

Living with Dictator Rosas: Argentina through Scottish Eyes

IAIN A. D. STEWART

Abstract. Whilst much illuminating research has been conducted into early British diplomatic and commercial activity in the River Plate, few scholars have yet focused upon the lives of individual settlers in any detail. The present article moves some way towards redressing this imbalance through the study of the Gibsons, a prominent Argentine-Scottish family with pioneering interests in commerce and sheep breeding. The analysis gives special weight to letters exchanged by the brothers Robert and George Gibson during the late 1830s, casting light upon the incomers' perspective of political turbulence as dissident forces fought to depose the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas.

Whilst the diplomatic and commercial ties between Argentina and Britain during the nineteenth century have been thoroughly investigated, the history of individual British citizens residing in the young South American republic has received little academic attention. There are many issues yet to be explored before we can arrive at a full picture of the early Argentine–British community, one of which is addressed in the present article. Through the study of a prominent Scottish family with an enduring involvement in the River Plate region, it will be possible to move some way towards an appraisal of the settlers' perception of the nascent Argentine nation at a time of intense social and political division, specifically during the rule of Juan Manuel de Rosas, governor of Buenos Aires and *de facto* dictator of Argentina for most of the period 1829–1852. In particular, the incomers' view of events in their adopted homeland is illuminated by focusing on a series of letters written by one member of this family between 1836 and 1840, some of the most unsettled years of the Rosas era.

Before embarking upon this specific task, it is appropriate to lend justification to the methodology employed throughout the present analysis, briefly elucidating its intellectual sources and pedigree. Doubts have regularly been voiced in certain sectors of the academic community regarding the status of personal documents (private correspondence being a prime example) as a credible resource for historical or sociological analysis. More often than not, researchers working in such fields simply abstract the externally verifiable hard data from personal testimony, devise

Iain A. D. Stewart is engaged in postdoctoral research at the University of St Andrews.

their own explanations and cast aside the subjective, emotional frame within which their factual icons were originally presented. In recent times, driven by the post-modern ethos, a reaction has set in against the excessive privileging of statistical evidence and the concomitant quest for overarching, universally applicable theories, seeking instead the scholarly rehabilitation of the individual subject of enquiry. This shift of emphasis owes much to the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, especially to his opposition of 'local knowledge' to the grand rationalisations of the human condition.¹ Espousing a similar stance, and working within the particular area of immigration studies, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin has argued convincingly that 'it is possible and useful [...] to understand a people's history not only as the experts describe it but also as it is conceived by those who lived it'.² Naturally, the researcher must always be alert to the bias inherent within any subjective document, but private records of experience are at least free from the suspicion of motivation overshadowing data intended for public consumption. Drawing inspiration from Geertz and Yans-McLaughlin, it is my view that personal letters written by members of the early Argentine–British community constitute a valuable source worthy of serious investigation, in that they facilitate an insight into the genuine concerns of the settlers and the way they conceived events in their adopted land.

The liberalisation of trade following the break from colonial Spain attracted many British entrepreneurs to Buenos Aires during the second decade of the nineteenth century. John Gibson, an affluent merchant from Garnett Hill, Glasgow, was amongst those who quickly perceived the emerging market in the Platine region. The existing firm of Gibson and Company, which John had established with his cousins, specialised in the export of woollen and muslin goods to the Oriental market and already had branches in Brussels and Singapore. During the early 1800s, John Gibson earned a reputation amongst members of Glasgow's commercial establishment as a bold pioneer. Although generally profitable, his innovatory dealings brought occasional difficulties. On returning from the European continent shortly after the battle of Waterloo, for instance, Gibson carried with him a bank draft issued by Rothschild of Frankfurt. Attempts to redeem the draft in Glasgow proved impossible, however, as the name of this eminent financial dynasty had yet to reach Scotland. Undaunted by setbacks of this type, Gibson constantly sought to extend

¹ To observe Geertz's methodology at work, see his collection *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (London, 1983).

² Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, 'Metaphors of Self in History: Subjectivity, Oral Narrative and Immigration Studies', in Yans-McLaughlin (ed.), *Immigration Reconsidered* (New York and Oxford, 1990), pp. 254–90.

the scope of the company's operations. One day in 1818, according to family legend, the eldest son of John Gibson, also named John, was summoned to his father's study. Revolving a globe, the older man pointed to the Argentine and declared 'We will go there'. At the end of the year, having recently celebrated his twenty-second birthday, young John began the long journey to the Río de la Plata, entrusted with the foundation of a new subsidiary of the family company.³

Once settled in Buenos Aires, John Gibson became a typical member of the British mercantile community, initially setting up business in Calle Potosí as an importer of textiles and an exporter of hides and nutria pelts. The trade in hides was especially lucrative at this time; a horse hide bought in the interior during the 1820s for around one shilling could fetch as much as seven or eight shillings on the European market.⁴ John Gibson resolved that the proceeds of the enterprise should be reinvested in land purchases, a common mode of capital diversification amongst the *porteño* merchant class. Whilst on a visit to Scotland in 1822, he persuaded his father to provide additional funds to facilitate the company's move into real estate. Later that year, John purchased their first rural property in the wooded region of Buenos Aires province, then known as the Montes Grandes, an area which lies in the modern districts of Esteban Echeverría and Lomas de Zamora. This estate was later resold to the Scottish brothers John and William Parish Robertson as the site for their agricultural colony.⁵

In 1823 or 1824, John was joined in Argentina by his brother George. Together, the Gibsons intensified their operations in the realms of land speculation, acquiring substantial tracts in the southern portion of Buenos Aires province. After the Monte Grande property, the company's next investment was the estancia El Paraíso, an estate of four square leagues (26,800 acres/10,854 ha) with 6,000 head of cattle and some sheep.⁶ A

³ The material on the Gibsons appearing throughout this article is principally based on the following sources: Correspondence and papers, 1816–1892, of George, Robert and Thomas Gibson, cattle and sheep breeders in the province of Buenos Aires, National Library of Scotland (NLS), Edinburgh, MSS 10326–10328; Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry in the Argentine Republic* (Buenos Aires, 1893); miscellaneous papers supplied to the author by descendants of the family.

⁴ H. S. Ferns, *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), p. 81.

⁵ On the Parish Robertsons' scheme to establish a Scottish enclave in Argentina, see James Dodds, *Records of the Scottish Settlers in the River Plate and their Churches* (Buenos Aires, 1897) or Cecilia Grierson, *Colonia de Monte Grande, provincia de Buenos Aires: primera y única colonia formada por escoceses en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1925).

