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David Rock

# The British in Argentina

## Commerce, Settlers and Power, 1800–2000

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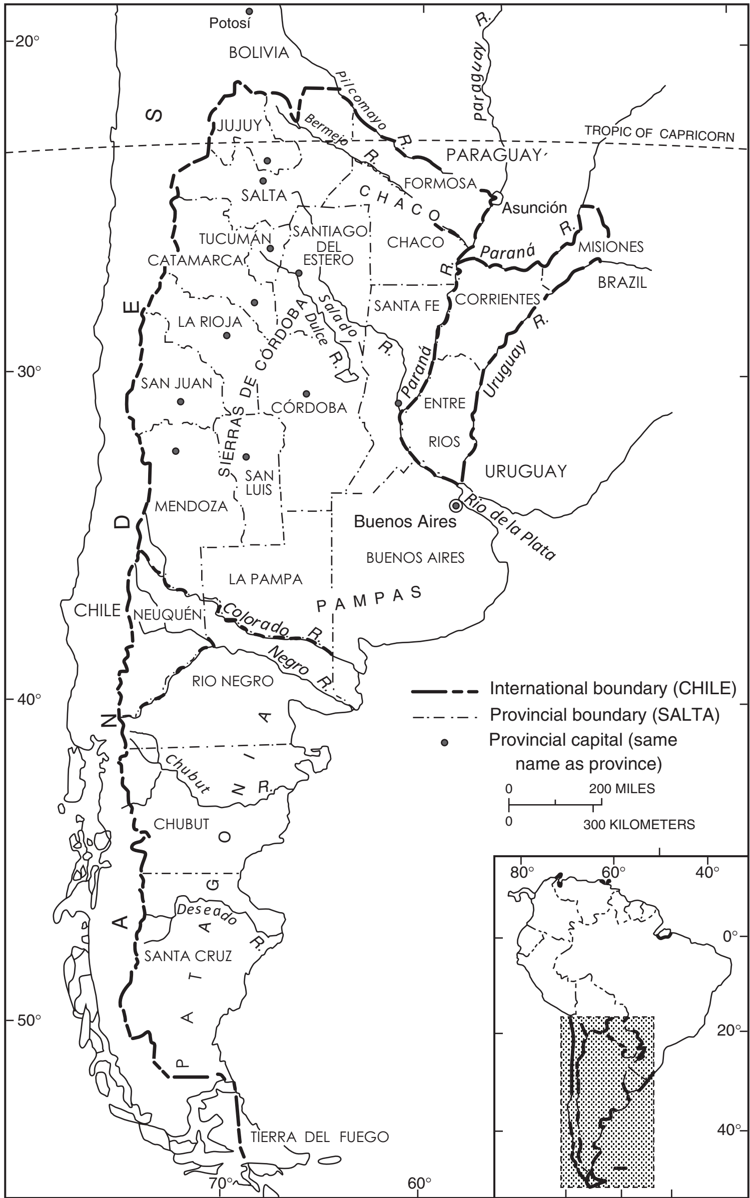
*In memory of C.J.R., 1981–2004*




**Map 1** Argentina: provinces and main physical features

# Preface

Ill-feeling and conflict between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands have darkened memories of their once exceptionally close ties. From the Napoleonic wars into the 1950s, Argentina remained a major focus of British commerce, trade and investment, and British settlement there once climbed higher than anywhere else outside the Dominions and the United States. Led by several great railway interests, British businesses in Argentina included tram and gas firms, water and sewage works, along with meat packers, banks and insurance companies. Each year hundreds of British ships anchored off Buenos Aires on the Rio de la Plata estuary. British shippers, warehousemen and importers occupied prominent positions on the waterfront, while British shopkeepers sold British goods along the city's congested streets and avenues. Anglican and Presbyterian churches, cricket grounds and polo fields flourished in Buenos Aires and among interior towns and rural districts. British and Anglo-Argentine ranchers owned great estancias on the Argentine pampas. Welsh speakers lived (and still do) in Chubut province in Patagonia, while further south ranchers, commonly of Scottish descent transplanted from the Falkland Islands, owned vast sheep farms. When Ireland remained joined with the United Kingdom under the Act of Union, Irish sheep farmers settled in some of the richest counties of the province of Buenos Aires. Small British enclaves in different parts of the country included a few Scots Gaelic speakers in Entre Rios, north of Buenos Aires, and curiosities like the Leach family and their descendants, once of Rochdale, whose men became cricket-playing sugar barons in the far north-west. "Firms carry the mark 'Limited' to such an extent that one has the impression of dealing with a

British colony," observed a local commentator in 1911.[1] Yet Argentina was no colony. One of its most unusual features lay in its development as a great centre of British business, economic power and settlement while remaining an independent republic, free of the panoply of imperial rule.

