

DEBORAH BESSEGHINI

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN CONFLICT
IN THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD: A STRUGGLE
FOR INFLUENCE OVER REVOLUTIONARY SOUTH
AMERICA (1812-1814)

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SYMPOSIUM:
NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF THE ATLANTIC,
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THE ANGLO-AMERICAN CONFLICT
IN THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD:
A STRUGGLE FOR INFLUENCE
OVER REVOLUTIONARY SOUTH AMERICA (1812-1814)

DEBORAH BESSEGHINI *

ABSTRACT

Research interpreting the collapse of the transatlantic empires as a global conflict fostered by inter-imperial rivalries – an age of ‘imperial’ revolutions – has contributed much in understanding the ‘Atlantic’ reconfiguration of two centuries ago. This reconfiguration is characterized by civil wars within the various empires, part of a general conflict between tradition and revolution, between supporters of the old empires and their opponents. Such interpretation fits both the Hispano-American independences and the concomitant Anglo-American War of 1812, the so-called Second War of Independence. This essay intends to show some points of contact between these two civil conflicts in the global war. It analyses the repercussions the War of 1812 had on conflicts between ‘loyalists’ and ‘independentists’ in South America, and formal and informal aspects of the struggle between Britain and the United States for influence over the area – how their ‘imperial’ nets expanded informally on land and sea through the use of agents as consuls, merchants and sailors, active largely between Río de la Plata and Chile. The American Pacific coast acquires a new centrality here, in the analysis of U.S. policy in Hispanic America and in the geography of the Atlantic reconfiguration, illuminating neglected details in the ‘geopolitics of Latin-American independence’.

Keywords: Informal Imperialism; Spanish American Revolutions; Pacific; War of 1812, Western Question.
JEL codes: N400; N410; N460.

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1. TWO 'CIVIL WARS' AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE ATLANTIC RECONFIGURATION

Hispanic-American Independences are no longer portrayed as nascent nations struggling to free themselves from the oppressive yoke of the motherland after the empire's administration had been reorganized to intensify their exploitation, in a kind of "second conquest" (Lynch 1973: 7). For the past thirty years, instead, this rupture has been analysed largely in the light of the profound crisis of the Hispanic monarchy, provoked by the abrupt Bourbon abdications induced by Napoleon in 1808 and by the ensuing failed attempt to create a modern 'imperial' nation in the context of anti-French resistance. Ever since François-Xavier Guerra's work (1992), the scheme of pitting Creoles and Spaniards against each other as if they were distinct nations (oppressor vs. oppressed) has been superseded. Jaime Rodríguez in particular has suggested that we see the independences as a more complex civil war in the midst of a vast Hispanic world in transformation (1998). Clément Thibaud, Federica Morelli and Geneviève Verdo (2009) are among those who have analysed independences in relation to research into political and constitutional solutions to the upheaval in the Hispanic world. Jeremy Adelman has defined the internal struggles within the Atlantic empires and ex-empires in the context of the decisive stages of their conflict as an "age of imperial revolutions": the Hispanic-American independences would constitute "a civil war contained within and unleashed by a broader, global conflagration" (2008: 328).

The Napoleonic Wars represented the last phase of the so-called 'Second Hundred Years War' (1688-1815) between France and England, another crucial episode of which had already destroyed the old British colonial Empire. The American Revolutionary War allowed France, allied with the rebel colonies, the chance to counterbalance the defeat suffered to Britain during the Seven Years War, which had cost France most of her own empire. Financial difficulties resulting from her intervention in America were among the causes of the revolutionary explosion, which in turn provoked the final conflict with Britain. The commercial war between France and Britain, which damaged neutral powers and involved the Hispanic-American colonies as well, was one of the causes of what has been defined as 'the Second War of Independence' of the United States. Even in the case of the Anglo-US war of 1812, the idea of conflict between nations has been replaced, in the work of Alan Taylor for example (2010), by the idea of civil war between remnants of the old British Empire, between republicans and loyalists in both Canada and the United States. In this context of Atlantic empires in decay, therefore, we have at least two 'civil' wars triggered by a global war for hegemony. In both cases these were wars between support-

ers of the old empires and their opponents. The dynamics of these internal conflicts should now be seen as stemming from a much larger reconfiguration of empires during the Age of Revolutions.

This research is part of a larger attempt at moving beyond interpretations that see in the empires of the nineteenth century an involution of the 'liberal' idea of nation which arose at the beginning of the century.¹ Nineteenth-century globalisation has instead deep 'imperial' roots, traceable to the colonial empire of the *ancien régime*, but it drew substance from a new and 'informal' type of empire (Robinson and Gallagher 1953).² From the first years of the century, this type of empire took on the semblance of a network – potentially global – of personal, political and economic connections articulated according to particular "rules of the game".³ Products of mutual negotiations, these rules were slowly established, thanks to what I call the 'structuring influence' of new or renewed imperial centers in territories that were formally independent (Besseghini 2019). Competing imperial systems, solidified by empirical relations on the ground, were able to expand due to the very force of their competition, often 'defensive', over this or that territory, through reticular connections, to the point of becoming even more deeply conjoined.

The scope of this essay is to bring to light points of contact, interplay and superimposition between these two areas – the Hispanic and the Anglo-Saxon – in the geography of the Atlantic World. Each area is in itself a global network of relations, woven around 'imperial' bases, rather than enclosed within precise territorial boundaries. We will discover connections between two crucial episodes in the crisis of European 'colonial' empires in America. We will analyse some of the effects that the War of 1812 – a transatlantic war between loyalists and independentists, but also a war between two 'new empires' – had on the conflicts between loyalists and independentists in South America. At the same time, we will analyse some of the effects that the crisis of the Spanish empire had on the formation of this new type of empire, regarding both the quasi 'neo-colonial pact' that Britain would have established in Hispanic America and the embryo of U.S. ambitions of hemispheric hegemony – an hegemony sometimes perceived as moral guidance in a free independent world, which is not in contradiction with an informal idea of empire.⁴ Emphasis will be placed on

¹ See, for example, HOBSON 1902: 4.

² On empires and globalization: HOPKINS 2018: 21-30.

³ On the use of this concept as related to 'Informal imperialism', see: HOPKINS 1994.