⁶ As the square league was a non-standardised measurement, it is difficult to provide a precise conversion. For the purposes of the present article, the formula of 1 square league = 6,700 acres has been employed, on the basis that 1 league is very roughly equivalent to 3.25 miles, approximately the figure used by Herbert Gibson in *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry* when describing the Gibson family

short time later they bought Sol de Mayo, an estancia of six square leagues (40,200 acres/16,281 ha) with cattle and slaves included. At the beginning of 1824, Los Portugueses, also known as Isla de Yeguas, became their next acquisition. This property lay on the Samborombón river and comprised some sixteen square leagues (107,200 acres/43,416 ha). For management purposes, this estate was later incorporated into Los Jagüeles, the largest of the Gibsons' purchases. The combined property extended from the Samborombón (commonly misspelt as San Borombón) river to the Laguna Adela near Chascomús and bordered the estancia of Gervasio Rosas (younger brother of the future dictator). The Gibsons also acquired some twenty square leagues (134,000 acres/54,270 ha) near the Laguna Caquel Huencul. They made their final investment of this period in May 1825, purchasing the Carmen estancia on a site close to the modern town of General Lavalle.⁷ When this property was bought in May 1825, a certain Andrés Hidalgo was employed as agent by the original proprietor, Esteven Márquez, who 'could not bring himself to sell directly to a "gringo"'.⁸

Two months after the purchase of the Carmen estancia, the Gibsons appointed one of their young employees, Richard Newton, as manager. Newton came from a family with a long-standing interest in the Platine region, his father having first set foot on Argentine soil shortly after the independence declaration of 1810 (Herbert Gibson, p. 197). When Newton took charge of the Carmen property, it was sufficiently close to the Indian frontier to require substantial defences. According to Herbert Gibson, 'gunpowder, two cannons, eight muskets, twenty sabres, lead and stone cannonballs' were amongst the first provisions despatched to the new manager (p. 243). By this time, the Gibsons were the proprietors of five estancias, some 60,000 cattle, 4,000 horses, many mules and a small number of slaves. In 1827, Robert Gibson arrived to join his brothers in the family business, having recently graduated from the medical faculty of the University of Edinburgh. Until this point, the Gibsons' involvement in Argentina seems a fairly typical record of the economically powerful British merchant class, but their fortunes were soon to take a turn for the worse.

During 1827, the financial crisis resulting from conflict between Argentina and Brazil over the sovereignty of the Banda Oriental (now

lands and other estancias in Buenos Aires province. It is highly probable that the concept of the league was subject to regional variation.

⁷ The preceding details of the Gibsons' property investments are from an article by Herbert Gibson, *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), 17 April 1938.

⁸ Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry*, p. 243.

Uruguay) began to have an adverse effect upon the Gibsons' prosperity. The devaluation of the Argentine peso from around four shillings (48 pence) to just over one penny seriously undermined their mercantile operations. The rural side of their enterprise was suffering at the same time from a particularly damaging drought, which began in 1824 and continued for four years. The southern portion of Buenos Aires province, where the Gibsons' properties were located, was one of the most severely affected areas, and it was reported that 'the dry beds of the San Borombón and Salado rivers were filled with the carcasses of dead cattle from bank to bank'.⁹ In addition, John Gibson contracted pneumonia and set sail for Scotland in an effort to recuperate his health, only to fall gravely ill in the course of the journey and die during a stop at Gibraltar.

Disheartened by the loss of his eldest son and troubled by unstable economic conditions in the Río de la Plata region, John Gibson senior instructed George and Robert to liquidate the company's Argentinian assets and return home. Selling land was no easy task in the climate of the time, but the brothers succeeded in disposing of all but the Carmen estancia, which they had now renamed Rincón del Tuyú, and a small tract of the San Borombón lands. It proved impossible to find a buyer for the Tuyú estate on account of its remote location and marshy terrain. The overland route to this property was frequently impassable due to flooding; the only alternative was to approach by sea, a journey complicated by unpredictable wind and tides. George Gibson himself did not visit the estancia until February 1835, and his description of the journey is ample testimony to its impractical location:

The vessel arrived at the mouth of the Salado on Sunday the 8th, but in consequence of a strong wind blowing right into the harbour she could not get out again till Tuesday morning. We were then kept beating about for two days with a head wind, without being able to make a mile in our course. At the end of that time we got a fresh breeze from the North, which sent us spinning along at a good rate, so that in 24 hours we were anchored off the coast of the Tuyú, 4 or 5 miles distant. Here again we were kept three days before we got into the river or creek, waiting till both wind and water answered, as both at once are necessary to get in. On the bar at the entrance there are seven feet of water at the highest tide and only about a foot at low tide. When we did get in the wind was again contrary to proceeding up the creek; we therefore started next morning in the boat for the berth the vessel usually occupies, about 15 miles up from the mouth, which we reached in about two and a half hours, and landed on the estancia.¹⁰

Whilst the natural characteristics of the Rincón del Tuyú did not

⁹ 'Old British and American Firms', *The Standard* (Buenos Aires), 70th anniversary issue, 1 May 1930.

¹⁰ George Gibson to Robert Gibson, Rincón del Tuyú, 15 Feb. 1835, NLS, MSS 10326.

facilitate the Gibsons' endeavour, the brothers were quick to appreciate the attractive terrain. On his first sight of the property, George Gibson described the wooded areas as 'some of the finest sylvan scenes I ever looked upon'.¹¹ At this time, the breeding of cattle and horses was the main activity at the estancia, the stock numbering some 18,000 head of cattle and 3,000 mares.¹² A few sheep of the *criollo* variety were kept, but only for mutton. Before he ever visited the Tuyú, George Gibson resolved to diversify into sheep raising by introducing merino rams to the area so that they might interbreed with the substandard creole type to yield a superior mestizo stock. After his arrival at the estancia, George further expanded the flock by offering calves to neighbouring landowners in exchange for ewes. As the local population traditionally considered sheep as vastly inferior animals to cattle, this must have seemed an extremely advantageous trade. In all likelihood, the Gibsons would have been regarded as eccentric foreigners who had much to learn about life in the Argentine, a reputation which may be reflected in the estancia's latest change of name to Los Yngleses (literally, the Englishmen).¹³

By 1835, therefore, the Gibsons had taken the first steps towards establishing their enduring reputation as pioneers in Argentina's rural economy. Until this time, the sheep-rearing industry amounted to little more than a few isolated, and largely unsuccessful, attempts to import the merino breed, without any determined effort to establish the ovine element as a commercially viable alternative to the dominant enterprise of cattle raising. The first flock of merinos in the region had been introduced to the Banda Oriental by Manuel José de Labarden in 1794, but it was not until the 1840s that sheep began to feature prominently on the rural landscape of Buenos Aires.¹⁴ In the course of the next three decades, wool rapidly displaced cattle-derived products as Argentina's major source of export revenue, as landowners engaged in persistent endeavour to improve their stock and establish a strain suited to local conditions, motivated by the demands of the booming European textile industry.¹⁵ The Los Yngleses enterprise featured at the very forefront of this drive for

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry*, p. 248.

