

Pioneering in the Pampas

RICHARD ARTHUR SEYMOUR

with a preface by

Juan Carlos Casas

STOCKCERO

910.4 Seymour, Richard
SEY Pioneering in the Pampa's.- 1ª. ed.-
Buenos Aires : Stock Cero, 2002.
156 p. ; 23x16 cm.

ISBN 987-20506-6-X

I. Título - I. Relatos de Viajes

FIRST PUBLISHED IN LONDON (1869)

by LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

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1º edición: 2002

Stockcero

ISBN N° 987-20506-6-X

Libro de Edición Argentina.

Hecho el depósito que prevé la ley 11.723.

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*Pioneering in the
Pampas*

or

THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

OF

A SETTLER'S EXPERIENCE IN THE LA PLATA CAMPS

by

RICHARD ARTHUR SEYMOUR

with a preface by

JUAN CARLOS CASAS

STOCKCERO

PREFACE TO THE PRESENT EDITION

Should the reader of this book expect a literary masterpiece, he is bound for disappointment.

Richard Seymour was not a master writer. However, his love for detail and outstanding memory captivates with the educated and fluent prose of an “average” nineteenth century Oxford scholar.

Vivid descriptions about the terrible Ranqueles Indians faces, the Gauchos outfits, and the differences between Indian and Gaucho horse taming methods make reading *Pioneering in the Pampas* a journey into the experience of everyday life at the Pampas Indian frontier during the mid eighteenth hundreds.

Minutiae such as hand brick-making, how many bricks per day an experienced worker could make, and how much would he do before becoming exhausted –all basic matters assuming that, even in the midst of nowhere, prime among your goals stands living like an English esquire–dot the book.

Were the gauchos honest workers or did they try to work as little as possible? How were the English-type horse races held in Rosario organized? All questions that haunted the earnest Victorian gentleman are subject to Mr. Richard Seymour’s sharp observations.

Among the both practical and curious details stand:

- The outrageously high labour wages –compared to those at home–cowhands, brick makers, horse breakers, and others.
- The weak commitment to religion of the Gauchos, who “delegated” church attendance to women leaving to them the chores of advocating on their behalf at doomsday.
- The exaggerated size up to which vegetables grew, to much-surprise of the Englishmen.
- How commonplace it was for newcomers travelling in the Pampas to lose track of time, ending up sleeping in the open, as Hume and a friend experienced the harsh way.

- The high-rank inhabitants of a low-rank town, such as Fraile Muerto in those days, including the town's cheap hotel and its colourful clientele.
- Differences between Creole and English sheep.
- The immediate requirement to dig trenches surrounding the houses and corrals as a defence measure against Indian attacks.
- The ill-fated government decision to transfer the soldiers from the line of forts, thus leaving unprotected the white population south of the Córdoba Province.
- The appearance of cholera in the region and its high death toll.
- How law and order were enforced by the “comandante” through summary trials and executions, and why English pioneers always carried their revolvers.

Through Richard Seymour's narrative, the geography of the Pampas and the times before railroads and immigration waves acquire amazingly realistic characteristics.

Soon enough the conquest of the desert by President Roca in 1880 would change the character of the place, though strangely Richard Seymour seems unwilling to stand witness to it. Without explicitly mentioning the detail in his book, he departed for England in 1869 where—in the Rectory of Kinwarton, Warwickshire—he devotedly relived his experiences by writing this book.

The vivid memories and the ever present strict Victorianism of his stance regarding relations with the opposite sex, strikingly never mentioned in spite of his youth and circumstance—a man in his early twenties dwelling with bachelor friends in a savage land where they must have undoubtedly encountered Creoles, Indians and some scarce British female subjects—altogether with the implicitly painful and unexplained abandonment of it all, sparked my mind up to the point of writing “Fraile Muerto”, the novel, bridging the notorious sex absence gap with an imaginary underlying plot.