⁴ On Pan Americanism and imperialism: SEXTON 2011: 73-84. On 'hemisphericism': MARIANO 2013: 52-65. On hegemony and empire: HOPKINS 2018: 30-32. I don't attribute the word

a few aspects of the formal and informal initiatives of Britain and the United States in South America, understandable as a series of defensive moves against each other on land and sea – and how such initiatives enabled them to establish a certain local influence, informally expanding their ‘imperial’ nets through the use of agents as consuls, merchants and sailors, active mostly between Río de la Plata and Chile. Our geographic area will include the Pacific coast of the Americas. The geographies of the Atlantic World are defined, indeed, by the historic relations among the continents along its shores, but expand themselves as far as such relations have a significant role, in a kind of net, casting its lines to catch all the points involved, both in the Pacific and elsewhere.

As Rafe Blaufarb maintained in his article “The Western Question” (the title reaffirming the nineteenth-century idea that competition between powers over the spoils of the Ottoman empire, the ‘Eastern question’, had its twin in Latin America),⁵ historiography has somewhat underestimated the international dimension of the struggles for independence in the Hispanic world, concentrating rather on the empire’s internal dimension. The two areas are interwoven, however, as well as the trajectories of the actors moving in them: “Just as the Eastern Question had its Western forerunner, the Great Game of central Asia had its earlier, Atlantic equivalent” (Blaufarb 2007: 761) – ‘Atlantic’ in this larger sense. The collapse of the Spanish monarchy created a vacuum in the Americas that no country wanted another to fill. During the 1810s the Hispano-American possessions, long coveted by Anglo-Saxons on both sides of the Atlantic for their mines and strategic control of the oceans, became a terrain of rivalry for the nascent United States – as interested neighbors – and England, queen of the oceans.

‘hegemony’ with a meaning opposed to ‘empire’, especially in relation to the new type of empire that I define as characterising the modern world. It seems to me, in fact, that Hopkins’ idea that “hegemony is leadership, not rulership” (and that “Britain built an empire; the U.S. sought hegemony”) is more confusing than clarifying in regard to the nexus between imperialism and globalisation. Even those that Hopkins defines as ‘hegemons’, in fact, exert what I define as a ‘structuring influence’ – in other words, they fix the “rules of the game that other states are expected to follow” (HOPKINS 2018: 31). This is made clear by Hopkins himself, who on this point follows up what he had already written in an influential 1994 article. It is very difficult, almost impossible, in conclusion, to define to what extent a ‘leader’ is, after all, a ‘ruler’. Opposing ‘hegemony’ to ‘empire’ seems to me, therefore, a step backward, when compared to Hopkins’ previous definition of ‘imperialism’ (1994) and to Robinson and Gallagher’s idea of an “informal empire” (1953), which derived precisely from the example of the United States (BESSEGHINI 2019: 61). Moreover, Hopkins’ idea that the United States were still subject to British influence and expansion until 1865, although shareable in many aspects, is difficult to understand from the point of view of the diplomatic archives on Hispanic America (especially on Mexico) of the period between 1820 and 1870, in which Britain and France’s fears of U.S. ‘informal imperialism’ in Latin America clearly emerge (see also: SHAWCROSS 2018).

⁵ SHAWCROSS 2018: 157.

Conjunctions between the War of 1812 and what was happening in the rest of the Americas are still largely unexplored, even in reconstructions of the Anglo-U.S. war as part of the global conflict between France and England (e.g. Black 2009). This long Civil War of the British Empire, which began with the American Revolution and was still present under the surface, in fact, burst into the open once again during the Napoleonic Wars, for reasons also linked to the Franco-Spanish alliance of 1796. Attacks on shipping by the British Navy led Madrid to open its Hispano-American commerce to neutral countries, the United States in particular. Also thanks to remaining personal and commercial networks from Britain's old Atlantic empire (including ties between British and US firms), this opening enabled indirect British commerce with Hispanic America which, by means of 'neutral circuits', was able to steer silver to Britain and the British Treasury (e.g. Pearce 2007: 190-229, esp. 195). The growing strength of the U.S. merchant marine, however, represented a threat to British commercial and strategic interests in the Atlantic. Suspicions of a possible synergy between the United States and France would have seemed partially confirmed, at least from a British point of view, by the 'Jefferson' embargo of December 1807, which could have been seen as a move coordinated with Napoleon's simultaneous Decree of Milan, excluding Britain from neutral commerce (Lambert 2012: 5-26 esp. 19-20). The British confiscated U.S. vessels under the 'rule of 1756' (Britain's enemies could not escape naval attacks by entrusting their commerce to Neutrals, when this commerce did not exist in peace), forcing their sailors into British service – a major cause of the Anglo-U.S. War.

This article intends to demonstrate how the War of 1812 and the tensions that preceded it transformed discords still present on the ground of the old British colonial Empire into a vector of new inter-imperial rivalries. It aims to explain how public and private interests already in conflict were able to take on imperial relevance in this long undercurrent of 'civil war' and how these interests were propelled into the disintegrating spaces of the Spanish empire, particularly on the Pacific coast and in the Southern Cone. We are interested in the processes that led to conflict between the growing reticular structures of new empires in areas where the crisis set off by the Bourbon abdications of 1808 either caused or accentuated a power vacuum, burdening both official and unofficial agents of the imperial centers with the responsibility of defending strategic interests on the ground. We shall show how the 1812 War represented an acceleration, both of external interventions in South America and of a rivalry important in the years to come, by illustrating two cases in which fragments of the British imperial world were able to penetrate Hispano-American spaces so far as to intersect with the strategies of the political decision makers. We shall see

how this contributed to defining the post-Napoleonic equilibrium which stabilized the region's independence from Spain as irreversible.

2. RIVALRY AMONG FUR MERCHANTS ON THE COLUMBIA RIVER AND THE MEDIATION OF A BRITISH CAPTAIN IN CHILE

In 1792, Robert Gray, a New England trader, discovered the mouth of the Columbia River while sailing along the North-American Pacific coast. This was a couple of weeks after the famous British Navy Captain, George Vancouver, who had been charged with finding a North-West passage and receiving the contested territory of Nootka Sound from the Spanish (a significant admission of weakness on the part of Madrid on the shores of the former 'Spanish Lake', i.e. the Pacific), had overlooked it (Merk 1950: 583-585). That moment, which somehow gave the United States greater rights to the territory, added to the transformation of an intra-imperial 'civil war' into an inter-imperial competition between Britain and the United States in an area where Spanish power was at its end.

