

The Argentine British Colony in the Time of Rosas

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AMONG the private papers of Lord Aberdeen, the British Foreign Secretary who became involved in the La Plata intervention in 1845,¹ there is a fairly long memorandum written by an unidentified, permanent resident of Buenos Aires describing the condition and state of mind of the British colony on the eve of that intervention. Despite the anonymity of its author, the document is not without some interest to students of Latin American social and economic history, as it indicates the nature and extent of the British interest in that area in Rosas' time.

The memorandum was sent to Aberdeen by William Gore Ouseley, the anti-Rosas British minister who had been sent to the La Plata region to end the state of hostilities in the Banda Oriental.² Having a limited knowledge of the La Plata, Ouseley requested a number of British residents in Buenos Aires to describe the situation of the British colony for him, and the most informative of these replies he sent to Aberdeen. Ouseley identified the writer as follows:³

Enclosed is a memorandum that I received at this place [Montevideo] from Buenos Ayres. It is written by a man long resident in that capital, and who passes for having been favorably inclined toward the govt. of Genl. Rosas. This memm. is worth reading as containing the opinion of a conscientious unprejudiced man—deeply interested in the results of our proceedings in the River Plate, and in the fate of our countrymen. He is a Scotchman—he requested me not to name him as the author of this memorandum.

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¹ The armed intervention began in August, 1845 and was not concluded until 1850. See John F. Cady, *Foreign Intervention in the Rio de la Plata, 1838-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1929).

² Rosas was supporting Manuel Oribe against Fructuoso Rivera, who was then president of Uruguay. Ouseley was supposed to persuade Rosas to withdraw his troops from Uruguay, to induce both Oribe and Rivera to give up their claims to the presidency, and to help sponsor a new election.

³ *Aberdeen Papers*. British Museum 43127. (Ouseley to Aberdeen, August 13, 1845) Ouseley was interested in learning about the British colony in Argentina because he feared a rupture with Rosas over the political situation in Uruguay was not unlikely.

Ousley went on to explain that Rosas' violent anti-foreign campaign made the British residents in Argentina fearful of disclosing information to their home government, lest word of their activities leak out and they become subject to reprisals. In August, 1845, the campaign of terror was at its height. In the same letter Ouseley mentioned the murder of nine members of a family named Kidd "and 3 or 4, perhaps 5 or 6 others (one of whom a N, Amr. by mistake). . . ."

Fear for the future is the dominant theme of the memorandum, the text of which follows:⁴

The British Section of the Foreign Population of Buenos Ayres is divisible into three classes—Merchants,—Farmers,—Artisans and Labourers.⁵

Merchants:—comprehending capitalists and consignees engaged in the import trade, and in the purchase and preparation of country produce for export to foreign markets—representing a very large amount of the capital employed in the general and local business of this city and province whether managed by foreigners or natives.

Farmers:—including proprietors, the owners of land to the extent of from three to twenty square leagues,⁶ with corresponding stock, and occupants, renters of land, but owners of stock. These are chiefly Scotch and Irish. They are in the province of Buenos Ayres to the distance of Sixty or Seventy Leagues from the City, but the greater part within twenty to thirty leagues of it. Their settlements have been formed during the last fifteen or twenty years and comprise numerous families and individuals.

Artisans and Labourers:—in great numbers, principally in the city, but likewise throughout the whole extent of the country.

Although all have necessarily suffered from the revolutions and civil wars which have afflicted this country in the course of the last twenty years, the second class, from the nature of their occupations, must obviously have been the most immediate sufferers. Still on the whole it is due to truth to state, that notwithstanding the difficult circumstances in which the country has often been placed, the British residents settled in the country have not been undue sufferers, but on the contrary have enjoyed, making allowance for special circumstances, all the privileges and protection to which by Treaty they are entitled.⁷ For the last two or three years, they, in common with the other two classes, have been subjected, if not to loss of life or property, to the constant sense of their insecurity and danger caused by the

⁴ *Ibid.* (Undated memorandum enclosed with the above letter).

⁵ Further information regarding the occupations in Argentina at this time can be found in Sir Woodbine Parish, *Buenos Ayres and the Provinces of the Rio de la Plata* (London: John Murray, 1852), and Miron Burgin, *The Economic Aspects of Argentine Federalism, 1820-1852* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946).

⁶ Meaning probably the *Legua terrestre*, amounting to 4,225 meters. The English land league, equalling 3 statute miles or 5,760 acres, is somewhat smaller. This measure was not commonly used in Great Britain. Due to minor defects in method, the surveys of those days were often not quite accurate, but the largeness of the British holdings is nevertheless apparent.

