especially) ranching as their mainstay. This set in motion what we must underline as one of the fundamental processes of Chilean history: the formation of great estates ruled by a landowning elite and worked by a semi-servile rural population. This theme lies at the heart of the growth of Chilean culture and nationality. As Mario Góngora has wisely observed, “the configurations called ‘colonial’ are ... the basic structures that underlie all the happenings of the ‘national’ period.”<sup>3</sup>

The great landed property did not make its appearance in the Central Valley overnight. Its beginnings can no doubt be seen in the land-grants (*mercedes de tierras*) made by Valdivia and his successors. In the mind of the imperial government, there was no connection between a grant of land and the *encomienda*, technically a “grant” of people. In the minds of the conquerors of Chile the distinction may well have been blurred, as *encomiendas* became incorporated into large seigneurial landholdings.

Our picture of these is not by any means clear. What is clear is that the impact of the *encomienda* on the native population, as in other parts of the Spanish empire, was little short of catastrophic. Much more catastrophic, however, was the effect of Old World diseases (against which the natives had no built-up resistance). Indigenous society outside Araucanía rapidly disintegrated. By the end of the sixteenth century, Amerindian numbers were in sharp decline to the north (and also, as far as we can tell, to the south) of the Bío Bío, probably by around four-fifths.

A third factor that affected the fate of the natives in the Spanish colony was miscegenation, the interbreeding of Spaniards and natives, producing the new mestizo component in the population. Given the near-total absence of European women in the early colonial period, such a development was unavoidable. Some conquistadors were positively boastful of

<sup>3</sup> “Vagabundaje y sociedad fronteriza en Chile (siglos XVII a XIX),” *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios Socio-Económicos*, 2 (1968), p. 29.

their efforts on this score. The most picturesque case is that of the larger-than-life Francisco de Aguirre, the conqueror of the Norte Chico (and a large part of what is now northwest Argentina), who fathered scores of children, some fifty of whom he recognized. Aguirre was censured by the Church for his hyperactive sexual conduct and distinctly heterodox opinions. One of the many heretical propositions he was required to recant in a ceremony at La Plata (the modern Sucre, Bolivia) in April 1569 was that “more service is rendered to God in engendering mestizos than sin is incurred in so doing.”<sup>4</sup> Anybody who consults the telephone directory of today’s Norte Chico will find more than a few Aguirres.

The process of miscegenation in Chile occurred over several generations, but its end result was clear well before the end of colonial times. By the close of the eighteenth century few communities of Amerindians survived north of the Bío Bío, and those that did were no longer completely native in either genes or culture. The new and constantly expanding mestizo component was the dominant component of the Chilean population of 700,000 or so in 1800. The evidence of baptismal records shows not only that Amerindian names had largely vanished by then, but that mestizos were to a great extent passing themselves off (or were being passed off) as “Spaniards.” Here, in this remote corner of the caste-conscious Spanish empire, there grew up a relatively homogeneous population in which only one vague ethnic division was of importance: the division between the predominantly mestizo (Spanish-Amerindian) majority and the more definitely European upper class consisting of “Creoles” (Spanish-Americans) and *peninsulares* (Spaniards from Spain). The culture of the upper class was fundamentally Spanish, though inevitably affected in many small ways by the more mixed mestizo culture, where indigenous influence survived in popular sports, superstitions, diet, and vocabulary – all of which played their part in the formation of the Chilean nationality.

The decline in the number of natives available for *encomiendas* led in due course to a variety of alternative methods of mobilizing labor. One was the enslavement of Mapuches captured in the warfare along the Frontier – a practice well underway before King Philip III legalized it in 1608. Slaves from the south were used throughout the seventeenth century (on paper the practice was abolished in 1674). Frontier garri-sons regarded the sale of captured Amerindians as a standard perquisite.

<sup>4</sup> Luis Silva Lezaeta, *El conquistador Francisco de Aguirre* (Santiago, 1953), pp. 376–77.