¹³ The term 'inglés' tends to be employed in Argentinian Spanish to denote all native speakers of the English language. Settlers from Scotland, Ireland and even the USA were frequently described as 'ingleses' in early documents, a fact which can pose considerable problems for an historian engaged in the study of one particular group.

¹⁴ Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry*, p. 15.

¹⁵ Wool exports rose from 1,609.6 tons in 1840 to 7,681 tons in 1850, reaching 17,316.9 tons in 1860, and surging to 65,704.2 tons by 1870. See John Lynch, 'From independence to national organization', in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Argentina since Independence* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 1–46 (p. 36).

advancement, alongside another Scottish-owned estancia, Espartillar, the property of John Fair.¹⁶

More than simply an economic fact, the rise of the sheep-breeding industry represented the evolution of wider socio-political conditions, for the cattle ranching elite had not only been financially powerful, but had firmly held the reins of the political system since the beginning of the Rosas era. The dictator, of course, was himself a rancher, who made his fortune from cattle and founded his political power upon the basic unit of rural society, the estancia, receiving support from both his fellow *terratenientes* and the semi-itinerant gaucho population. Although Rosas diversified to some extent into sheep breeding during the 1840s, his estates remained first and foremost bastions of the cattle industry, and his demise in 1852 may be seen as symbolic of the sea change in the rural economy sweeping the Platine region at that time, a phenomenon which one observer has justifiably termed 'la revolución del lanar'.¹⁷

In the space of about fifteen years, the Gibsons' enterprise had evolved from a fledgling mercantile operation in the city, typical of the early British involvement in Argentina, into a primarily rural concern. Unlike the majority of the British merchant class, who remained only so long as it was profitable, circumstances had dictated that the Gibsons could not withdraw. The brothers were not motivated to stay in Argentina by the country's opportunities, but on account of their failure to sell the Rincón del Tuyú lands. Rather than abandon the property, thereby receiving no return on the investment, their only option was to persevere in this remote and inhospitable corner of Buenos Aires province. The strong financial position of the Glaswegian branch of the family ensured that the occasional journey home was always a possibility, but the Argentine side

¹⁶ In *Agrarian Capitalism and the World Market: Buenos Aires in the Pastoral Age, 1840–1890* (Albuquerque, 1990), Hilda Sabato notes that during the 1820s and 1830s 'only a small group of enterprising men, most of them immigrants seeking a profitable field for investing their capital which had been made in other activities, saw a possibility in the expanding international demand for wool, and started to promote the development of sheep breeding and wool production in the River Plate area' (p. 122). The Gibsons, of course, conform closely to this model. Although the Los Yngleses estancia lay outside the geographical focus of Sabato's study, she does make reference to the Gibson family, drawing upon Herbert Gibson's *History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry* and erroneously attributing John Gibson with English nationality (pp. 165–66, note 3), an understandable slip in light of note 13 above.

¹⁷ For details of Rosas's cautious ventures into sheep raising, see Richard W. Slatta, *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier* (Lincoln, Neb. and London, 1983), p. 142. On 'la revolución del lanar', see José Pedro Barrán, *Apogeo y crisis del Uruguay pastoril y caudillesco* (Montevideo, 1992), pp. 112–17. For an in-depth exploration of the development of the Argentine pastoral economy during the nineteenth century, see Hilda Sabato, *Agrarian Capitalism and the World Market*, or the same author's 'Wool Trade and Commercial Networks in Buenos Aires, 1840s to 1880s', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1983), pp. 49–81.

of the business obliged an eventual return to, or at least a continuing interest in, the Platine region.

The remote location and rugged terrain of the Los Yngleses estancia were constant obstacles in the early years of the Gibsons' endeavour. Cut-throats and deserters often sought refuge on the property, as it lay on the very margins of national jurisdiction. Further south there was only the ungoverned territory of the Indians. Raids by the indigenous tribes, however, were quite rare; the numerous creeks and marshes which surrounded the estancia formed a natural line of defence. Predators were probably the greatest threat to the Gibsons' flocks; pumas and packs of wild dogs (*cimarrones*) inflicted heavy losses. In an effort to combat this threat, the brothers paid premiums for the extermination of these animals.

Having reviewed the early history of the Gibson enterprise, let us now turn our attention to their perception of major events during the Rosas period. From around 1836, George Gibson was in almost permanent residence at either Los Yngleses or San Borombón and rarely ventured into the city. His isolation deprived him of news of the latest national developments, a void partially filled by a steady stream of letters from Robert, who managed the company's interests in Buenos Aires. Through analysis of this series of reports, it is possible to construct an image of one of the most troubled periods of Rosas's distinctly turbulent reign from the perspective of an incomer, whilst at the same time extrapolating the Gibsons' attitudes to matters of national politics.

Letters written by Robert Gibson between 1836 and 1840 focus on three significant and inter-connected manifestations of conflict: (1) the civil war in Uruguay, which soon evolves into an international struggle; (2) the blockade of Buenos Aires from 1838 to 1840 by the naval forces of France, initially motivated by a dispute over the treatment of French citizens residing under Rosas's jurisdiction; (3) an *antirosista* uprising in the southern portion of Buenos Aires province in response to the hardships imposed by the French intervention. Each of these episodes concerns Robert Gibson for valid reasons. For those engaged in the import-export business, the first two events caused serious disruption, since the turmoil in Uruguay jeopardised any commercial activity on that side of the Plate, and the French blockade rendered impossible all trade between Buenos Aires and Europe. Robert, therefore, would have found his city-based operations severely prejudiced at this time. Naturally, the rural side of the Gibson enterprise also suffered under the prohibition upon export, as indeed did so many of the *estancieros* of Buenos Aires, some of whom considered that only the removal of the intractable dictator would bring a French withdrawal and the consequent restoration of prosperity to the province. The southern rebellion, which unfolded in

close proximity to the Los Yngleses estate, may be viewed as the direct product of this desire to re-establish normal trading conditions.

