

## **FIC's Aborted project of sheep ranching in Patagonia.**

Fernando Coronato  
Puerto Madryn, Patagonia Argentina.

*coronato@cenpat.edu.ar*

### **Introduction**

British presence in Patagonia is an old and generalized fact. Either formally or informally, by means of official or individual initiatives, British subjects, capitals and interests have pointed to Patagonia since its discovery in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Because of the marginal condition of Patagonia within the Spanish Empire, the region was openly exposed to the influence of the British Empire, and this situation continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Argentina and Chile entered into the scene.

The nascent Argentine and Chile nations-state sought to integrate the region to their respective national body by several means but in fact they did not succeed in doing so until the onset of the sheep farming after 1880. With sheep, Patagonia was integrated into the international market in that globalization led by Britain. The sheep farming obeyed a supranational scheme and, with a lag of 20-30 years, repeated in Patagonia the same boom it had had in the Falkland Islands around 1860.

Some chapters of the British saga in Patagonia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century are abundantly reported, such as the stubbornness of Welsh Colony in Chubut, the huge properties of several *Sheep Farming Companies*, the zeal of the *Patagonian Missionary Society*, or the rooting of many Falkland Islanders families in Santa Cruz. Others chapters are less known even if not less important, for instance the arbitration of king Edward VII of the Argentine-Chilean border in 1902, or the ambiguous interpretation of his 1908 Letter Patent concerning the Falkland Dependencies.

Finally, some facts concerning British actuation in Patagonia remain almost unknown and certainly deserve further research, as for instance the presence of British observers in some of the military patrols during the conquest of Patagonia to the native people in early 1880s (Roberts, 1995), or the intentions of Falkland Islands Company (FIC) to expand over the mainland at the same period, up to this day only revealed by the document presented in this article.

### **Historical context**

After 1880, once the “Conquest of the Desert” was achieved, the sheep entered Patagonia through the north from the province of Buenos Aires and the south from the Falklands, directly from the archipelago or via Punta Arenas. The starting point of the northern dispersion of sheep was El Carmen, on the Rio Negro, the only Patagonian city of Hispanic origin, while the starting point of the southern dispersion was the cosmopolitan Punta Arenas. These two small towns, situated at the two opposite extremes of Patagonia, were not the very source of the sheep but acted as dispersion

focus to livestock coming from neighboring regions outside Patagonia, that is, the River Plate Pampas and the Falkland Islands respectively.

Both regions have experienced a comparable situation in relation to the boom of sheep. By the 1880s the River Plate Pampas shifted towards large scale grain crops and bovine herding [once that beef exportation became easier thanks to cold technology ], and sheep were moved to Patagonia; meanwhile the Falklands, without crops nor freezing plants, had reached saturation of their carrying capacity in ovines. In 1880, there were 436 000 sheep, they numbered 676 000 ten years later, and in 1898 reached 807 000 animals, marking the peak in the history of the archipelago (Bernhardson, 1989, p.475). Although sheep had been introduced by all the previous settlements in the islands (French, British, Spanish, Argentinian), there were very few towards 1840; the first try of commercial sheep farming started in 1842, in a parallel and simultaneous process to that was taking place in the Pampas.

Precisely, the first ovine batches from the River Plate were dispatched by British entrepreneurs in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, mainly the Lafone brothers. The cost of these early introductions was approximately 0.70 pounds per head (Middleton, 1924, p.9). At the same time, fine rams of Southdown and Leicester breeds were imported from Britain, but due to cost and transportation difficulties such introductions were necessarily restricted. Some pedigree animals were also introduced from Buenos Aires as early as in 1841, offered by Peter Sheridan of "*Estancia Los Galpones*" (Philpot, 2007, p.8; Solari Yrigoyen, 2006, p.138). El Carmen was also one of the places from which the Falklands were supplied of sheep and horses. According to the register port dues (Philpot, 2007, p.12), among the 23 ships that carried cargo to the Lafones' settlement between 1847 and 1852, 10 came from El Carmen, and half of them landed sheep. Other mass introductions of sheep from Rio Negro are recorded as late as in 1867.<sup>1</sup>

So, it can be seen that the sheep that colonized southern Patagonia from the Falklands in the 1880-1890s, had common origins with those that colonized the region from the north. Despite sharing ancestors, the characteristics of the (initially continental) flock were markedly modified in the archipelago by calculated British breeding during the three decades elapsed, eventually resulting in a mixed breed very well adapted to environmental conditions in southern South America that would be known in Patagonia as *Malvinera* sheep.