All said, I must add that bringing back to print Richard Seymour's book is my most sincere homage to the man who preceded me in the love for the strange solitudes of the Argentine Pampa's soul.

Juan Carlos Casas
Buenos Aires – December 2002

TO THE
HON. GERALD C. TALBOT
and
REV. R. SEYMOUR,

In grateful recollection
of
THEIR WARM AND CONSTANT INTEREST IN
THE SETTLERS AT MONTE MOLINO

The writer of the following pages is well aware that the only apology that is worth anything for the publication of a book must be found in its contents. If his readers do not find these such as to justify the presumption which asks for their perusal, no preface, however ingenious, can be of any worth. And yet he is anxious to bespeak the favour of those under whose eyes this volume may chance to fall, by briefly saying, that while he grants the superior merits, in almost every respect, of such works on the La Plate regions as Mr. Hinchcliff's, Mr. Hutchinson's, Mr. Latham's, and though last in its appearance, by no means least in value, the work of Señor Sarmiento, the present enlightened President of the Argentine Republic, the claim of this volume, if it has any claim at all, lies in this - that the ground it traverses has been scarcely touched by those writers, inasmuch as it is confined almost exclusively to the simple narration of the difficulties which beset the settler in the first few years of his enterprise, more particularly when he has been tempted to fix himself outside the older settlements, and to be, as in the case of the writer and his companions, in the truest sense of the word, a Pioneer.

R. A. S.

KINWARTON RECTORY:

August 25, 1869.

CHAPTER I.

VOYAGE OUT - LISBON - BAHIA - RIO - ARRIVE AT BUENOS AYRES.

I sailed from Liverpool, January 17, 1865, in the Kepler, bound for Buenos Ayres, intending to join a friend who had already been for a year and a half in the Argentine Republic, where we both hoped to make a rapid fortune by sheep-farming; how far these sanguine prospects have been realised I am now about to relate. I think also that a slight sketch of the difficulties, disappointments, and successes of a settler's life, in the River Plate, may not be wholly devoid of interest.

I went on board early in the morning and about ten o'clock we started. It was a cold raw day, and as we slowly steamed down the Mersey, I was glad, as soon as I lost sight of the friends who had come to see me off, to go below, and examine into my prospects of probable comfort during the voyage. These appeared rather promising, as, our number of passengers not being very large, I was favoured with a cabin to myself, opening on the saloon.

I was not able to indulge in much sentiment about the last sight of old England, as she was wrapped in her usual veil of fog; and if Lord Byron's celebrated "Farewell" had occurred to my mind, I must have bid "Adieu" not to blue but to brown water. The weather, however, on the whole, was very favourable, and we steamed rapidly along. I was much relieved by discovering myself to be a far better sailor than I expected, and, until subjected to the severe test of the Bay of Biscay, imagined myself quite impervious to the "Maladie de mer". But once well embarked on those stormy waters, we experienced some really rough weather, and very few of the passengers appeared at dinner on the first day. My chief amusement just then consisted in watching the large shoals of porpoises that used to play round the vessel, quite regardless of the rough state of the weather. I tried some shots at them with a revolver, but am happy to reflect that I did not succeed in abridging their ungainly existence, as porpoises are not among

the delicacies usually served up on board ship, and necessity had not then reconciled me to the many varieties of food of which I have since partaken.

On the 24th we sighted the lighthouse just outside the Tagus, but for a day and a half the fog continued so thick that it was not till the afternoon of the second day that we could venture to cross the bar, and even then were forced to run in without a pilot. This delay did not sweeten the tempers of either officers or passengers, and many phrases which might be called strictly nautical were employed on this trying occasion. Once fairly over the bar, however, all annoyances were forgotten, or only enhanced our admiration of the beautiful view before us. The weather was lovely, and the banks on each side of the river, covered with verdure, made one conscious of having reached a more sunny clime. The most striking feature, however, on the banks of the Tagus, to the less poetical stranger who now beheld them for the first time, was the enormous quantity of small windmills; the cause of this I have been unable to discover for certain, but the unflattering reason I have heard assigned is that the Portuguese millers are such thieves that everyone is obliged to turn miller on his own account and grind his own corn for himself. I may just hint, by the way, that in my own beloved country I have heard a proverb which appears to throw a doubt on the integrity of other millers besides those on the banks of the Tagus -