British and U.S. initiatives were seamless. The Canadian North West Company sent a mission to explore the Columbia's course, reaching its mouth in 1811, where Fort Astoria, primary trading post of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company and the first U.S. colony on the Pacific, had recently been founded. Astor was an important businessman, involved in global trade from China to South America. With this colony he intended to control the fur commerce with Canton, strategic for the United States which, apart from Hispano-American silver, had little to offer the Chinese, contrary to England with her Indian cotton and opium. Astor also wanted to populate the area with U.S. settlers. As Thomas Jefferson emphatically wrote in an 1813 letter to Astor, it would become "a germ of a great, free and independent empire" (596). For the moment, though, the empire was largely being built by Canadian pioneers who, unhappy with their treatment by the North West Company, preferred working for Astor (Ronda 1986: 35). The Canadian company was also planning to set up a transpacific fur trade with China, to barter for dollars to take to Britain, thus taking advantage of a possible favorable exchange rate.⁶ From 1811 on, it sought an agreement with the East India Company for this purpose, without success (Lloyd Keith 2008: 569-570). At the beginning of that year Astor shared part of his fur business with the North West Company; the pact did not include the part

⁶ At the time Spanish dollars arrived in China chiefly through the United States and were broadly used (IRIGOIN 2009: 210-211; 233-234).

west of the Rocky Mountains though – here Astor intended to exclude the Canadians (Wallace 1934: 239-245, 266-268; Heager 1991: 128, 137-148).

The directors of the North West Company tried to fight back. As early as 1810 they asked the British government for a warship to attack Fort Astoria and a commercial monopoly on the western coast of North America. At the time, however, London was reluctant to add any pretext to her disputes with the United States. She only replied to these requests after the 1812 conflict broke out (Ormsby 1958: 39-42). The war gave the Canadians the opportunity to upset the balance of power with Astor. It is possible, as sometimes happened on the part of Whitehall, that an informal response, granting a substantial go-ahead in case of war, had already arrived. In fact, as soon as news of the war reached the company's Fort William station, partners at the annual meeting decided to send the mercantile *Isaac Todd* to capture Fort Astoria. John McDonald and Donald McTavish travelled to England where they doubled the ship's artillery and obtained a limited license from the East India Company (they could sell furs to China but not import coin to England). The Admiralty assigned a warship to the mission, something not to be underestimated in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars (Masson 1890: 42-45; Wallace 1934: 271-272; Lloyd Keith 2008: 568-573). This was the *Phoebe*, captained by James Hillyar, whose orders were "to totally annihilate any settlement which the American may have formed either on the Columbia river or on the neighbouring coast".⁷ The sailors were thus offered a rich prize (573). London now evinced explicit interest in the North American Pacific coast and fur trade with Asia, as a means to first occupy and later claim North American territories. The episode represented the beginning of the long Anglo-American dispute over Oregon. A rivalry among businessmen had, in the context of the War of 1812, been transformed into a question of imperial interest.

With the outbreak of the war, the British had blockaded U.S. commerce in Canton (Lambert 2012: 253). Although Astor's interests were damaged in this and in many other ways, he generously financed the U.S. war effort. In effect, as soon as he heard of the *Isaac Todd*'s mission from his London informers, he asked the U.S. government to protect Fort Astoria, but numerous plans to send warships had to be scuttled (Heager 1991: 150-152; 172-175; Lloyd Keith 2008: 574-575). Yet, soon after the *Isaac Todd* left the port of Quebec, the USS *Essex* was sent to help the famous USS *Constitution* disrupt British trade in the South Atlantic. After the latter withdrew, the *Essex* rounded Cape Horn and entered the Pacific. David Porter, the ship's captain, had previously sent the government plans to counteract

⁷ Admiralty to Hillyar, 1 March 1813, quoted in LAMBERT 2012: 253.

British interests in the Pacific and Asia (Daughan 2013: Chapter 7). The *Essex's* motto, "free trade and sailors' rights", recalled the reasons behind the War of 1812, from the U.S. point of view.

Once Hillyar and the men of the North West Company reached Rio de Janeiro, Manley Dixon, the new commander-in-chief of the British naval station established when the Portuguese court was transferred five years earlier (after Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula), ordered the warships *Cherub* and *Racoon* to escort the *Isaac Todd*. The former had been sent by the Admiralty to the Southern Pacific, but a lack of forces had kept them in service off the coast of Brazil. In early 1813 they had gone briefly "in search of the *Essex*" (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 86, 92-93). It has been suggested that escorting the *Isaac Todd* with other warships and sending only one ship to Fort Astoria, while the others kept the *Essex* at bay, may have been part of the Admiralty's secret orders to Hillyar, which he opened once he had entered the Pacific and of which Dixon was informed. It seems, then, that the initiative was not, or at least not entirely, Dixon's (Lloyd Keith 2008: 578; Masson 1890: 45-48). After rounding Cape Horn, in fact, Hillyar, together with the *Phoebe* and the *Cherub*, stalked the *Essex* throughout the Pacific – an episode that inspired Patrick O'Brien's novel *The Far Side of the World*, and the movie *Master and Commander*. Aboard the *Racoon* were North West Company men heading toward Fort Astoria. The fort would later be sold by Astor's employees to men from the North West Company arriving from the interior on a complementary mission, decided at the Fort William meeting. Only afterward would the *Racoon's* officers take formal possession of it in the name of Britain and in the hope of the promised prize. All traces of the *Isaac Todd* were lost around Cape Horn but the *Racoon* later crossed paths with her in San Francisco, from where she would sail on to Fort George (the new name of Fort Astoria) and Canton (Lloyd Keith 2008: 579-588).⁸

Hillyar's duty in the Pacific was now to protect the West Coast mission from the *Essex* in particular. His more general objective, however, was to protect British interests in the Pacific in light of changes wrought both by the War of 1812 and by the crisis of the Spanish Empire. When he left Brazil, it was known that the *Essex* had arrived in Peru, where Porter had quarreled with the Viceroy over the question of Spanish privateer attacks on U.S. whaling ships, something he saw as contradicting Spanish neutrality during the 1812 War (Hughes 2016: Chapter 4).⁹ Conversely, Dixon commanded Hillyar

⁸ See also: Luis Argüello to José J. Arrillaga, San Francisco, 31 Jan. 1814, quoted in: "Spanish documents relative to the voyage of the *Racoon*", *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 18 (2), 1938: 186.