The parallel between the Falklands and the Pampas with respect to the ovine boom of the years 1850-1870s can be traced back from the beginning of the cycle in both sheep-source regions. In fact, though different and remote, in the Pampas and in the Falklands the sheep thrived at the expense of cattle. The "leather civilization" existing in the buenosairean Pampas in the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was also implemented in the Falklands by Vernet's settlement in the late 1820s. Estimates of the number of cattle in

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction of "*some 6 or 7 thousand sheep from Rio Negro or Buenos Aires*" is reported by "The diary of Joseph Seth Jones, 1867 in the Falkland Islands" [FIJ, 7(2):26-49. 1998]. On the other hand, selected breedings from the continent continued being introduced every so often until the 1982 conflict.

the islands after the Argentine forced departure in 1833 vary between 5 000 and 40 000 heads (Bernhardson, 1989, p.213), but it is certain that these animals, become feral, gave the first economic benefits to the new British colony. As only the Gauchos could handle such a flock, the British authorities favored the installation of Uruguayan labourers in the 1840s (Philpot, 2007, p.7), The Pitaluga family, owner of one of the traditional station of the islands, has this origin (Rob Pitaluga, pers.comm, dec. 2008).

The footprints of the River Plate gauchos are still visible in the islands, especially in the stone pens and in the rural lexicon, as shown by Spruce (1992). Yet cattle and gauchos did not last long in the colony since it turned to raising sheep according to the increasing wool demand in Britain. Bovines were replaced by ovines brought from the south American mainland and from the metropolis, as seen above. Labour, namely shepherds from Scotland (Royle, 1985, p.207), was also brought to take care of the sheep as they had led the Irish to the Pampas a few decades earlier (Korol & Sabato, 1981). The replacing of cows by sheep in the economic wealth of the islands took more than a century to materialize into the Falkland's coat-of-arms, since only as late as in 1948 the bull in the emblem was changed to a ram.

Then, by 1890 the Falklands were overstocked with sheep. The 12 000 Km<sup>2</sup> of the archipelago (of which approximately 20% is unusable for animal husbandry), supported more than 800 000 sheep, resulting in an average stocking rate of more than 0.9 ov / Ha (sheep per hectare), while the current figure is 0.5 ov / Ha (Summers & McAdam, 1993, p. 29). Setting aside some rudimentary canning industry, the lack of freezing plants or a nearby market where to place the surplus, sometimes led farmers to take extreme measures, such as throwing the surplus animals to the sea (Tim Blake, pers.comm., [dec. 2008]; James Lewis [1891], in Bernhardson [1989, p.448]). This being so, it is not surprising that the possibility of occupying land in the continent, 500 Km away, had been a valid alternative for sheep growers.

On the other hand, Chilean and Argentine authorities in southern Patagonia viewed Falklanders as potential settlers into their respective sectors, by then almost vacant. In 1876 Governor Dublé of Magallanes (Chile), and in 1885 Governor Moyano of Santa Cruz (Argentina), visited the Falklands to promote immigration. Eventually they succeeded and quite an important displacement of islanders took place.<sup>2</sup>

This pioneer flux of people, sheep and capitals from the islands to the mainland is well known thanks to authors such as Pereira Lahitte (1971), Mainwaring (1983), Foulkes (1987) and Martinic (1996). Suffice it to add that 197 bank accounts were closed in Stanley between 1888 and 1895, implying the withdrawal of 40 000 £. *From a colony whose total population remained below 2 000, the scale of emigration to Patagonia was impressive* (Bernhardson, 1989 p.441-442).