*Give me a miller that will not steal,
Give me a webster that is leal,
Find me a clerk that is not greedy,
And lay these three a dead corpse by;
And by virtue of these three
The same dead corpse shall quickened be.*

We soon passed Cintra, which stands back at some little distance from the river and is beautifully situated among the hills, but the mist, though partially dissipated, prevented our seeing it at all clearly. About two miles below Lisbon stands Belem Castle, an old fortress, part of which appears to be of very ancient date; here the coast-guard boat and also that of the captain of the port boarded us, to carry out the vexatious quarantine regulations, which we were luckily able to escape on showing our clean bill of health. We then proceeded up the Tagus, and soon anchored close to Lisbon.

Here we were shortly joined by the Herschel, one of the same line of steamers as the Kepler, but homeward bound, and found, to our surprise,

that she had on board the crew of H.M.S. Bombay, the flag-ship at Monte Video, which had just been unfortunately burnt, and was bringing them back to England. I found amongst them several officers to whom I had letters, which I had not expected to deliver so speedily.

We landed almost immediately and went up to the Braganza hotel, and, having established ourselves there, we proceeded to lionise Lisbon. The town is built on a number of little hills, the natural result of which is that most of the streets are very steep. The recollection of the dreadful earthquake appears still to be very vivid in the minds of the inhabitants of Lisbon, as I was told that the houses are still constructed to suffer as little as possible from a similar misfortune, the walls being built with a sort of wooden frame into which the lime and stones are tightly pounded down.

The streets are very well paved, and there are some fine squares. One called by the English sailors "Rolling Motion Square" is paved in a most peculiar manner with black and white stones, arranged in such a way as to have the appearance (more especially by moonlight) of small waves. The Opera House is very fine, and the performance of "La Marta", which we attended, was good.

We left Lisbon on the afternoon of the 25th with a fair wind, and in a few days sighted Palma, one of the Canary Islands; but we unfortunately passed the Peak of Teneriffe at night, so that we saw nothing of it. Our weather was beautiful, and the night splendid, as it was just then full moon. The stars have a friendly look to the traveller at sea, being the only perfectly familiar objects on which his eye can rest, and the faithful "Orion" carries him back to calm English summer nights, or frosty winter evenings, when he has shone above him in other, and well-remembered scenes. But even here there is a change, and the "Southern Cross", did not equal my expectations, nor in my opinion can it at all be compared to the old "Great Bear". We generally had some singing in the evenings; one of the passengers played the violin, and another the flute. There being only one lady on board, dancing was not very practicable. I also amused myself with my Spanish studies, and embarked upon "Gil Blas". We went through the usual ceremonies on passing the Line, some of the new hands on board being favoured with a visit from old Father Neptune; the passengers escaped an introduction to this venerable god by paying the usual fine. In spite of these innocent relaxations, I found the voyage very tedious, and was not sorry to arrive at Bahia, which we did on the 14th of February.