The first topic which concerns Robert in this sequence of letters is the attempt by Fructuoso Rivera, the former president of Uruguay, to overthrow the legitimate government of Manuel Oribe. Rivera had been elected first constitutional leader of the República Oriental in October 1830, in spite of his shady past as a partisan of Brazilian attempts to annex the territory to their domain. When Oribe succeeded Rivera in 1835, it soon became apparent that the new president was the antithesis of his maverick predecessor. Grandson of the first colonial governor of Montevideo and a member of one of the most distinguished landowning families of Uruguay, Oribe quickly asserted his distance from the populist Rivera.¹⁸ Early in 1836, in an effort to unite the country behind a single authority, Oribe abolished the role of *Comandante General de la Campaña*, the post now occupied by the former president. The new government also began investigations into alleged financial irregularities under Rivera's administration. Infuriated by the erosion of his position, Rivera plotted to bring down Oribe and retake power by unconstitutional means.

In the first of his letters on this subject, Robert Gibson reflects upon Rivera's recent declaration of revolt, and cites this action as 'further proof (if indeed proof were wanting) of the futility of thinking these people are in a state to govern themselves by constitutions and laws', an assertion which insinuates the distance that the typical British settlers perceived as separating their own community from creole society. In the same letter, Robert proceeds to give his forecast of the likely development of the conflict:

my opinion is that the legal Govt., although opposed by Rivera who has undoubtedly great influence amongst the people of the campaña, stands a good chance of winning the day from the assistance and countenance of this Govt. [that of Buenos Aires] and the others of the confederation. Rosas will no doubt make great exertions one and another to put down Rivera who has all along given protection and countenance to the Unitarians from this side.¹⁹

¹⁸ Oribe's grandfather was Mariscal José Joaquín de Viana. According to some accounts, a link can be traced between the Viana line and Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, Spain's legendary Cid. See, for example, José de Torres Wilson, *Oribe: el Uruguay en la lucha de los imperios*, 2nd edn. (Montevideo, 1986), p. 12.

¹⁹ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 23 Aug. 1836, NLS, MSS 10326. A certain aloofness is one of the distinguishing features of the early Argentine-British community, an attitude which was often portrayed as an admirable determination to avoid 'contamination' through contact with the 'inferior' local community. A document written by a member of the settler contingent for the British envoy to Buenos Aires in 1845 evinces this view; the author cites the incomers' adherence to their native culture and values 'as a proof of the superiority of their character [...] in spite of the many untoward influences to which they are exposed'. See Wilbur

Thus, we learn that the Uruguayan conflict and Argentina's domestic quarrel between Rosas's Federalists and their Unitarian opponents are inextricably entangled. By 1836 Rosas had entered his second phase of government, having been re-elected the previous year with absolute authority, *la suma del poder público*. As opposition to his autarchic style mounted in the following months, the dictator employed increasingly repressive measures to subjugate dissenting voices. Sympathisers of the Unitarian faction, most of whom were Europeanised liberals, became the regular targets of brutal abuse, and even dissident Federalists were subjected to scathing attacks from the organs of *rosista* propaganda. The polarisation of society largely centred upon personal allegiance, with the result that truly ideological distinctions were relegated to secondary importance. The political battleground was delineated in the most basic terms; if not an active supporter of Rosas one automatically became his enemy.²⁰ Given the regime's absolute intolerance towards its adversaries and all who collaborated with them, Rosas's close involvement in the Uruguayan struggle came as no surprise, if only on account of Rivera's disposition to associate with the Unitarians.

The first major clash between the government and rebel forces in the Banda Oriental occurred at Carpintería in September 1836, resulting in a convincing victory for Oribe. From the contents of Robert Gibson's next communication, it seems that his prediction of Rivera's defeat is about to be realised: 'The news from the Banda Oriental is that Raña an officer of Rivera has gone over to the Govt. side with about 750 men, which it was supposed would soon decide the business'.²¹ Rather than abandoning his campaign, however, Rivera retreated to Southern Brazil, where he regrouped his forces after sealing a pact with the *farroupilhas*, the rebel

Devereux Jones, 'The Argentine British Colony in the Time of Rosas', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 40, no. 1 (1960), pp. 90–97.

²⁰ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento has recorded that this binary view of society was made explicit in a public proclamation issued by Rosas shortly after resuming office in 1835, the fundamental premise of which could be summarised in the following axiom: 'El que no está conmigo es mi enemigo'. See Sarmiento, *Facundo* [1845] (Madrid, 1993), p. 315.

²¹ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 20 Oct. 1836, NLS, MSS 10326. Additional details of Raña's defection to the government army are provided by Alfredo Lepro in his classic biography of Rivera, *Fructuoso Rivera, hombre del pueblo: sentido revolucionario de su vida y de su acción* (Montevideo, 1945). Lepro notes that Rivera argued with Colonel Raña during the retreat northwards after their defeat at Carpintería 'y éste se entrega al gobierno con sus quinientos hombres' (p. 193). Rivera, however, soon had his revenge: 'A Raña, el desertor, lo ha de matar poco después en Cagancha la lanza que maneja el hercúleo brazo de Marcelino Sosa y cuentan las tradiciones orales llevadas de años en años, que Rivera hizo desfilar sus caballerías ante el cadáver para que todos apreciaran el fin de un traidor' (Lepro, p. 193).

separatists who were fighting for the independence of Rio Grande do Sul. His exile brought a period of relative calm, but soon Robert Gibson writes:

According to all accounts there is every probability of a renewal of disturbances in the Banda Oriental. Armed parties are said to be rising in a great many different places, and Rivera is said to be again advancing towards the centre of the province at the head of a considerable force. As yet, however, nothing certain is known.²²

From his Brazilian sanctuary, Rivera planned the next phase of the operation. Early in 1837, he began to make sporadic forays into Uruguayan territory in preparation for a full-scale invasion later that year. On 22 October, Rivera's followers clashed with the government army at Yucutujá, winning a major victory. After a long series of encounters, some favouring the insurgents, others the authorities, Rivera inflicted a heavy defeat upon the government army at Palmar in June 1838. As the victorious rebels marched towards Montevideo in the following months, French naval forces intervened in their favour, blockading the capital's port. This move can be viewed as an integral part of the French campaign to undermine Rosas and his allies. France's interference placed irresistible pressure on the beleaguered Montevidean government to negotiate an armistice, and the president came to realise that his position was no longer tenable. Hence, Oribe resigned under protest in October 1838, but continued to assert his rightful claim to the presidency, which he would now try to recoup with the direct aid of Rosas.²³

Until 1839, the conflict receives only passing attention in the Gibsons' letters as it has yet to have a serious impact on their own lives. Early that year, however, the civil disruption in Uruguay escalated to an overtly international conflict. Operating under the influence of the French, Rivera declared war upon Rosas on 10 February 1839. This is the date in Uruguayan history which marks the beginning of the so-called Guerra Grande, a struggle which would endure with varying phases of intensity until 1851. In spite of the storm clouds gathering on the horizon, Robert Gibson considers that there is little imminent threat to Rosas's position on account of the dictator's authoritative leadership: 'If the people of the

²² Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 3 March 1837, NLS, MSS 10326.