⁷ Referring to the treaty of friendship and commerce between Britain and Argentina signed on February 2, 1825.

spirit of ill-will and enmity studiously excited among the natives toward foreigners, and by the obstacles purposely thrown in the way of the free enjoyment of their privileges by all possible restrictions and limitations. The tendency of the policy pursued towards them latterly, has decidedly been intolerant, hostile and injurious.

The present crisis, in as far as the British are concerned, is distinct from the dangers to which they have heretofore been exposed. The British are parties—the question at issue has been industriously represented by this Govt. as national, and amounts therefore not simply to a misunderstanding between the Governments, but to a rupture between the countries. In the event therefore of active measures being taken by Her Majesty's forces in the River Plate, in opposition to the will of the Govt. of Buenos Ayres, it becomes a serious consideration to all British residents, how far their persons and property are secure,—especially to that numerous class settled in all directions throughout the country, separated as they are from each other, mingled with the native inhabitants, and beyond the reach of all protection from a naval force. The protection they have heretofore enjoyed affords no assurance that it will be continued,—the circumstances of their situation are changed; they have been protected heretofore when there was no motive to annoy them, and there were many motives to make a display and boast of protecting them;—they now stand in the relation of national enemies—the spirit manifested towards them latterly has been hostile,—the policy pursued towards them latterly has been intolerant, and, as far as compatible with the letter of the existing treaty, injurious. The character of the Government besides furnishes no guarantee for safety. The representations it authorizes or permits to be put forth on its behalf are altogether deceptive and fallacious; it has not hesitated when occasion suggested to have recourse to violence even against the defenceless and undefending, as a political expedient; in the state of absolute subservience, to which the whole population is reduced, to the will of the governing authority, secret instruments are never wanting to execute its most atrocious purpose;—in its total destitution of character, nothing constitutes a security against its exercise of violence, but that in virtue of which itself rules—dread of power.

In these circumstances, and in view of the impending rupture between England and Buenos Ayres, the situation of the British whose property and residence are in the country, becomes peculiarly critical and delicate. If they abide in their homes, they must be the prey of habitual dread, and may be the victims of sudden and secret violence; if they abandon them, they reduce themselves to poverty and destitution; they cannot even remove to town without the risk of serious loss. They have no means of living apart from their herds and flocks; they cannot even live long in the city unprovided for, and least of all is it in their power to remove from the country and go elsewhere. They remain, not because they can remain with confidence and security, but because it is not in their power to remove. It is an aggravation of the evil in this case that they are the best and most respectable of the British, in a moral point of view (of those viz., settled in the country) that would suffer most; for they are the honest, the sober and the industrious who have gradually acquired property. Nor are the parties who are now thus exposed mere adventurers, whom the chances of revolutionary troubles, or hazardous speculations have advanced to temporary consequences. They

were brought to this country by parties to whom they were recommended by their characters; they came here in the strength of the existing treaty and with all the guarantee afforded by a then liberal and patriotic Government. The state of things which now threatens them has arisen altogether subsequent to their domiciliation here. As a proof of the superiority of their character, they maintain their distinctive British habits and institutions, in spite of the many untoward influences to which they are exposed, by their separation from home, and their residence among another people. Scattered widely apart though they are over an extensive surface, they maintain by intercourse with one another the feelings and habits of a home community. They educate their children to the extent they are able in their home principles and manners, and they come together at stated times from a circuit twenty or thirty miles in diameter for the purpose of divine worship. Indeed to a lover of his country and to a friend of humanity, nothing can present a more interesting or cheering spectacle than such meetings of countrymen and christian brethren in their circumstances. In fact, in the Pampas of Buenos Ayres, in virtue of the number of families settled,—the property and kind of property they are possessed of,—the habits & character and institutions they maintain,—& the rapid rate at which they are increasing, the foundations of a large and influential British Community are laid. War between Buenos Ayres and England, and especially protracted war, would in all likelihood, as far as regards this portion of the British, be their virtual annihilation as Britons. They must either be ruined by abandoning the country altogether, or, by remaining, cease from their distinctive peculiarities, and gradually assimilate themselves in manners and ideas to the inhabitants of the country. Let it not be supposed for a moment that this representation is made with the view of opposing an obstacle to the march which Her Maj's Govt. has resolved to pursue in reference to this country, or of suggesting an argument against it. Long expatriated as these families and individuals have been, they still are Britons, and are prepared to endure and suffer much in vindication of their loyalty and their patriotism, and they are especially prepared to do this in a contest which they cannot but hope may terminate favorably at once for the interests of this country at large and their own. War they would not shrink from, with all its horrors and devastations, in the cause of freedom and good government; sacrifices in the cause they would not scruple to make could they see themselves secure against entire sacrifice—could they see any provision for the safety of their families in the meantime, and any prospect of returning to their possessions and peaceful pursuits ultimately. In the dread of approaching hostilities and of the consequent danger to which they might be exposed in the country, many,—particularly women and children—have already come to town. This by interrupting their usual pursuits has of course subjected them to great inconvenience and loss, and they have no means of remaining here long. While in the country they are comparatively rich, in town they are poor. In their present circumstances it is of essential importance to them to be informed on the following points:—

From the state of the differences between England and this country, does actual war seem near or distant? that they may be enabled to decide whether to return to their homes, or to continue where they are.