We landed at once, and in spite of the intense heat most of its directly set off for a walk of some miles, after the manner of Englishmen; some of our company, however, fell into the ways of the country at once, and were conveyed in the sedan-chairs or the place, called *cadheras*. The public gardens are pretty, and there is a beautiful view from them over the blue waters of the bay. I gathered some pods of a very pretty flower, a creeper, with blossoms something like a pea in shape, but of a pale blue colour, and sent them home, where I believe they grow well in a conservatory. The first sight of tropical plants and flowers must strike everyone much, and the white buildings of the town looked intensely hot and dazzling in the glaring sun. I went into the cathedral, which was most splendidly decorated: there were silver candlesticks and candelabra, and the shrines covered with gold lace, &c. There were some very fine frescoes on the roof, and in a sort of open court, outside, were some curious pictures of Scripture subjects on China tiles. Still Bahia in general is not a lovely town, the streets being narrow and ill-paved and very offensive to the olfactory nerves. We only remained there one night, and after another expedition into the country on the following morning to a place called Bamfu, sailed in the evening for Rio, feeling no great envy for one of our fellow-passengers who remained at Bahia.

We reached Rio de Janeiro on the 19th, and entered the harbour at about five o'clock in the morning, and having risen earlier than was my wont, to admire the entrance to the most beautiful harbour in the world, I was a good deal disgusted to find everything wrapped in a fog, so thick that we could see no farther than the bows of the ship. We consoled ourselves with breakfast, and on returning to the deck found that the fog had cleared away, and the lovely bay lay stretched before its in all its beauty. The Italians say "*Vedi Napoli e poi mori*", but the inventor of that proverb had certainly not seen Rio, as no national partialities can, I think, compare any harbour in the world to that which we now beheld. The entrance to the bay is very narrow, with the Sugar-loaf mountain rising straight out of the water on one side, and the fort on the other. Through this picturesque passage you come at once into the immense bay, more than sixty miles round. The wide expanse of blue water shone brightly in the morning sun as we slowly steamed in, and the magnificent background of mountains rose in the distance.

The town of Rio lies to the left as you enter the harbour, and is very picturesquely situated, many of the houses being dotted about among the thick tropical foliage of palm trees, plantains, &c. Behind the town rises the Corcovado mountain, and other hills stretch round to the right until they

reach the Organ mountains, which are just above Petropolis, the favourite summer resort of the fashionable inhabitants of Rio. We soon landed, and agreed to spend most of our time in an expedition to Tijuca, a lovely spot among the mountains. After going about eight miles by train we procured mules, on which we rode to the hotel, and after ordering dinner there, we proceeded some four miles farther, along a winding path up the mountains, until we reached a beautiful waterfall surrounded with pines and flowers.

The sun was just setting as we returned to the hotel, and the view over the harbour, with the town stretched at our feet, the white shipping in the bay glowing in the departing light which lit up the distant mountains with every imaginable tint of purple and gold, altogether made up a picture which must have been seen to be realised; and certainly no words of mine can adequately describe the lovely scene I then beheld. All around us was the most luxuriant vegetation in the world; orange-trees, bananas, palms, and tree-ferns towered above us, and the ground was carpeted with flowers of every colour, some of them extremely sweet; humming-birds and butterflies added to the brilliancy of the scene; some of the latter are immensely large, and I saw several which appeared to be about the size of an English thrush. But the whole place was to us like enchanted ground; and with every allowance for the feelings of travellers weary of the monotony of life on board ship and ready to think any spot of green earth a paradise, and also for the first dazzling effect of tropical scenery on the eyes of those hitherto accustomed to the gloomier colouring of our northern home, I think it is impossible that in this world there can be any other place so perfectly beautiful as Rio, nor can any description, either in poetry or prose, ever do it justice. I forgot to mention that at one of the houses near the waterfall I beheld something which delighted me even more than the large butterflies, one of which, by the bye, I vainly endeavoured to capture; this was a small ant-eater about the size of a little terrier dog, with a large bushy tail and a collar round its neck, so tame that it followed us about like a dog, and I should have much liked to carry it off with me. We spent the night at the hotel, and during the early part of it a most tremendous thunderstorm came on; the lightning had a magnificent effect among the mountains, which it lit up most splendidly; and the violent rain was rather surprising to us after the drizzling showers of England, which certainly give no idea of what hard rain can be in the tropics. On returning to Rio next day, we went into the market, and were much amused by all the new beasts and birds which met our eyes; the gaily-coloured par-

rots and some lovely little marmosets especially took our fancy, to say nothing of the handsome negro women, slightly inclining to embonpoint, who looked very like bronzed statues in picturesque dresses.