⁹ The National Archives, UK (hereafter TNA) *Records of the Admiralty, Naval Forces etc.* (hereafter ADM) 1/21 *Intelligence received on 3th June 1813 from Captain Heywood*.

to cultivate the warmest relations with the Spanish allies, also in order to repossess the ships the latter had impounded with accusations of smuggling.¹⁰

It was the British Ambassador to the Portuguese court in Brazil, Lord Strangford, who asked Dixon to add this order, in reference to the ships he himself had sent to Chile to buy wheat for Wellington's army in Spain. The Viceroy held that this was not really an initiative of Spain's ally, the British government, but was rather a commercial speculation of Strangford's.¹¹ In any case, it was financed with public funds. This emerges from an official note on the British Treasury's liquidation of the expenses for thirty-one missions to purchase wheat carried out in Brazil, Buenos Aires and Chile under Strangford's supervision (with a value of about £176.000).¹² The United States had built excellent relations with Chilean 'independentists' and this – it was thought – could have favoured Hillyar in his negotiations with the Viceroy of Peru, their enemy, in the context of the War of 1812. Public and private interests were inextricably linked.

Soon after the May Revolution of 1810, the Madison administration had appointed Joel Poinsett as commercial agent and later consul-general to Buenos Aires and Chile, with the instruction to spread the idea that "in the event of a political separation from the parent country [...] it will coincide with the sentiments and policy of the United States to promote the more friendly relations [...] between the inhabitants of this hemisphere" (Manning 1925: 6-7). Although the United States were formally neutral between pro-French and anti-French Spain after the abdications of the Bourbons induced by Napoleon, as well as between the Cádiz anti-French government and Spanish colonies now autonomous in the name of the Bourbon king, Poinsett was convinced that if the colonies formally declared their independence while Britain was allied with Cádiz against France, U.S. influence would replace that of the British in Hispanic America. In Buenos Aires he fostered suspicions about the traditional alliance between England and Portugal, and about the latter's old ambitions on Río de la Plata from Brazil. Fearing that the British were negotiating commercial privileges similar to those they had just obtained in Brazil, Poinsett attempted to negotiate new commercial regulations himself but, by his own account, the British opposed the plan.¹³

¹⁰ TNA ADM, Dixon to Hillyar, Rio de Janeiro, 1 and 5 July 1813.

¹¹ TNA ADM 1/21, Strangford to Dixon, Rio de Janeiro, 3 July 1813.

¹² TNA, *Records of the Auditors of the Imprest etc.* [hereafter AO] 1/571/469. In a letter to the Viceroy of Peru, dated Lima, 9 Dec. 1813 (ADM 1/1948), Hillyar stated that one of these ships, the U.S. *Borishka*, "freighted solely and exclusively on the risque and account of the Britannic Majesty's Government".

¹³ PARTON 1934: 15-19, 22; TNA, *Foreign Office* [hereafter FO] 72/157, Staples to Castlere-

In December of 1811, Poinsett moved to Chile, opening his own home to the committee in charge of drafting the Constitution of the autonomous 'state'. He interfered in party conflicts, supporting the faction of Miguel José Carrera, pressing and even fighting for independence during the first attack from Lima in 1813. His influence in Chile was one of the concerns of British officials during the War of 1812. Captain William Bowles, of the new British naval presidium on the River Plate, wrote to London: "The Carreras are entirely guided by the American agent Poinsett, who may be considered as much in the interests of France as America" (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 113).¹⁴ Poinsett justified these actions against Spain, both considering them as protection of U.S. property and denouncing a convergence between Spain and Britain against the United States in the Pacific.¹⁵ He was referring to the combined privateer action of the British *Nimrod* and the Spanish *Nereyda*, but also to a broader informal convergence against U.S. influence in the area (Parton 1934: 30-32, 38; Daughan 2013: Chapter 11).

The *Essex* sailed into Valparaíso on 15 March 1813 and was welcomed by the autonomous Carrera government as the saviour of the port from the Viceroy of Peru's corsairs (Hughes 2016: Chapter 4). In a short time, Porter had captured so many British whalers in the Pacific that he had trouble managing both the booty and the prisoners, part of whom were released 'on parole' in Ecuador. In July, officers of the South American British squadron were alarmed to hear of the attempt by one of Porter's captains to sell some captured British vessels in Valparaíso with the *placet* of the local government. Captain Bowles protested vehemently to the Chilean government – theoretically neutral during the Anglo-U.S. war (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 113).

The first reports of the *Essex*' arrival in Valparaíso were sent to Buenos Aires by partners of Brown, Watson & Co., the company acting for Strangford in buying Chilean wheat. Two of the Brown & Watson's ships had been confiscated in the Pacific because they lacked Spanish licenses: the U.S. *Borishka* and the Portuguese *Fama*.¹⁶ In Lima, Hillyar undertook negotia-

agh, London, 30 July, 7 Aug. 1812; ADM 1/1555, Captain William Bowles to John Wilson Croker [hereafter: Bowles to Croker], *Aquilon*, off Buenos Aires, 3 Aug. 1813.

¹⁴ TNA ADM 1/1556, Bowles to Croker, *Aquilon*, off Buenos Aires, 9 Nov. 1813.

¹⁵ On all these aspects of Poinsett's policy, see: PARTON 1934: 25-42 (on Madison's overall approval: 42); NEUMANN 1947: 209-210; GRAHAM and HUMPHREYS 1962: 113-117; COLLIER 1967: 97-98, 124, 307.