When the British appeared on the Rio de la Plata in the early nineteenth century, they encountered a country of little apparent consequence, a mere gateway to the silver mines of Peru. In those early days, visitors revelled in galloping across the near-empty pampas. "Away and away again, with a fresh sweet breeze and a rising sun, the most delicious elements that a mortal man could desire," wrote one of them.[2] In the late nineteenth century, Argentina experienced explosive growth, a process in which the British became deeply implicated. The *Standard* of Buenos Aires, long a principal source of Argentine business news, regularly shipped 20,000 copies of its monthly supplement to British investors. Railways, artesian wells and windmills, paddocks, hundreds of miles of barbed wire fencing, pedigree cattle and sheep, and thousands of grain farms filled the landscape worked by tenant farmers, mainly Italians. In parts of rural Buenos Aires, estancia land appreciated to levels as high as anywhere in the world. Attracting hundreds of thousands of European immigrants, Buenos Aires became one of the world's great cities, Parisian in style and atmosphere but Chicagoan in energy. Political change reinforced the transition. Long dominated by petty warlords cannibalising meagre foreign trade revenues, Argentina crossed the threshold into respectable constitutional government. Expansion continued until World War I and in many respects until the Great Depression when instability, near-stagnation and bouts of authoritarian government supervened. As railway building and investment tailed away, the British population declined and the entire British connection weakened. From World War II, Juan Perón, a paladin for many but an arch villain for others, disrupted the liberal society the British helped to construct. By the time of Perón's fall in 1955, their once salient economic presence had shrunk to a negligible level from which it never recovered. The more recent history of the British in Argentina centred on the growth of multinational subsidiaries and, along with similar companies originating elsewhere, their impact on the social and political landscape. As it also

[1] Alberto B. Martínez, "Foreign Capital Investments in Argentina." *Review of the River Plate* 7 June 1918. Reproduced from a pre-war commentary.

[2] Thomas Woodbine Hinchliff. *South American Sketches; or, A Visit to Rio de Janeiro, the Organ Mountains, La Plata and the Paraná*. London: Longman, 1863, 134–135.

marked the progressive integration of the "Anglo" descendants of British settlers, the final period became dominated by the issue of the Falkland Islands.

Outlines and fragments of the story are known, most of all perhaps during its early phases. Contact between the two countries began with two British military assaults against Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807. Their defeat stifled the hopes some entertained of building a British colony in the Plata. Soon afterwards during the independence era, British merchants selling textiles and buying Peruvian silver settled in Buenos Aires. For the next half-century, the antithetical figures of Bernardino Rivadavia, the liberal Unitario, and Juan Manuel de Rosas, the anti-liberal Federalist, one ostensibly pro-British and the other reputedly Anglophobic, dominate the story. The Rivadavia era of the 1820s is replete with colourful, informative accounts of the country by scarcely remembered British travellers and prospectors. Published literature in English of the Rosas period of the 1830s and 1840s includes W.H. Hudson's accounts of the birdlife and his memorable stories of the gauchos of the pampas. Following the destruction of the Federales soon after mid-century, the British re-engaged with Argentina as investors to build railways and many other businesses, and to strengthen the resident British community. Remnants of their presence include Anglican neo-Gothic churches, clubs with cricket squares and polo fields, and schools with names imported from the English Home Counties, whose pupils remain identifiable by their English-style school uniforms. Today, the historical British presence remains visible in commemorations of century-old sports heroes gilded on oak-panelled walls of some of the clubs, and in solemn observances of Armistice Day.

This book includes discussion of why the British first went to the Rio de la Plata and why contact took the form it did without any prolonged attempt at imperial possession. It addresses points of transition in the relationship such as the commercial collapse of the late 1820s. Another commercial breakdown fifty years later in the 1870s concluded in a great surge of British investment and railway construction. While it surveys the writings of travellers and explorers, Charles Darwin the best known among them, the book recalls the lives of almost unknown Irish and Scottish sheep farmers. It assesses the Baring crisis of 1890, a perennially fascinating subject for historians. Discussion of the twentieth century includes an assessment of the factors in British decline, the loss of manufacturing competitiveness, the rise of local Argentine industry and the eventually irresistible expansion of the United States. Later chapters examine Anglo-Argentine

relations during the era of Juan Perón, one of the best-known political leaders of twentieth-century Latin America. An epilogue explores the role of British multinationals in the political breakdown in Argentina of the 1970s, a process culminating in civil war, dictatorship and the closely interrelated war of 1982 over the Falkland Islands.