Before returning to the ship I visited the cemetery appropriated to foreigners, which is about two miles out of the town and beautifully situated, lying at the foot of one of the hills, and running down almost to the water's edge. The graves are well kept, and I soon found the one I was in search of, which, like most of the others, was in a very good state; nor could anyone, I think, desire for those whom they most love a more beautiful and peaceful spot as their last resting-place than the burying-ground at Gamboya.

But we could not linger long on these delightful shores, and were soon tossing again on the waves of the Atlantic. We spent one night, the 30th, at Monte Video, the capital of the flourishing little republic of Uruguay, but, after Rio, the scenery was not very striking. The carnival was just going on, and I carried away a lively remembrance of the pastimes then practised, as some fair damsel dropped from a balcony upon my head a paper bag filled with water, which immediately burst and drenched me thoroughly. We reached Buenos Ayres about eight o'clock on the 2nd of March, and anchored so far out that my first view of my adopted country was a very indistinct one. The towers and spires of the churches were the only objects that broke the flat monotony of the distant view; but the most interesting sight to us was that of the whale-boats approaching to carry us to the shore, for the harbour is so shallow that a large ship is unable to approach nearer than five or six miles to Buenos Ayres. An enterprising speculator has recently proposed to remedy this, by reclaiming a large part of the inner roads, on condition that the recovered land shall belong to him; but for some reason or other he has at present been unable to agree with the Argentine Government as to the terms of the undertaking, and it seems to be abandoned. I soon entered one of the boats which were to convey us to the shore, and after about three hours row, under a very hot sun, was landed upon the mole, as the tide was then high; so we were not reduced to the usual ignominious expedient of landing in a cart, which is one of the customs of Buenos Ayres which strikes a stranger with some surprise.

CHAPTER II

*BUENOS AYRES - VOYAGE UP THE URUGUAY - NIGHT IN A COAL HULK -
FRAY BENTOS - GUALEGUAYCHU - FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF ENTRE
RIOS.*

If my accounts of settling in the River Plate strike my readers as being less "couleur de rose" than previous descriptions of the country which they may have read in the various interesting books already written by tourists in the Argentine Republic, it must be remembered how different are the impressions derived by the passing traveller, who, after perhaps the bustle and noise of a London season, spends a few pleasant holiday weeks among entirely new scenes, and visits the houses of long established and prosperous Estancieros, from the opinion of the same country formed by the new settler, who generally is forced to go to the very edge of civilisation in search of his fortune. The traveller, free from care, and with no thought in his mind but the enjoyment of the new scenes amidst which he finds himself, has simply to take his fill of the amusements which the hospitable Estanciero delights to provide for him. The settler, on the contrary, in the sort of locality which I am about to describe, with every possible disadvantage to contend against - of want of protection from Indians, want of timber, want of fuel, want of servants, and last of all, the great want which originally led him to fix his residence in a foreign country, want of money - endeavours slowly and with many hindrances to arrive at the same state of comfort and prosperity which has given the traveller so favourable an idea of the position of English settlers in the Argentine Republic.

I spent about five days in Buenos Ayres before proceeding up the country to join my friend, and received a good deal of kindness from several people to whom I had letters. A great deal of good advice was given me as to the best means of seeking my fortune; but opinions were divided on this point, some advising one part of the country, some another, and

as there appeared not to be much safety in this multitude of counsellors, I was compelled to follow my own devices, and have since come to the conclusion that Experience is the only safe guide in the New as in the Old World, though unfortunately she costs nearly as much in the former as in the latter. The town of Buenos Ayres is built on a regular plan, that is to say, the houses are built in blocks of a hundred and fifty yards square; all the streets are therefore quite straight, and from the flat nature of the ground you can see a long way through them, a circumstance which prevents much picturesque beauty. The Plaza de la Victoria, with a statue erected to Victory in the middle of the square, is the finest part of the town, and here are also the cathedral and hall of justice. The immense amount of people on horseback strikes one directly, and it is rather a novel sight to an Englishman to see the number of horses standing every afternoon, quite unwatched, hobbled outside the Bolsa while their owners are transacting their business inside. Grooms are not much of an institution here, but the horses seem to understand their duty well, and stand perfectly still until their riders come out.