¹⁶ TNA AO 1/571/469. U.S. ships were used by Strangford in order to avoid U.S. attacks. On information received from Brown and Watson: ADM 1/21 *Copy of two extract of a letter from Messrs Brown & Watson, agents at Valparaíso*, dated 8th April 1813.

tions with the Viceroy for the release of British ships and property, but the official in charge replied that this decision could only be taken in Cádiz.¹⁷ And yet, a sum of 3550 pounds in coins “shipped aboard the *Borishka*” was handed over to the company’s agent in Chile.¹⁸ This amount roughly corresponds to the 15,000 dollars confiscated in Peru which Thomas Crompton, a merchant involved in the business, mentioned in a letter.¹⁹ Crompton then sailed for Valparaíso – when Hillyar intended to capture the *Essex* – from Lima on Hillyar’s ship with large quantities of coins, perhaps the sum provided by Strangford for the Chilean mission (Hughes 2016: Chapter 11). It is possible, therefore, to hypothesize that the confiscated coins may have been informally recuperated by the British.

In general, the atmosphere of the mission was quite friendly, probably even more than had been expected. The Viceroy, indeed, took advantage of the presence of a warship from a country neutral in the dispute between Spain and its colonies, and an ally in the European war (a guarantee which the United States could not provide), to open negotiations with local authorities in rebel Chile (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 146). Hillyar could appear as the perfect mediator, after news of the decline of Carrera’s prestige arrived in Lima.²⁰ For once, the British mediation between Spain and its colonies, which London had been proposing in vain to its Spanish allies, had somehow materialised.

3. THE U.S. THREAT TO CAPE HORN AND THE BRITISH INITIATIVE IN THE RIVER PLATE

The presence in South American waters of the *Essex* represented a threat to some aspects of British global strategies during the Napoleonic Wars. These included the transport of Hispano-American silver to Europe and of wheat to the Iberian Peninsula (and Wellington’s army). U.S. initiatives endangered British influence in autonomous Hispanic America, from which Britain obtained gold and silver in exchange for goods and weapons,

¹⁷ TNA ADM 1/22 José Pascual de Vivero to Hillyar, Lima, 17 Dec. 1813. On the ship *Fama* in Chile, see: Archivo General de la Nación 1941. *Correspondencia de Lord Strangford y de la Estación Naval Británica en el Río de la Plata con el Gobierno de Buenos Aires, 1810-1822*, Buenos Aires: Guillermo Kraft: 127-131, 147-158.

¹⁸ TNA AO 1/571/469.

¹⁹ TNA ADM 1/21, *Extract of a letter from Mr. T. Crompton dated Lima 16 Feb. 1813*. Later Hillyar wrote to Viceroy Abascal that the 15,000 dollars “were put on board by the British Minister at the Court of Brazil [Strangford] to purchase the abovementioned cargo [of Chilean grain]”. See ADM 1/22, Hillyar to the Viceroy of Peru, Lima, 9 Dec. 1813.

²⁰ *Gaceta del Gobierno de Lima*, 25 Dec. 1813.

just when she had the most need of precious metals in order to confront both the war and a shortage in the Bank of England's reserves. Even British whaling in the Pacific, guaranteeing a British presence in the area, was threatened by the *Essex*.

By the end of the war more than a thousand British ships had been captured or destroyed by the Americans (Black 2009). Most of these were merchant ships or whalers attacked by privateers. Some battles among warships did take place, however, such as the one in which the HMS *Java* was defeated by the USS *Constitution* off the coast of Brazil on 29 December 1812. The battle between the *Essex* and the *Phoebe* was much more than just a rematch.

When the 1812 War broke out, the British South American naval station in Rio de Janeiro was unprepared to stand up to the daring of the U.S. sea captains. It was often impossible for warships, loaded with coins and bullions accumulated by the British through commerce in Brazil and Río de la Plata, to leave port frequently enough, because of U.S. moves. This caused serious damage to British merchants, who were sometimes forced to wait long periods before being able to send the returns of their commerce to London in relative safety from U.S. attacks. For some time, British businessmen had been calling for the establishment of a steadier naval presence on the River Plate and later of "direct naval communications with England by ships of war".²¹ The Admiralty reacted to this situation chiefly after Napoleon's defeat in Russia. With greater forces now available, reinforcements were sent to the Americas – and to the River Plate under the command of Captain Bowles.

British direct commerce with Buenos Aires had unofficially been opened since the arrival of news concerning the 1808 alliance between anti-French Spain and Britain. As Poinsett complained, some *de facto* privileges for British merchants did exist in Buenos Aires after the May Revolution (Whitaker 1964: 72-74). The British Admiral in Brazil and the Ambassador in Rio de Janeiro acted as political-military leaders of the anti-French alliance in South America, thus giving the local representatives of British commerce ample contractual power. At that time, however, London was seeking to convince the Spanish imperial government of Cádiz to open fully direct British trade with *all* of Hispanic America, in order to recover silver reserves in compensation for Britain's war effort in Spain. Spanish reticence, along with communications arriving in Buenos Aires on the eve of the revolution, fostered British suspicions that the Cádiz government would have preferred to sur-

²¹ TNA ADM 1/21, British merchants to Dixon, Buenos Aires, 8 July 1813; GRAHAM and HUMPHREYS 1962: 78-80; 84-92.

render to France, rather than partially lose formal commercial control over the colonies.²²

In 1811, Britain had unsuccessfully proposed herself as mediator in the conflict between Cádiz and part of Hispanic America, asking official sanction for her already existing trade with the colonies. Initially Britain had even asked Spain for the *exequatour* for her appointed consul in the River Plate, Robert Staples, who was a distant relative of Viscount Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary between 1812 and 1822.²³ From Spain's point of view, however, the rules of commerce had not changed and even an exceptional condition, such as that of the military alliance, hardly warranted the presence of a formally recognized British consul. The anti-French government would reconsider its position solely in exchange for concrete aid, on the part of Britain, in bringing the 'rebel' territories back under its control. Aid which London could not give.²⁴

A subsequent attempt to attain recognition for the British consul directly from Buenos Aires was a failure. The First Triumvirate used this occasion to ask Britain to better clarify her position in regard to the dispute with the imperial center.²⁵ Although Poinsett's credentials had been questioned one year before Staples' because of deficiencies of form, his role was accepted in Buenos Aires (Manning 1925: 320-21; De Goey 2016 [2014]: 95). Therefore, Staples was convinced that Poinsett was better placed than he was, not because of the *exequatour* which not even Poinsett had obtained (it seems that he had not even requested it) (95), but because the United States' policy had not been disputed at the presentation of his credentials. On the other hand, the United States had not previously asked Cádiz for Poinsett's recognition and perhaps this explains Buenos Aires' attitude. Staples, while aware that the ambiguity of the British position was one of the causes of his problems, thought that the spread of "anti-British sentiment" in Buenos Aires was Poinsett's work.²⁶

After the initial euphoria and reciprocal half-promises at the time of the May Revolution, when Spain seemed destined to end up in French hands and London was trying to avoid the same fate for the Indies, some British

²² TNA FO 72/107, Alexander Mackinnon to George Canning, Buenos Aires, 12 Aug. 1810.