²³ The rhetoric of Oribe's resignation statement cites ample justification for his subsequent attempts to regain power: 'El Presidente Constitucional de la República, al descender del puesto a que lo elevó el voto de sus conciudadanos, declara [...] que en este acto sólo cede a la violencia de una facción armada, cuyos esfuerzos hubieran sido impotentes si no hubiera encontrado su principal apoyo y la más decidida cooperación en la marina militar francesa, que no ha desdenado aliarse a la anarquía para destruir el orden legal de esta República'. Quoted by de Torres Wilson, *Oribe*, p. 105.

country would not now follow him from love, they would do so from fear'.²⁴ Nevertheless, the combined pressures of the French blockade of Buenos Aires and Rivera's hostility soon led to the neglect of Argentina's internal affairs. At this time, the Gibsons encountered difficulties in securing the required official approval for a land transaction, not because of any deliberate attempt to hinder their activities, but simply as a result of Rosas 'having been so much taken up with the late important events'.²⁵ In the same letter, the ever more substantial implications of the conflict are reflected in the greater detail of Robert's account of recent developments:

The Banda Oriental has declared war against Buenos Ayres it is said at the instigation and urgent reclamation of the French agents in Montevideo, such being the condition upon which the French assisted Rivera, viz. that he should immediately upon getting into Montevideo declare war against Rosas. The Corrientes Govt. were also seduced to join the Orientales against Rosas and were coming down against Entre Ríos when they were met by the Argentine forces under Echagüe Governor of Entre Ríos and completely defeated with a loss of about 2,000 men and officers killed (including the governor of Corrientes) the remainder (of 5,000) being almost all taken prisoner or wounded. Fructos Rivera has not yet moved from the Banda Oriental.

This extract refers to the revolt of Berón de Astrada, governor of the province of Corrientes, against the federal authorities. On 28 February 1839, Astrada declared war on Buenos Aires, but his rebel forces were roundly defeated by the combined armies of Pascual Echagüe and Justo José de Urquiza at Pago Largo on 31 March, the bloody battle related by Gibson. The figure of 2,000 killed seems to be a somewhat exaggerated estimate and is probably a repetition of the inflated tally disseminated by *rosista* propagandists. John Lynch, for instance, proposes that the death toll was around 400, whilst Manuel Gálvez suggests that 800 *correntinos* died and 400 were captured.²⁶

By October 1839, the outlook is no longer so favourable to the regime, for though Echagüe is marching rapidly towards Rivera's stronghold of Montevideo, the forces of Juan Lavalle, Rosas's old Unitarian adversary, are pushing towards Buenos Aires. Robert Gibson notes:

I told you in my last that Lavalle had landed in Entreríos at the head of 800 or 900 men, after having been a considerable time in Martín García with the French troops there, and ultimately assisted by them in his landing, viz. by vessels etc. etc. Since then he has routed 1,600 men sent against him and is said to be carrying everything before him, a reaction having taken place (at least so they say) in Corrientes, which indeed is extremely probable now that Echagüe is in the Banda

²⁴ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 1 Feb. 1839, NLS, MSS 10326.

²⁵ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 29 April 1839, NLS, MSS 10326.

²⁶ John Lynch, *Argentine Dictator: Juan Manuel de Rosas 1829–1852* (Oxford 1981), p. 202; Manuel Gálvez, *Vida de don Juan Manuel de Rosas* (Buenos Aires, 1975), p. 348.

Oriental and Lavalle ready to support any demonstration against the existing government of Corrientes which may be said to have been put there by Echagüe at the point of the sword. In the meantime, Echagüe is within 12 or 14 leagues [39 to 45½ miles] of Montevideo at the head of, it is said, 5,000 men.²⁷

In the same letter, Robert goes on to describe the preparations being made within Montevideo to protect the city from the impending attack:

The French have landed about 500 men with artillery for the defence of Montevideo, and their consul has called upon French residents to take up arms for the defence of the city against the common enemy, for so they call Echagüe's force, which although it goes under the pretence of restoring the legal government of the Banda Oriental is looked upon by the French as the army of Rosas. About 500 French residents have armed accordingly and more are expected to do so. It is even said that some more foreigners such as Germans were also arming for the same purpose.

Later in this letter, Robert Gibson anticipates an imminent battle between Echagüe and Rivera. He suggests that a victory for Rivera would prove decisive, but that should Echagüe emerge victorious then Rivera would have 'the means of recovering himself soon'. Gibson criticises Rosas for not sending Oribe to lead the invasion on the grounds that the present force 'has every appearance of being nothing else but an Argentine army coming to lay down the law to the Orientales'. A recent attempt has been made to remedy this error: 'Oribe only left this lately with 400 men (enlisted here) for Entreríos on his way to the B.[anda] O.[riental], but to get there he will have to fight Lavalle in Entreríos who I expect will beat him'. In fact, Oribe avoided this encounter and Lavalle was engaged by Juan Pablo López, the pro-Rosas governor of Santa Fe. Lavalle's Unitarians were routed, but the general managed to escape to Corrientes with the remnants of his army. This setback to the Unitarian campaign was not foreseen by Robert Gibson, who considered it likely that Lavalle would 'carry all before him in Entreríos and Corrientes, and then come over into Santa Fe, and then down into the province [of Buenos Aires]'

At this point, Robert Gibson is becoming increasingly frustrated by the economic implications of the French blockade of Buenos Aires and begins to hope for Rosas's defeat, considering that all would be resolved if the dictator was to fall. He writes: 'I hope that if this is the way the blockade is to be raised, that it will be done quickly and with as little fighting as possible'.²⁸ He expresses confidence that the southerly location of the Los Yngleses and San Borombón properties will be far removed from the worst of any combat and that the people there have little to fear. In

²⁷ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 23 Oct. 1839, NLS, MSS 10326.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

contrast, one of the Gibsons' Scottish compatriots found himself in a much less secure situation:

Poor Captain Campbell who bought an Estancia in Entreríos in preference to this province, as being in his opinion less likely to be disturbed by revolutions, has got into the very hottest of it, the battle lately fought there by Lavalle having been fought on his very ground.²⁹

Although Robert's prediction that the family estancias would be safe from any engagement between Rosas and Lavalle proved correct, he was unable to forecast the disturbance which would be caused by the separate uprising in southern Buenos Aires province. At this time, George Gibson was residing at the San Borombón property, having left the Los Yngleses estancia in the care of the youngest of the brothers, Thomas, who had arrived in Argentina as recently as 1838. As communications in rural areas were very poor, George still relied on letters from the distant city for news of the nearby rebellion:

Since the date of my last we have had an attempt at a revolution in the south, some of the particulars of which you will have seen in the Gazette [*La Gaceta Mercantil*, a pro-Rosas newspaper] which I send you by packet. It broke out at Dolores on the 29th and immediately afterwards at Chascomús.³⁰

Although there is some circumstantial evidence to link the southern conspirators to the wider Unitarian campaign, the uprising was essentially a response to the economic ramifications of the French blockade. Historically, the *estancieros* of the south were more financially vulnerable than their counterparts near to the city, as their cattle lost weight on the long drive north to the *mataderos* of Buenos Aires. Whereas they had survived previously, the repression of export meant that the supply of cattle now far outstripped demand, with the result that the market for stock from the more distant estancias was severely confined. Few of the rebels who sought to oust the stubborn Rosas in favour of a governor prepared to negotiate with the French were natural Unitarians; indeed, many possessed solidly Federalist credentials, and could even count amongst their number Gervasio Rosas, the younger brother of the dictator. Such factors, however, did not shield the conspirators from savage treatment in the official press; the regime circulated propaganda describing the insurgents as 'los viejos unitarios de Dolores y Monsalvo encabezados por el hombre desnaturalizado don Gervasio Rosas'.³¹

Robert Gibson estimates that the rebels amassed an army of around 3,000 to 3,500 men from the local population and also received the

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 23 Nov. 1839, NLS, MSS 10326.

³¹ Cited by Gálvez, *Vida de don Juan Manuel de Rosas*, p. 364.

support of some renegade government forces in the area: ‘They were joined by the officer and troops stationed at Salado (about 300 men), the troops at Atalaya, without their officer, and they counted upon an officer called Granada joining them with his force, about 600 or 800 veterans’.³² In the event, Granada did not defect to the rebels; instead, with the assistance of Prudencio Rosas, another brother of the dictator, he ambushed and routed the insurgents near Chascomús. The remnants of the rebel army took flight, many escaping to Montevideo aboard vessels stationed at the mouths of the Salado and Tuyú rivers by prior arrangement with the French navy. Despite the close proximity of Los Yngleses to the scene of the battle, Robert appears confident that no harm will have come to his younger brother, Thomas:

I don’t think anything will have happened to Thomas or our own people at the Estancia, as the chasque [messenger] who came up to the owner of the Zumaca [a vessel which ferried some of the defeated rebels to their Uruguayan exile] said that the people were in the greatest order, that no excesses had been committed by them, and he also said that Don Manuel Rico who commanded the force, had paid for some animals which they had got at an Estancia to take on board with them.³³

Although the residents at Los Yngleses were never physically endangered by the uprising, Thomas Gibson’s own account of events suggests that they had to endure considerable disruption:

The insurgents gave battle at Chascomús, and, being defeated, retreated to the coast and encamped upon our place. Here they remained three or four days, getting or taking over 40 steers per diem. Report reached them that the Government army was on their track, and they moved on to Ajó creek, whence they embarked for Monte Video. We, however, anticipating an action and all its consequent disorders, left the head station by night and travelled down to an isolated corner of the estancia, taking with us a bullock cart which served as house and store-room. A few days later we heard of the flight of the insurgent army, and returned to the head station. On the same afternoon the whole eastern horizon became serrated by the Government army, 3,200 strong, including 400 Indians, the infantry of course mounted; they brought immense troops of spare horses, and had one or two pieces of artillery. The General, Don Prudencia [sic] Rosas, and his staff, accepted the offer of our house, and the army encamped about the steading. They slaughtered 120 steers upon arrival, the General apologising for not being able to save the skins, as the soldiers needed carne con cuero on the successful termination of the campaign. They remained with us two or three days, consuming over 60 steers per diem. (Cited by Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-breeding Industry*, pp. 27–8)

Thomas Gibson makes no mention of receiving financial compensation for the substantial plundering of his stock and we must assume that he had

³² Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 23 Nov. 1839, NLS, MSS 10326.

³³ *Ibid.*

little option but to tolerate the situation. Given the immoderate atmosphere of the time, failure to cooperate with the government forces would have probably led to accusations of complicity in the rebellion. This would have indeed been an unwise risk in light of the severe punishments meted out to captured dissidents. Robert Gibson gives testimony to the typically draconian oppression which followed the uprising:

Pedro Castelli, one of the principal movers in the affair, was taken in the Montes Grandes (to the south of us) and shot, and his head was taken off and sent to Dolores. The whole business may be said to be at an end now. A number of people have been brought into town, concerned in it. What their fate will be 'quien sabe'. Rosas surely can't shoot them all...³⁴

Historical accounts of the rebels' fate vary considerably. John Lynch, for instance, also tells of Pedro Castelli's arrest and decapitation on the express orders of Rosas, adding that 'excesses were committed by the government troops in the south, following their victory'.³⁵ Manuel Gálvez, on the other hand, whose pro-Rosas bias is apparent, depicts the dictator as a man who reacts with great magnanimity towards friends who have cruelly betrayed him, asserting that no executions took place and that those who were imprisoned were released after serving relatively short sentences.³⁶ The true extent of the retributions is difficult to establish, but, on balance, it seems that the authorities responded with comparative restraint. There is certainly no evidence of the frenzy of retaliation which might have been expected of an absolute ruler. In all probability, a rebellion that had originated amongst a traditionally *rosista* sector of society had indeed shaken the regime and prompted a cautious reaction, the dictator not relishing the prospect of further conflict with his most natural allies.

At no stage of Robert Gibson's account of the revolution is there an explicit indication of his own political allegiance. His letter gives a fairly restrained version of events, offering just a hint of growing impatience with the regime. Some evidence would suggest, however, that Thomas Gibson may have assisted the rebels in their flight to exile. As we have already observed, the insurgent army fled through the Gibsons' property en route to the coast. Given that many of the leaders of the rebellion owned lands close to Los Yngleses, and were thus known to the Gibsons, it seems quite possible that Thomas would have felt some obligation to help his beleaguered acquaintances. This is the conclusion reached in a brief summary of the Gibson family history appearing in *The Standard of*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Lynch, *Argentine Dictator*, p. 227.

³⁶ Gálvez, *Vida de don Juan Manuel de Rosas*, p. 365.

1 May 1930. In this article, Thomas is described as ‘the unwilling host of General Prudencio Rozas with his Federal Army’, and we are told that he earlier ‘sped from the Rincón del Bote [...] many neighbours and friends’.³⁷ Of course, this does not necessarily imply that he was a partisan of the rebel cause; viewed from a different angle, his actions may be interpreted as nothing other than those of a good friend and neighbour.