There are a good many wealthy English merchants in Buenos Ayres, and some of their houses are very handsome. I was not much charmed with my hotel, the internal arrangements of which seemed to show that cleanliness was not held in much esteem; but at this time I was more particular than becomes an Estanciero, and experience has taught me to be very thankful for much slenderer comfort.

On the 8th of March I started for Gualeguaychu in Entre Rios, one of the thirteen provinces of the Argentine Republic, situated between the rivers Parana and Uruguay, whence, as my intelligent reader will at once discover, is the origin of its name, Entre Rios. The city of Buenos Ayres is about three hundred miles from the sea, and is situated on the river La Plata, which, however, is here so enormously wide as rather to resemble a gulf than the mouth of a river. The La Plata is formed by the junction of the Parana and Uruguay, about fifty miles above Buenos Ayres; and the province of Buenos Ayres lies entirely to the south and west of the La Plata. Entre Rios and Corrientes are the only two provinces to the east of the Parana, the others all lying to the west; the two provinces between the rivers are therefore very well protected from the Indians, and being fertile, and possessing very good pasture for sheep and cattle, have become a favourite resort for settlers, and, with the exception of Buenos Ayres, are certainly the most thickly populated part of the whole republic. Land has

consequently become very dear, and in the last four or five years has almost doubled its value. There are a great many flourishing Estancieros in Entre Rios, who have either made or are in a fair way to make large fortunes; but of course most of these have been here for a great many years, and began in the happy days when a small capital went farther in Entre Rios than it will do now.

I embarked in the steamer *Era*, and found a good many passengers on board; one of my companions in the *Kepler* was also going to Gualeguaychu, and there were several other young men bound on the same errand as myself; one of them, who had already been settled in the country some time, had come down to meet some friends, and cheered us with promising accounts of our new *El Dorado*. There were also some ladies on board whom I had met at Buenos Ayres, and being very nice people our voyage promised to be an agreeable one, and we all started in high spirits. We found we were to be accompanied by some of the conquerors of Paysandu, in the shape of several ferocious-looking soldiers in scarlet ponchos, whose general appearance was more picturesque than prepossessing. They were proceeding to the seat of war in the *Banda Oriental*, where the war between the Blancos and Colorados was then raging, and from the way in which they swaggered about, appeared anxious to impress us with their military character, nor did we feel inclined to take any liberties with them.

We reached Fray Bentos at about twelve at night, and discovered that our destination there was a coal hulk, on board of which we were to wait for the small steamer for Gualeguaychu. Some accident appeared to have happened to this steamer, and we were informed she would not arrive till next day at the earliest. Report said that the accident consisted in the captain and chief engineer having made themselves ill by eating bad lobsters; at any rate, it was not until the following day that they were sufficiently recovered to resume their nautical duties. As we had nothing to eat or drink in our temporary sooty home, we composed ourselves to sleep on the boards, and very hard we found them. Our slumbers were not protracted very late into the following morning, and we went ashore rather early in search of breakfast. The town of Fray Bentos was not then at all striking; in fact, the plan hung up in the little hotel where we breakfasted, of the important city which sanguine owners of desirable lots of building land expected to see arise, reminded me strongly of the city of "Eden" in *Martin Chuzzlewit*; but since then I believe Fray Bentos has really grown very rapidly, and become an important place, as I see it described as such on