²³ Staples's half-sisters were Lady Castlereagh's first cousins.

²⁴ TNA FO 72/108, Foreign Office to Henry Wellesley, London [undated]: "The Prince Regent entirely approves [...] particularly your observations on the separate article requiring 'that if the mediation of Great Britain should not be successful, she should break off all communication with the colonies, and moreover assist Spain with her forces in order to reduce them to their duty'. These conditions are entirely inadmissible [...]."

²⁵ TNA FO 72/157 Bernardino Rivadavia to Staples, Buenos Aires, 12 March 1812.

²⁶ TNA FO 72/157, Staples to Castlereagh, London, 30 July and 7 Aug. 1812.

officers on the spot became reluctant to side with the autonomous government of Buenos Aires. In 1811, the Spanish naval squadron of Montevideo had blockaded Buenos Aires three times, notwithstanding the presence of British merchants. The revolutionary élite was calling for more effective British protection, at least of Britain's own trade, threatening to look for other connections and to forbid silver exports.²⁷ British trade with loyalist Montevideo had by no means ceased, nor the British would have had cause to do so, and Buenos Aires feared that they were more inclined toward the rival city.²⁸ London felt that relations with Buenos Aires warranted a cooling off.

It would take the War of 1812 to prompt London into increasing her efforts to avoid political developments contrary to her interests in the territories north of Cape Horn, among the key military positions in the world. Prior to the war, information had arrived in London accusing several central figures in Buenos Aires politics of having ties to France, fueling British fears that the region might leave the anti-French coalition. These fears grew during the 1812 War, in light of attempts at coordinating a common policy on Spanish America by France and the United States. All this was seemingly amplified and confirmed by the swarms of French and Spanish-American agents in Philadelphia and Baltimore, whose presence was constantly monitored and denounced by anti-French Spain's Ambassador to the United States, Luis de Onís (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 70; Robertson 1939: 74-104, esp. 92-99).²⁹

The U.S. Vice Consul to Buenos Aires, merchant William Gilchrist Miller, informally favoured the mission of Diego Saavedra, son of ex-president Cornelio, and of Juan Pedro de Aguirre to buy arms in the United States, providing them with funds and contacts (Whitaker 1964: 68-69). The declared goal was to increase U.S. prestige in Buenos Aires, something easily accomplished (Manning 1925: 326). The British, too, had sold arms to Buenos Aires with the government's tacit consent, but once the 1812 War began, the arrival of informal aid from the United States was viewed with alarm, especially by Staples, who had recently returned home to discuss his consular appointment.³⁰

²⁷ TNA FO 72/126, The Buenos Aires Junta to Richard Wellesley, Buenos Aires, 9 March 1811.

²⁸ TNA FO 72/126, Mackinnon to Wellesley, Buenos Aires, 29 June 1811.

²⁹ TNA FO 63/85, Strangford to Wellesley, Rio de Janeiro, 28 Sept. 1810; FO 72/157, Mackinnon to Strangford, Buenos Aires 7 Nov. 1811 and 31 March 1812; Staples to Castlereagh, London, 22 June, 7 Aug. 1812; ADM 1/20 Admiral Michael De Courcy to Croker, *Foudroyant*, Rio de Janeiro, 5 March 1812.

³⁰ TNA FO 72/157, Staples to Castlereagh, London, 7 Aug. 1812.

Representatives of the Hullett Brothers firm, active in South American trade, suggested to Castlereagh the use of a British agent on the spot in order to counteract the influence the enemy had acquired in South America through the arms trade.³¹ However, the issue of consul recognition was no longer being raised. At the beginning of 1813, Staples made instead a proposal to the Foreign Office that he return to Buenos Aires as British Treasury agent for the purchase of bullion and specie. Castlereagh was thus able to justify the presence of Staples as *de facto* consul in Buenos Aires.³² This mission for the Treasury consisted of buying silver and gold from merchants in South America in exchange for bills payable at the Bank of England. British merchants could thus avoid risky remittances of specie and bullion, now the property of the Treasury.³³ Thus, British trade became less vulnerable: even if U.S. warships intercepted British vessels transporting silver and gold or forced them to delay their departure, it would do no damage to the interests of the merchants who sold their coins and bullion to Staples. British commerce in Buenos Aires emerged stronger than ever and this would soon have political consequences.

At the time, the most important British merchants in Buenos Aires were probably James Brittain and Staples' partner, John McNeile (Reber 1979: 63; Besseghini 2016: 341), who both played a central role in one of the best business deals, with important political implications, of the War for Independence. In 1814, in fact, McNeile received more than 200,000 dollars' worth of discounts for military supplies at the Buenos Aires Custom House (355). This amount included the commercial transactions (with Brown & Watson in Brazil as well) destined to finance and equip the new naval squadron of Buenos Aires, that would decisively defeat the Spanish fleet of Montevideo between March and May of 1814. McNeile even sold a ship belonging to the Staples family firm to the Buenos Aires' squadron (249). This was the *Belfast*, which became the *escuadrilla's* flagship after the *Hercules*, sold by Brittain. The latter also sold a ship from the British fleet in Río de la Plata, the *Nancy*, which he purchased from Dixon in Brazil.³⁴ Other ships were either British or were sold by Britons, something which

³¹ TNA FO 72/157, London, John Hullett et al. to Castlereagh, 9 July, Hullett Brothers to Staples, 21 Aug. 1812; Staples to Castlereagh, London, 24 Aug. 1812.