Robert’s account of the uprising ends on an uneasy note and he bluntly indicates the likely outcome of continued hostilities with the French:

This outbreak to the south, where Rosas considered himself strongest, must have alarmed him not a little... He must now see the necessity there is for settling with the French immediately, as, if the blockade continues much longer, the discontent of the people will again break out, and if it does so it will probably be in such a manner that he will not be able to put it down.³⁸

This letter contains a final reflection upon the whole unfortunate episode, which indicates the full implications of the French intervention for the people of Buenos Aires: ‘If the blockade continues much longer we must have another rising again; the discomfort is such as you have no idea of’. The ‘discomfort’, however, was set to continue for some time yet. At this point, Rosas was in no way disposed towards settling with the French, especially as his enemies were gaining the upper hand in Uruguay. On 29 December 1839, the forces of Echagüe and Rivera clashed at Cagancha, and the federal army was driven back into Entre Ríos. Rivera’s victory was a major boost to the Unitarian campaign to depose Rosas. As Lavalle advanced towards Buenos Aires early in 1840, the regime responded with a ferocious campaign of defamation in the pages of the official press. The Unitarians are ‘salvajes, perversos, traidores, sabandijas’; Lavalle is depicted as ‘vil, traidor, asesino, bestial, malvado’; Rivera is condemned as ‘pardejón, perverso y mulato’, whilst the French are denigrated as ‘cobardes, incendiarios, piratas’.³⁹ The mounting atmosphere of fanaticism and hatred appalls Robert Gibson, who, for the first time, openly declares opposition to Rosas:

The *Gaceta* [*La Gaceta Mercantil*] begins to vomit forth its venom against Lavalle. It is a sure sign that things are not going as Rosas would have liked them... The storm now threatens Rosas on all sides, and I suspect not all his talent (and he is undoubtedly clever) will be sufficient to carry him through with success. He must fall, and the sooner the better. He has through his obstinacy in the affair of the Blockade, brought distress and ruin upon many of the Country and his bloodthirsty persecution of all those who dared to think for themselves will ever be a damnable stain on his memory.⁴⁰

³⁷ ‘Old British and American Firms’, *The Standard*, 1 May 1930.

³⁸ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 23 Nov. 1839, NLS, MSS 10326.

³⁹ Gálvez, *Vida de don Juan Manuel de Rosas*, p. 369.

⁴⁰ Robert Gibson to George Gibson, Buenos Aires, 16 May 1840, NLS, MSS 10326.

Rosas, of course, was to avoid this fate for quite some time. In the latter part of 1840, his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Felipe Arana, entered into negotiations with the French representative, Baron de Mackau, finally signing a peace treaty on 29 October. Thus, the French blockade was lifted.

The end of this conflict with France restored a measure of prosperity to Buenos Aires and its province, but other aspects of *rosismo* continued to prejudice the Gibsons' operations. Throughout the Rosas era, there was an acute lack of manpower in rural areas due to the conscription of a high proportion of the adult male population into the militia. Press gangs constantly roamed the pampa in search of recruits, and landowners were virtually powerless to impede the commandeering of their work-force. Only the estancias of those with influential contacts in the regime would be saved the visit of the recruiting teams. The corrupt nature of the system has been noted by John Lynch: 'estancieros and peons were completely at the mercy of local military commanders, who spared their friends and exacted unfair levies on others'.⁴¹ Shortage of labour was a constant problem for the Gibsons at this time, especially during the sheep shearing season. During 1845, however, Rosas's conflict with the British and French governments brought an unlikely benefit to the proprietors of Los Yngleses.

Throughout the 1840s, Europe's principal powers kept a watchful eye on developments in the Río de la Plata and grew increasingly concerned over Rosas's ever-closer involvement in the Uruguayan troubles. Britain, in particular, felt that the dictator's intentions towards the Banda Oriental were dishonourable and that his embroilment in the conflict posed a very real threat to Uruguay's autonomy.⁴² Should the eastern shore of the Plate have fallen under the domain of Buenos Aires, of course, Rosas would have been ideally placed to restrict shipping to the region that lay upriver. Dr Francia, the isolationist ruler of Paraguay, had recently died, and European commercial interests considered that the time was ripe to infiltrate the potential market from which official xenophobia had previously excluded them, an enterprise viable only if free navigation was permitted through the fluvial access to the country. Rosas, for his part, aspired to regulate any trade passing Buenos Aires, and attempted to close the Río Paraná to foreign vessels. Already riled by this measure, Britain and France perceived that any further expansion of the dictator's sphere

⁴¹ Lynch, *Argentine Dictator*, pp. 191–2.

⁴² The fact that Uruguay's attainment of independence in 1828 was largely the product of the diplomacy of Canning and Ponsonby undoubtedly made the British government feel this new threat more keenly. On Britain's part in the establishment of the Uruguayan nation, see Luis Alberto de Herrera, *La misión Ponsonby* (Montevideo, 1930).

of influence, *vis-à-vis* his intervention in Uruguay, would deal a disastrous blow to their mercantile ambitions.⁴³

In 1845, the British and French envoys to Buenos Aires, William Gore Ouseley and Baron Deffaudis, demanded the cessation of hostilities in Uruguay and the opening of the rivers to foreign merchantmen. Even whilst a response was awaited, a fleet of warships was gathering ready to blockade Buenos Aires and impose a settlement through the display of naval might. Rosas, however, refused to negotiate and rejected the envoys' proposals outright. The Anglo-French squadron moved into position around Buenos Aires almost immediately, later forcing a passage up the Paraná by fighting their way through Vuelta de Obligado, a narrow point on the river where Rosas had located floating obstructions and artillery batteries.⁴⁴

Due to the collapse of diplomatic relations between London and Buenos Aires, Ouseley retreated to Montevideo in July 1845, advising his compatriots to do likewise. His decision left the remaining Argentine–British community without the protection of official representation and, effectively, at the mercy of Rosas. Those living in remote areas were considered to be at particular risk of persecution at the whim of local officials. Nevertheless, Thomas Gibson chose to remain at Los Yngleses and, in the words of Herbert Gibson, ‘trust to the chivalry of the Argentine commander in the south, to leave him in peace’.⁴⁵ His courageous decision was soon to bring its own rewards. Suffering an acute shortage of manpower at this time, most of the Los Yngleses herds and flocks were wandering untended and unbranded. In such conditions, animals were likely to be lost or stolen and Thomas resolved that action was required to muster and brand the stock. He sent word to Robert in Buenos Aires, asking him to ride to the military garrison at Dolores to solicit the loan of a working party to assist with the daunting task. When Robert placed the request before him, the commander of the post, Colonel Delfer Del Valle, replied: ‘For your brother who remained at his estancia

⁴³ British sources, however, severely overestimated the economic potential of the Paraguayan region. As Peter Winn has noted, officials and merchants ‘succumbed to the myth of the “Great Paraguay Market” – a beatific vision of the teeming populations of the interior of South America, prevented only by Rosas’s despotism from becoming a vast market and a source of cheap raw materials for [...] industrial England’. Winn, ‘British Informal Empire in Uruguay in the Nineteenth Century’, *Past and Present*, no. 73 (1976), pp. 100–26.