If not advisable to return speedily, what means or arrangement can be resorted to for their assistance in town?

In the event of war, and the necessity of removing even from the town elsewhere, how are they to be removed? where are they to go? and by what means are they to be maintained?

In the event of being obliged to abandon their property, will they have any claim for remuneration? against whom? and what steps must be taken in the meantime to certify and substantiate their claim?—

Certain facts regarding the British colony supplied by this memorandum, such as the size of the British holdings, and the manner in which some British settlers came to Argentina, throw some light on the social situation in the colony, as does the classification of the various British settlers in general. It appears that the British colonists at this time actually hoped to form eventually a sizable ethnic minority in this region, a minority which intended to remain relatively aloof from the rest of the population. While this hope was never wholly realized,⁸ the policy of aloofness was established quite firmly.

The memorandum also provides an interesting ground upon which diplomatic historians may speculate. In turning over the document to Aberdeen, Ouseley undoubtedly believed it strengthened his case against Rosas, and would encourage the home government to send a strong land force against him, as the writer specifically emphasized the futility of naval operations. Had Ouseley known Lord Aberdeen better, he would not have made this mistake. The document had the opposite influence.

In his instructions to Ouseley, Aberdeen had shown concern regarding the safety of the British colony in Argentina,⁹ and even before receiving this memorandum had expressed his fears on this subject in a letter to Sir Robert Peel.¹⁰ After receipt of the memorandum, Aberdeen wrote Ouseley as follows:¹¹

My only ground for uneasiness arises from the possibility of some outrage being committed against the persons and property of British subjects.

⁸ British immigration into the area was never large, and later in the 19th Century became a mere trickle compared with the wave of incomers from southern Europe. See Mark Jefferson, *Peopling the Argentine Pampa* (American Geographical Society, 1930).

⁹ “. . . at any moment, or in any place, in which the lives of British subjects might be in danger, it will be your duty to call for the Aid of such Force as may be necessary to ensure their prompt and efficient protection.” Quoted in *Aberdeen Papers*, BM 43127. (Ouseley to Aberdeen, July 4, 1846).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, BM 43064. (Aberdeen to Peel, September 25, 1845). The transmission of Ouseley’s letter would have had to have been unusually rapid for Aberdeen to have received it in September.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, BM 43127. (Aberdeen to Ouseley, October 8, 1845).

Rosas is so little scrupulous, his instruments are so blindly devoted to him, that any atrocity may be possible. Any event of this kind would produce a most painful effect in this country, which would not be removed even by the most terrible vengeance we might exact. I hope at all events, that every possible care will be taken to secure the personal safety of our countrymen. Their property must suffer, more or less, in a state such as that in which we find ourselves at B. Ayres, even if actual war should not take place.

Two months later Aberdeen wrote uneasily: "Even at this moment I am not without apprehension respecting the fate of our countrymen,"¹² and, toward the end of December: "He [Rosas] has hitherto behaved well with respect to the personal safety of our countrymen under pretty severe trials, but if he should suddenly adopt any different course, we must then change our own."¹³ Still later, in outlining the peace terms to be offered to Rosas, Aberdeen stressed the need for a general amnesty, no doubt hoping to protect British subjects who had collaborated with the home government.¹⁴

While the correspondence indicates that Aberdeen was worried regarding the possible fate awaiting the British colony in Argentina, and toyed with the idea of strong retaliatory action if they were the victims of atrocities, this concern was not the major factor in causing him to begin to liquidate the intervention early in November.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the memorandum may have played a modest part in turning Aberdeen's thoughts in the direction of a compromise.

The memorandum, in fact, was a very clever propaganda document indeed. In sending it to Aberdeen, Ouseley assumed that the writer was merely describing the condition of the British colony for the information of the home government, but it seems likely that the unidentified author was actually seeking to influence the course of the home government. And, in his desire to do this, he might have been reflecting the attitude of many others in the British colony.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.* (Aberdeen to Ouseley, December 3, 1845).

¹³ *Ibid.* (Aberdeen to Ouseley, December 27, 1845).