The book examines the nebulous issue of British power in Argentina. Textbooks cite the Anglo-Argentine relationship as a paradigm of "informal empire," the idea proposing that the British long dominated and profited from Argentina while deliberately sidestepping the burdens and expense of colonial government. Influential figures in Britain advocated such an approach even before the overthrow of Spanish colonial rule in 1810. Soon afterwards, critics of the British in the United States, notably John Quincy Adams, accused the British of practising indirect rule. In such cases, perception or propaganda sometimes fell short of reality. Noted historians have sometimes changed their mind on this elusive, perplexing issue. Long ago, H.S. Ferns embarked on his career with an article, "Britain's Informal Empire in Argentina." A decade later in *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century*, he disavowed the idea, questioning whether "the term imperialism [could] be applied to Anglo-Argentine relations? If we accept the proposition that imperialism embraces the fact of control through the use of political power, then the verdict for Britain is unquestionably 'Not Guilty'."[3] Ubiquitous yet impalpable, "empire" or "imperialism" when applied to Argentina evoke memories of George Bernard Shaw's aphorism, "There is only one religion though there are a hundred versions of it." Today, informal empire suffers from overuse and the protean, catch-all quality it has developed. Uncritical application has reduced its analytical utility.[4]

Concrete issues yield a more complex picture of Britain's quasi-imperial role in South America. The 1806 British military occupation of Buenos Aires for instance cannot be deemed an attack on Argentine sovereignty, which as yet in colonial times did not exist. With sovereignty over the ter-

[3] Salisbury, quoted in H.S. Ferns. *Britain and Argentina in the 19th Century.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960, 487. See also Ferns, "Britain's Informal Empire in Argentina, 1806–1914." *Past and Present*, No. 4, Nov., 1953, 60–75.

[4] A quite recent definition calls imperialism, in vague, unspecific terms, "the complex of intentions and material forces which predisposes states to an incursion, or attempted incursion, into the sovereignty of other states." P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins. *British Imperialism, 1688–2000.* New York: Longman, 1993, 43. The problems lie in terms like "intentions" and "predisposes."

ritory always in dispute, the Falkland Islands controversy can never be decided in favour of one side against the other, since the consent necessary to establish sovereignty can only be achieved politically by negotiation. The Anglo-French intervention in 1845 is conventionally viewed as an egregious case of British imperialism. The matter appears less clear-cut noting that Lord Aberdeen's instructions to his envoy Ouseley forbade any incursion against the sovereign rights of Buenos Aires. At the same time during this period, the local government used a leading British merchant in Buenos Aires as an interlocutor to propose a form of relationship with Britain identical to that of informal empire.

In other contexts, the British wielded power in Argentina subtly and selectively, preferring enticement, persuasion, example and certainly consent to coercion. During the Edwardian era, diplomats and businessmen promoted British interests using sports in part, in which imitation and emulation became a means to elicit deference and compliance. Argentines never became passive, inanimate victims of British domination, however avidly nationalists might argue to the contrary. When Argentina developed into a great artifice of British overseas investment, the material gains were shared. Argentina became the richest country in Latin America and likely the most egalitarian too. If this book seeks to illustrate multiple ways in which the British deployed power in Argentina, it also demonstrates that the Argentines retained extensive freedom of manoeuvre. Welcoming the British when it suited them, they also devised ways to resist them—by maintaining a tight grip on their own monetary system, for example—and thereby protecting their sovereignty. Nearly always open to wider external contact than with Britain alone, Argentina exemplified the great difference between free, independent states and closeted colonial subjects of the British Empire.

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My work began with an invitation by Robert Bickers to contribute a chapter on the British in Argentina to a collected volume on British communities in different parts of the world. The book has a second distant provenance from my contact with eminent historians of an earlier generation during student days at Cambridge University. David Joslin, D.C.M. Platt, Ronald Robinson and John Street became pioneers in this or cognate fields. H.S. Ferns, a non-Cambridge member of the fraternity of senior scholars whom I knew, deserves special mention. His *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* published in 1960 stands above other work in the field. Almost sixty years after Ferns I have followed him with a new outlook and a longer time span, using many sources unavailable to him at the time he was writing. Throughout my career, ties and friendships with historians in Argentina led by Ezequiel Gallo and Tulio Halperín Donghi provided another major source of support and inspiration.

I prefer older usages when referring to Argentina and its people. Thus *Argentines* live in the country subject to the *Argentine* government. The term "River Plate" has largely fallen into disuse; "Rio de la Plata" replaces it. I often refer to the people of British descent in Argentina as Anglos as an abridged alternative to Anglo-Argentines.

I dedicate my book to Rosalind, my companion in many adventures in Argentina that began in 1968 as we sailed on the SS Arlanza from Tilbury to Buenos Aires.

Wetheringsett, Suffolk.

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