⁴⁴ For a detailed account of the Anglo-French intervention, with special emphasis on Britain’s role, see José Luis Muñoz Azpiri, *Rosas frente al imperio británico* (Buenos Aires, 1974). It may be worth noting that this work is written from the viewpoint of an Argentinian nationalist, who portrays Rosas’s resistance to British ‘imperialism’ in an heroic light. Notwithstanding this fact, Azpiri’s work combines perceptive analysis with a useful documentary appendix.

⁴⁵ Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry*, p. 257.

when his minister advised him to leave the country? Most willingly!’⁴⁶ Robert Gibson was permitted to choose as many men as were required, selecting those who had a good knowledge of the terrain around Los Yngleses. A short time after this act of generosity, Del Valle seems to have fallen foul of the regime; according to one account, the Gibsons, ‘on riding into Dolores [...] saw to their sorrow, the head of this friend impaled on a stake’.⁴⁷ Herbert Gibson, however, asserts that Del Valle’s death was the product of natural causes, but that the authorities denied him a decent burial:

He died of a fever, and it is reported that his body remained for some time sewn up in a horse hide before a charitable man was found sufficiently courageous to bury it. Such were the times of terror under which the South groaned in the ‘forties’.⁴⁸

Whichever version may be true, we can only speculate as to the cause of Del Valle’s fall from grace.

Two years after this incident, Thomas Gibson narrowly avoided a similar fate. At this time, the export of foodstuffs to Rosas’s enemies in Uruguay was strictly prohibited and punishable by death. From 1843 onwards, whilst the Argentine wool industry was still in its infancy, one of the principal activities of the Gibson brothers was the ‘boiling down’ of sheep carcasses to yield fat for both culinary and industrial use. Two grades of fat were produced: *sebo*, which was deemed suitable for human consumption, and *graza* (tallow), a less refined product, most of which was exported to Europe for the greasing of machinery and the manufacture of candles. In 1847, Thomas Gibson obtained an export permit to send a consignment of *graza* to Europe via the port of Montevideo. In error, the word *sebo* was entered in the documentation and Thomas was arrested on the charge of attempting to export edible produce.⁴⁹ He was taken to Buenos Aires as a prisoner, but was released after only a few days of confinement on the intercession of Gervasio Rosas. One must assume that Juan Manuel had now forgiven his brother’s role in the southern rebellion.

The episode of Thomas Gibson’s arrest clearly demonstrates the extent to which political matters interfered with business during the Rosas era. This was again apparent in 1848, when the authorities renewed the Gibsons’ permit for ‘boiling down’ at Los Yngleses. The license was

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁴⁷ ‘Old British and American Firms’, *The Standard*, 1 May 1930.

⁴⁸ Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry*, p. 258.

⁴⁹ On his detention, Thomas Gibson sent a rather cryptic note to Robert in Buenos Aires explaining his plight: ‘Have been today arrested by the Juez because I embarked grease wt. permit for talw. and sent to town wh. I protest against on stamped paper’, NLS, MSS 10327.

granted ‘with the express condition that this work shall not be administrated nor served by any person or persons who are savage Unitarians’⁵⁰

Having reviewed the Gibsons’ letters and associated documents, we can now draw certain conclusions on their opinions of the Rosas regime, which may perhaps be extended to the Argentine–British community as a whole. As we noted earlier, Robert Gibson’s interest in national events intensifies when political developments begin to affect his own experience. Even then, he pursues a predominantly dispassionate tone until exposed to the full extremity of the dictatorship during the latter part of 1839 and early 1840. A note of irritation begins to impinge upon Robert’s description of the southern uprising, finally giving way to outright hostility in the following months, a change with which we can easily sympathise. He is clearly exasperated by the dictator’s failure to heed the hardships which catalysed the revolt and by the subsequent oppression. Presumably, his anger is only heightened by the disruption experienced by Thomas at Los Yngleses and by the persecution of family acquaintances in the wake of the rebellion.

The reader will have observed that only passing reference is made to the period after 1840; this is because political comment is all but absent from the brothers’ later correspondence. After the lifting of the French blockade, there followed a period of relative calm in the domestic affairs of Buenos Aires, during which business matters dominate the epistolary conversations between Robert, George and Thomas. Their letters from this era are filled with details of everyday life, the livestock market and land transactions, with only the occasional interspersed national news. From this shift in emphasis, we can deduce that political events *per se* were of little interest to the early British settlers, provided that there was no significant intrusion in their existence or obstacle to their prosperity (Thomas Gibson’s arrest, for example). Indeed, this is a hallmark of the Argentine–British community, corroborated by many observers.⁵¹ Nat-

⁵⁰ Herbert Gibson, *The History and Present State of the Sheep-Breeding Industry*, p. 32.

⁵¹ In general, British residents in Argentina during this period remained detached from the political arena, but viewed the dictator as a necessary evil, considering that his strong-arm tactics were the only means of checking the inherent lawlessness of creole society. This attitude is summarised by the Anglo-Argentine author W. H. Hudson, who spent his early life in Buenos Aires province during the Rosas era. In *Far Away and Long Ago: A Childhood in Argentina* [1918] (London, 1985), Hudson writes: ‘People were in perpetual conflict about the character of the great man. He was abhorred by many, perhaps by most; others were on his side even for years after he had vanished from their ken, and among these were most of the English residents of the country, my father among them. Quite naturally I followed my father and came to believe that all the bloodshed during a quarter of a century, all the crimes and cruelties practised by Rosas, were not like the crimes committed by a private person, but were all for the good of the country, with the result that in Buenos Ayres and throughout our province

urally, there were times when the sheer brutality of the Rosas regime offended the incomers' sensibilities, as Robert Gibson's letter of May 1840 would suggest. To those familiar with Argentinian history of this period, Robert's disgust should come as no surprise; the date of this communication coincides with a sudden upsurge in the dictatorship's official terrorism. We need only read a literary work such as José Mármol's *Amalia* to appreciate the full horror of the final months of the French blockade.

there had been a long period of peace and prosperity, and that all this ended with his fall and was succeeded by years of fresh revolutionary outbreaks and bloodshed and anarchy' (pp. 126–7). A few pages later, however, Hudson expresses his mystification at some of the more extreme actions of the dictator.