¹⁴ See *Ibid.* (Aberdeen to Ouseley, February 4, March 4, April 8, and July 2, 1846). In all of these communications Aberdeen stressed a general amnesty as a *sine qua non* for a settlement with Rosas, and he seems to have been worried about the British subjects in Uruguay as well as those in Argentina. It is interesting to note, however, that some British subjects (who later claimed they had been forced to do so) served with Rosas' forces in opposing Ouseley's expedition up the Paraná River. Eleven such Englishmen were captured. *Ibid.* (Ouseley to Aberdeen, November 30, 1845).

¹⁵ The writer has endeavored to explain Aberdeen's sudden change of attitude in *Lord Aberdeen and the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), pp. 50-51.

¹⁶ On this point the reader might consult Wilfrid Latham, *The States of the River Plate* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866), and Cady, *Foreign Intervention*, cited above. Miron Burgin, in his work cited in footnote 5, concludes

The memorandum leaves several strong impressions—of the high moral character of the colonists (which gave them strong claims to the consideration of the home government), of the utter lack of character of Rosas' government, and of the great danger to the former if the latter were pressed too strongly by Great Britain. While the writer gave assurances of the patriotism of the British colony, the end product of the document was to leave two alternatives open to the British government—an all-out war against Rosas, or a peace policy. A lingering intervention, such as might ensue from a blockade, was held to be fraught with great dangers to the colonists. It is highly doubtful that anyone expected the peace-loving Aberdeen to involve his nation in an all-out war, so the memorandum, in effect, demanded a peace policy.

As we do not know the identity of the writer, we cannot be sure of his real motive in writing the memorandum. However, we do know that Ouseley described him as one who "passes for having been favourably inclined" toward Rosas' government, and we know also from the same source that Rosas was a past master at the art of propaganda.¹⁷ Thus the document might even have been prepared with the

that the blockade hurt the large landowners only temporarily, and that even the merchants did not fare too badly because of it. Those who suffered the most were the small merchants and artisans of the city, farmers in the country districts, the government officials and the laborers. Thus, all classes of British citizens mentioned by the writer of the memorandum were affected by the blockade. Before it was laid, however, the various classes could not have been certain which would bear the brunt of it, and those who suffered most were not necessarily those most opposed to laying it in the first place.

¹⁷ One of the more interesting themes in the Ouseley-Aberdeen correspondence during this period is the propaganda activities of Rosas, whose importance might justify a brief review of Ouseley's observations and charges here. Ouseley was convinced that Mandeville, his predecessor, was virtually an agent of Rosas (Ouseley to Aberdeen, July 23, 1845). In August he noted Rosas' great skill in "hoodwinking" European governments, observing ". . . he has a press in most countries, in Rio, London, Paris, Un. St., etc. etc. at his command," and later added: "It is as difficult as it is in Russia to get at the truth of anything in Buenos Ayres, unfavourable to the government." (Ouseley to Aberdeen, August 13, 1845). Later he emphasized that Rosas' propaganda stirred the people against European imperialism (Ouseley to Aberdeen, September 9, 1845), and charged that Rosas used what we call today the "big lie" technique to cover up his atrocities (Ouseley to Aberdeen, December 22, 1845). When it became apparent that Rosas' propaganda was turning world opinion against the interventionists, Ouseley observed: ". . . I see his usual clever and indefatigable use of the Press in England, France, Germany, Washington, Rio, everywhere, misleading public opinion, creating a general feeling against us & we have no means of replying or counteracting the impression. England cannot afford it—the Gaucho can! This is a culpable indifference to the opinion of the world, when we pay dearly for its consequences." (Ouseley to Aberdeen, January 31, 1846). The amazing success of Rosas' propaganda is indicated in another of Ouseley's observations: ". . . it is with deep regret that I trace in his [Guizot's]

connivance of the dictator. The fact that it condemns his government does not rule out such a possibility, for it was necessary to emphasize Rosas' ruthlessness to secure the desired effect.

Such an interpretation rests on no firmer grounds historically than mere conjecture. Be this as it may, it is clear that Ouseley, whose dearest wish was to overthrow Rosas, sent home a document which had quite the opposite influence, and merely provided an additional reason why Aberdeen should come to terms with the dictator.

language & even that of Govt. & Parliament the exact terms used by Rosas' Agents, which are merely intended to mystify or delay.' He even found propaganda in Aberdeen's own dispatches. (Ouseley to Aberdeen, June 6 and July 4, 1846). The propaganda campaign was so successful that Ouseley finally showed a grudging admiration for it. 'Rosas deserves great credit for his admirable (in his sense) system of mystification & deception in all the questions at issue,' Ouseley wrote on June 28, 1846. And finally he observed: 'It must be admitted, however, that they [Rosas' falsehoods] are continued with a perseverance, talent, and unhappily success, that is truly wonderful, and were it employed in a good cause, would excite admiration.' (Ouseley's Confidential Memorandum, July 4, 1846). All references are from the *Aberdeen Papers*, BM 43127.