³² In his ODNB's entry on Staples (2009) Manuel Llorca Jaña expresses his skepticism about Castlereagh's involvement in the mission. However, my later doctoral research (2016), with which Llorca Jaña is familiar, explains the role of the Foreign Office in Staples' initiatives.

³³ BESSEGHINI 2016: TNA AO 1/7/13; FO 95/468, 29 Jan. 1813, *Plan for obtaining bullions*. See also: LLORCA JAÑA 2012: 150.

³⁴ On all these events the main source is: Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires, [hereafter AGN] Sala X [hereafter X] 22-1-1. On the *Nancy*, see also: GRAHAM and HUMPHREYS 1962: 133.

transpires from the acts of a trial, which took place after the fall of Director Carlos María de Alvear, in which the agent charged by the Buenos Aires government with the task of equipping the squadron was accused of having bought ships and equipment at greatly inflated prices.³⁵ It has been pointed out that Captain Bowles was fully aware of all of this but did nothing to impede the setting up of the “Argentine” fleet, even though it had been created to attack an ally city, Montevideo (Piccirilli 1957: 189-190). On the eve of the attack, when the governor of Montevideo complained about the arms trade operated by British merchants, Bowles justified himself: “all the officers I have would not been enough to attend the discharge of their [the British ships] cargoes, even if I attempted a measure which must be so offensive to this [Buenos Aires’] government, under their own guns” (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 131). He wrote to the Admiralty that his objective was: “merely endeavouring to give that tone and direction to their measures which appeared most adapted to keep them [the local politicians] clear from French or American influence” (126).

The expedition was good business for British merchants and for Buenos Aires’ independence. The consequent conquest of Montevideo put an end to the Spanish presence in the River Plate, extinguishing the possibility of further blockades and, with no effective base, rendering any Spanish expedition to retake the capital unrealistic.³⁶ All this was made possible thanks to the presence of British Treasury agent, Staples, who facilitated the merchants’ returns, and of Captain Bowles, who transported to England the considerable quantities of coins and bullion bought for the British Treasury and resulting largely from the *escuadrilla* affair.³⁷ Private interests (and, of course, the commissions to which both of them were entitled) and public ones came together and contributed to forging imperial destinies. Not even had she so desired, would London have now been able to help Spain against Buenos Aires without losing the material and political-relational patrimony accrued by British merchants, thanks to the institutional support furnished by London herself, in order to counterbalance U.S. influence during the War of 1812.

This influence was, in the meantime, eradicated with one decisive stroke on the other side of the Southern Cone as well. When Hillyar arrived at Valparaiso in early 1814, the *Essex* was already there, ready to accompany Poinsett home (Graham and Humphreys 1962: 130; De Goey

³⁵ AGN X 22-1-1, esp. *Confesión de Guillermo White*. The agent was William P. White, a U.S. citizen loyal to Britain, who had been active in neutral commerce and facilitated the 1806 British invasion of Buenos Aires, and now declared himself in favor of independence.

³⁶ Fears of ‘the Spanish expedition’ broke out again after the loss of Montevideo to the rival Caudillo Artigas and, later, to the Portuguese, but without reason.

³⁷ TNA AO 1/7/13, *Account of Robert P. Staples*.

2016 [2014]: 96). Carrera had been overthrown as commander-in-chief of the Chilean armed forces and loyalists were attacking anew in the South. Hillyar captured the *Essex* in March of 1814, in the bay of Valparaíso. According to the agreements made with the Viceroy of Peru, he mediated the negotiation of the Lircay Treaty between the governments of Lima and Santiago. This guaranteed international trade for Chile and negotiations in Europe. The treaty proved useful in promoting British trade, though only for a short period. Hillyar was praised by his superiors, but the Viceroy of Peru, very dissatisfied, denounced the agreement.³⁸

In Rancagua, the Spaniards defeated the independentists who were further weakened by divisions among parties and especially those between Bernardo O'Higgins, traditionally considered pro-British,³⁹ and Carrera. O'Higgins led the independentists into exile in Mendoza, under the protection of José de San Martín, then governor of Cuyo (and a friend of Captain Bowles), who would definitively liberate Chile from Spanish rule in 1818. Poinsett left Chile soon after the capture of the *Essex*, after having been declared *persona non grata* (Schoultz 2003 [1998]: 7; Daughan 2013). U.S. influence on the South American Pacific coast had been swept away.

4. THE 'WESTERN QUESTION', THE PACIFIC AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF LATIN AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

After the events of 1808, Jefferson declared that the United States and Hispanic America must share the same objective: the removal of all European influence from the Americas (Whitaker 1964: 42-43). This hemispheric dream (later a basis for the Monroe doctrine) never came to pass, however. The embargo weakened flourishing U.S. commercial relations with Hispanic America just when they were politically crucial during the crisis of 1808 – and Britain took full advantage of the new situation. The end of the embargo fostered trade in foodstuffs and wheat to Spain and to the armies of the anti-French alliance, now led by Britain (Galpin 1922: 24-25). This strengthened the convergence of interests between New England (from where this grain was largely shipped) and Britain, which represented a headache for the United States during the War of 1812 and an important component of

³⁸ With the Lircay Treaty, the Chilean government conserved “todo su poder y facultad al firmar el comercio con las naciones dados los inconvenientes y apreciadamente con Gran Bretaña, a la que debe España su existencia” (Ossa 2016: 241). This, as well as the contextual agreement on the withdrawal of ‘Peruvian’ forces from Chile, was contrary to the interests of Spain (240-247, esp. 244). See also: COLLIER 1967: 100; 116-120; HUGHES 2016: 193-195.

³⁹ For a different view see COLLIER 1967: 124.

the 'civil war of 1812' described by Taylor. It was urgent to gain ground in the competition with Britain, also struggling for influence over the future of the vast spaces separated from Spain. In this context, Consul Poinsett's or Captain Porter's initiatives on the Hispanic-American Pacific coast originated: forays into imperial Spain's territory justified in part by the war with Britain, they were the fruits of an optimistic vision of the United States' and its agents' capacity of intervention in the Americas.