The continental option was considered not only by independent individuals, mostly rural workers who had completed their 20-year contract (Mainwaring, 1983) and

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<sup>2</sup> Beside the authors to be quoted right below, a good approach to this topic can be found in: <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/scotsinargpat/malvineros.htm> or in <http://www.patbrit.org>.

had accumulated capital, experience and desire for autonomy, but also by the Falkland Islands Company (FIC) itself.

## **The Proposal**

The proposal is stated in a letter sent to the Minister of the Interior of Argentina, dated December 21<sup>st</sup> 1880, and signed by a William Harvey acting as FIC's representative in Buenos Aires. The document is kept in the *Archivo General de la Nación* in the section corresponding to *Ministerio del Interior*, year 1881. As far as we know this letter was not published before, and only Dumrauf (1999, p.285) briefly refers to it. The first page of the original manuscript is shown in Figure 1.

The three page-long letter reads as follows (our translation)

*“Buenos Aires, December 21<sup>th</sup> 1880.*

*Your Excellency*

*William Harvey, representing the company incorporated by Royal Charter of the Government of Her Britannic Majesty, for the settlement of the Falkland Islands, before Your Excellency respectfully states that:*

*He requests the purchase, in order to colonize, to stock with cattle and to improve it, the following lands belonging to Argentina:*

*1 ° The Peninsula known in the English Admiralty charts as “Valdés”, and in this Republic as “San José”.*

*2 ° (160) One hundred and sixty leagues, more or less, chosen from the vicinity of the Bay of San Sebastian, on the east coast of the isle of Tierra del Fuego.*

*William Harvey is committed to pay for these lands the same price as the Government has received for land sold to cover the cost of the expedition to the Río Negro, that is, 400 pesos-fuertes per square league.*

*If Your Excellency does not consider himself allowed to //end of 1<sup>st</sup> page// decide this sale, William Harvey requests grant on lease until to get the corresponding authorization from the Parliament; in this case he is obliged to buy cattle in Argentina and elsewhere, and to bring from Europe to his own cost, a sufficient number of immigrants to work the estancia in a large extent, thus providing almost immediate possession of new tax revenues to the Government*

*The Government may set aside from the sale in the Peninsula of San Jose, four leagues of land for public use, or more if deemed appropriate, although always should remain in the property of the buyer a number of water points high enough to run the farm.*

*William Harvey, not knowing what conditions may be required to accept his proposal, fails to go into more detail and suggests that these details could be arranged in London by the Commissioner of Immigration and Colonization in Europe, Don Carlos Calvo,*

*who can receive the necessary instructions to guarantee the faithful accomplishment of what is appropriate.*

*Constituted my home on Street San Martín No. 155.*

*God save Your Excellency.*

*(signed) William Harvey*

*To the Minister of the Interior of Argentina*

*Dr. D. A. del Viso. "*

Thus, according to the document the company wanted to buy the entire Valdes Peninsula (145 leagues, i.e. 3 600 Km<sup>2</sup>) and 160 leagues (4 000 Km<sup>2</sup>) in northern Tierra del Fuego, offering to pay the same price at which the government sold the land they had just conquered to the aborigines,<sup>3</sup> i.e. 400 pesos-fuertes per league ( = 80 sterling pounds) [then equivalent to 0.3 grams of gold per hectare].<sup>4</sup> So, the FIC was ready to pay out £ 24 400, only to buy the land; this price would be noticeably cheaper than what it paid to buy land in the islands.

All in all the company intended to purchase a surface more than twice as big as the lands it possessed by then in Falkland Islands,<sup>5</sup> that is to say, grassland enough to stock about 680 000 sheep if applying the same stocking rates by then in force in the islands. One could easily imagine how this business could have fostered the FIC's development and promoted its direct implantation in the mainland as well.