The Huarpe natives from the *encomiendas* of Cuyo (the sparsely populated region across the Andes which was formally part of Chile until 1778) were also drafted for forced labor and brought across the mountains to the Central Valley. African slavery, much relied on farther north in the Spanish empire, made less of an impression: the colony's poverty precluded its development on any great scale. In the eighteenth century, thousands of slaves passed through Chile on their way from Buenos Aires to Peru, but relatively few stayed. In 1800 there were between 10,000 and 20,000 blacks and mulattoes in the colony: some 5,000 were slaves, many of these house-slaves.

The mainstay of the Chilean economy by the seventeenth century was ranching. Its scale must not be exaggerated. Markets for produce were very limited. Locally, there were the small Frontier garrisons to be supplied – not least with the tough, wiry horses for which Chile was soon noted. A modest intercolonial trade also grew up with the Viceroyalty of Peru. In addition to “opulent Lima,” the impressive viceregal capital, the vital silver-mining city of Potosí acted as an economic magnet or “growth-pole” for much of southern South America. The Potosí miners' insatiable demand for mules was partly met from the Central Valley – the mules sent in long trains to the great annual fairs at Salta. The main Chilean offerings throughout this period, however, were cattlehides (among other things used for shoemaking), *charqui* (jerked beef), and tallow (used mostly for candlemaking and soap). The common description of Chile's seventeenth century as “the tallow century” is not too strong an exaggeration.

It was ranching, above all, that consolidated the settlers' lands into the form of the great estate, the *estancia* as it was usually termed at this early stage. The needs of ranching gave the great estates their natural shape: a section of the Central Valley floor (the core of each property usually was located there), and pastures in the better-watered lands of the coastal range and main Cordillera. While no detailed account of the build-up of the *estancia* yet exists, it is clear that a tendency to concentration was underway by the mid-seventeenth century. It was reinforced soon afterward by the rise of a new Chilean staple, with the development of a wheat trade with Peru.

Wheat-growing in Peru was badly affected by an earthquake in 1687 and by disease thereafter. Once established in the Peruvian market, Chilean wheat (cheaper and of better quality) never lost its popularity. Domestic demand also grew with the expansion of the mestizo population, with its preference for European rather than native food. Chilean

estates, hitherto mostly ranches, now turned to cereal cultivation, and from then on were referred to as *haciendas*. (The common alternative term, *fundo*, came into use only later.) Once again, we should not exaggerate the scale of the wheat trade. In Peru, to be sure, it came to be regarded as vital: “without Chile, Lima would not exist,” wrote a Viceroy in 1736.<sup>5</sup> Even so, production in the middle and late eighteenth century was modest in comparison with the levels of one hundred years later. By nineteenth-century standards, only a relatively small acreage was brought under the plow. Large sections of every estate lay fallow from year to year. Cultivation, however, was sufficient to maintain a reasonable trade and, more important, to give the Central Valley the fundamental social shape it retained until well into the twentieth century.

With the decline of the *encomiendas* (which survived mostly in outlying areas such as the north, or on the island of Chiloé, until abolished in 1791 by Governor Ambrosio O’Higgins), landowners were forced to look elsewhere for reliable labor. During the ranching phase, they often found it useful to allow families of “poor Spaniards” (sometimes veterans) or mestizos to settle on estates as “renters,” in return for services such as watching the herds, guarding against rustlers, and helping with the annual round-up and slaughter. Such short-term contracts (*arriendos* or *préstamos*, as they were called) gradually hardened into the more permanent arrangement whereby the “renters,” in return for their little plots of land and other perquisites, supplied regular labor all year round – an obvious need with the spread of wheat-growing. Opportunities for such people were in any case narrowing. The open, military camaraderie of the decades of conquest was steadily being supplanted by a more consciously hierarchical order in which the best land was already in the hands of the colonial elite. Indeed, the connection between cereal cultivation, miscegenation, and a developing social hierarchy seems inescapable.

The “renters” on the *haciendas* came in time to form a distinctive rural class, becoming known as *inquilinos*. (The specialized Chilean use of the common Spanish term for “tenant” was becoming widespread by the second half of the eighteenth century.) *Inquilino* tenancies in effect became hereditary. With the spread of agriculture, the estate owners, the *hacendados*, placed heavier demands on these tenant-laborers, and their original status was correspondingly diminished. When Charles Darwin

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Diego Barros Arana, *Historia general de Chile*, 16 vols (Santiago, 1884–1902), VI, 74.