The clash between fragments of the old British empire in South America represents an integral part of the old empire internal 'civil war', as does the competition between fur merchants in Oregon: subjects (merchants, sailors, entrepreneurs, adventurers, whale hunters) whose interests, as we have seen, take on importance as vectors of new imperial networks during the 1812 War. We have seen how the rivalry between Columbia River traders led to a British captain capturing the principal U.S. warship in the Pacific. We have also seen how fears of U.S. influence on the Southern Cone were behind official initiatives which gave British merchants in Buenos Aires the support necessary to undertake a business deal which would contribute to eradicating the Spanish from the River Plate. All this was the fruit of concrete interests on the ground, contributing to the construction of broader strategic plans which ended up benefiting mostly Britain.

After 1815, the U.S. government became more meticulous in following the position of official neutrality between Spain and its rebel colonies adopted after the 1810 revolutions. Thus, it viewed with greater indifference the initiatives of its agents on the ground who, on the other hand, for a certain period did not achieve the same success as Poinsett and Porter (who, in spite of his defeat, was given a hero's welcome at home). This shift from the unofficially pro-independentist policies of the first half of the 1810s is traditionally attributed to the defeat of Napoleon, to the advance of loyalist forces in Hispanic America and, in particular, to the ongoing negotiations for Florida which necessitated better relations with Restoration Spain. In his essay on "the Western Question", instead, the originality of Blaufarb's assertions on this point lies in shedding light upon a neglected factor of the "geopolitics of Latin American independence". The United States' hemispheric ambitions were, in his opinion, curtailed by "a new respect for British power" learned in the War of 1812 (Blaufarb 2007: 745-755, esp. 750).

Blaufarb does not touch on the old debate between those who maintain that the United States won at least a 'moral' victory in the Naval War of 1812 (Theodore Roosevelt, for example) and those who deny it – claiming British victory as a fact.⁴⁰ And he does not analyse in detail, nor would he

⁴⁰ For a recent example: DAUGHAN 2013 and LAMBERT 2012.

have had the space in his article to do so, the expanding power and influence enjoyed by the United States in all of Hispanic America at this time, with the exception of U.S. initiatives in Spanish North America – terrain congenial to him. Still, in order to further reinforce this sharable affirmation on the role played by the Anglo-U.S. war in defining the relationship of the United States with “the Western Question”, we must widen our horizons to include the Pacific. And it is not necessary to prove the naval superiority of Britain over the United States during the War of 1812: the story of one defeat is sufficient.

The case of the *Essex*, in fact, as can be seen here, had important implications on U.S. policy. It is crucial in linking the 1815 turning point toward greater U.S. disengagement in the ‘civil war’ in the Iberian Atlantic (up to the beginning of the 1820s)⁴¹ to the War of 1812. This policy – initially active in informally encouraging Hispano-American independence – was attempted in particular on the Hispano-American Pacific coast by Consul Poinsett, but failed, also as a consequence of initiatives by the British Navy at the end of the Anglo-U.S. war. The war legitimised, in a sense, British intervention in Chile against the U.S. influence, which could have been laying the foundations of an informal empire. The possibility of using force against her rival in South America, as happened with the capture of the *Essex*, together with the possibility of building up British naval presence in the region without unduly alarming Spanish and Hispano-American authorities were two elements of the 1812 War that established the bases for what has been called an informal British imperialism in South America: a constant although hardly unopposed presence during the Nineteenth century. The War of 1812 in the Pacific, therefore, deserves a new central position in the history of Atlantic ‘imperial’ reconfiguration.

We have seen how the naval forces of Britain were capable of intervening unto the limits of the sea, while simultaneously fighting a world war on other fronts, in order to restore a political equilibrium favourable to herself, in relation to the initiatives of her former colony in regions as far apart as Río de la Plata, Chile and Oregon. British intervention in the Pacific in all probability contributed indirectly to accelerating the fall of the *Patria Vieja* in Chile, an important sign of temporary royalist advances. And yet, in 1814, loyalist forces lost ground in the very region considered the key to South America: the River Plate.⁴² Spain was forced to desist from attacking Buenos Aires after having lost Montevideo. This is something to

⁴¹ After 1820, for many reasons, the United States regained the initiative, especially in Mexico.

⁴² On the River Plate as the key to South America: TERRAGNO 1998, GALLO 2001: 15.

keep in mind when referring to 1815 as the nadir of Hispanic-American revolutions.

The war with the United States, together with Poinsett's activity, led Britain's Foreign Secretary to unofficially agree with an attempt at forging better relations with the independentists in order to avoid the consolidation of U.S. influence over the Southern Cone. In the meantime, to gain the support they needed, local groups tried to use to their advantage British fears of being limited in access or shut out of important markets and strategically crucial positions to the benefit of the United States. Members of the British 'Official Mind' sought to establish fruitful contacts through informal representatives on the spot. These figures made decisive contributions to the creation of the 1814 naval squadron of Buenos Aires, which proved to be crucial in ousting forces loyal to Spain from the River Plate. Thus, while privateers and a naval officer were acting in synergy with Spain to contrast the United States in the Pacific, British businessmen and agents were helping to destroy what was left of Spanish power in the South Atlantic. On the other hand, the fragility of the Anglo-Spanish alliance in America became perhaps evident when Hillyar, after neutralising the U.S. peril, helped negotiate an agreement favorable to Britain but contrary to the interests that the Viceroy of Peru – who had furthred his mediation – had to defend (Ossa 2016: 240-247, esp. 243).

In the structural power of Britain over the oceans, both affirmed and demonstrated in these years, also lies the origin of the failure of Bourbon Spain's policies in the post-Napoleonic period, which led to the loss of its empire. As Blaufarb points out, part of this strategy consisted of neutralising U.S. temptations of expansion in Hispanic America by means of European mediation. Britain, however, the principal guarantor of this post-Napoleonic mediation, was hardly interested, as Spain well knew, in finding a solution to "the Western Question" (Blaufarb 2007: 754-755). She preferred, instead, to continue reaping the benefits of her position as indispensable ally to all, something that allowed her agents on the ground to broaden the 'structuring influence', in the imperial sense, of their networks. The U.S. provisional retreat from their informal policy on the Pacific coast of the Southern Cone after the Anglo-U.S. War of 1812 ratified this position.

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