## **Conclusion**

We have not found an official answer to this request, however it is clear that it was rejected by the Argentine government since no further steps were given towards the conclusion of the business. Perhaps a research in the FIC's archives would shed some light on how this affaire ended.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the lands were sold beforehand, a "brilliant" real estate business that allowed the funding of the 1879 military campaign.

<sup>4</sup> In 1887 the land in the forested mountains of southern Tierra del Fuego costed 50 sterling pounds per league (Belza, 1975, p.70).

<sup>5</sup> Besides Lafonia [about 240 000 hectares], in 1880 the FIC possessed 55 700 hectares ("Memorandum for the information of his Excellency Governor Kerr", signed by F.E.Cobb, 8<sup>th</sup> September 1881. FIGA).

What is clear is that the requested lands remained without being settled for still some years; the San Sebastian area was occupied by the native Fuegians (the Onas) until granted to the Romanian entrepreneur Julius Popper in 1887. It is worthy noting here that by the time of the FIC's request, national sovereignty on Tierra del Fuego was still unsettled since the Treaty defining the Argentine-Chilean border was signed only in 1881.<sup>6</sup> This may have deterred the Argentine government to decide on a territory whose authority was not sure, despite Harvey's assertion in contrary sense. On the other hand, it can be supposed that the British interest on Valdes peninsula aroused official concern on that area close to the Welsh Colony, as shortly after, in 1881, the Argentine government sent surveyors to measure the land.

The refusal of the FIC's proposal might be related to the presence of the Welsh colony not very far (less than 200 km). Just as in 1863 the Argentine government had rejected the installation of that colony arguing the vicinity of the British settlement in the Falkland Islands; the reciprocal reaction could be well explained for the same concern to prevent the formation of a strong British nucleus in Patagonia, in a period in which national sovereignty in the region was just settling.

However, once the process was more or less accomplished, the Argentine government willingly accepted the individual installation of islanders. Just created the territory of Santa Cruz (October 1884), was appointed governor Carlos M. Moyano, empowered by a decree of President Roca (December 1884)...

*...to prepare and agree on ground leases with the inhabitants of the Falkland Islands and the northern coast of the Strait of Magellan who have requested [...]*<sup>7</sup>

On that basis, as already said, Moyano went to the Falklands in early 1885 to look for settlers, (and not only has he found many of them, but a wife as well, Miss Ethel Turner).

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<sup>6</sup> In some sectors the international boundary was still the subject of controversy, leading to the royal arbitration mentioned above.

<sup>7</sup> Pereira Lahitte (1971, p. 21).

In such a way, the flux of settlers, capitals and sheep from the Falklands to Patagonia was established and very soon was to become the driving force in the south of Argentina and Chile. It could be said that the FIC had anticipated the thriving of sheep farming in the area and sought to firmly establish there, but perhaps it was too early...

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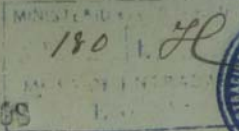
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1881

CINCUENTA CENTAVOS



Buenos Aires Die<sup>ta</sup> 21 de 1880

Exmo. Señor.

Guillermo Harray representante de la Compañía constituida por Real Carta del Gobierno de Su Majestad Británica, para la colonización de las Islas Falkland, ante V.E. respetuosamente expone

Que solicita su compra con el proposito de colonizar, poblar con ganados, y mejorarlos, los siguientes terrenos pertenecientes a la Republica Argentina

- 1<sup>o</sup> La Península conocida en las cartas del Almirantazgo Inglés, por de Valdes, y en esta Republica por de San José
- 2<sup>o</sup> (160) Ciento sesenta leguas mas o menos, eligidas en las inmediaciones de la Bahía de San Sebastian en la Costa Este de la isla de Tierra del Fuego

Guillermo Harray se compromete a pagar por estos terrenos, el mismo precio que el Gobierno ha recibido por el terreno vendido para cubrir los gastos de la expedición al Rio Negro, es decir, \$400, Cuatro cientos pesos fuertes por legua cuadrada.

Si V.E. no se considera autor-

Figure 1: First page (out of three) of the original manuscript.