# JOSÉ ARTIGAS AND THE FEDERAL LEAGUE IN URUGUAY'S WAR OF INDEPENDENCE (1810–1820)

WILLIAM H. KATRA

# José Artigas and the Federal League in Uruguay's War of Independence (1810–1820)

# José Artigas and the Federal League in Uruguay's War of Independence (1810–1820)

William H. Katra


FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Madison • Teaneck

Published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
Copublished by The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB



British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Katra, William H., author.
Title: José Artigas and the Federal League in Uruguay's War of Independence (1810-1820) / William H. Katra.
Description: Lanham, Maryland : Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016046017 (print) | LCCN 2016057306 (ebook) | ISBN 9781683930228 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781683930235 (electronic)
Subjects: LCSH: Artigas, José Gervasio, 1764-1850. | Statesmen—Uruguay—Biography. | Uruguay—History—1810-1830.
Classification: LCC F2725.A7 K38 2017 (print) | LCC F2725.A7 (ebook) | DDC 989.5/04092 [B]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016046017

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

For Marta
In whose *pueblo oriental* of Mal Abrigo
I first learned to love, dream, and struggle.

# Contents

# Introduction

This study of the life and career of José Gervasio Artigas (1764–1850) is written to fill a gap in English language studies of the history of Uruguay during the period of struggle for independence in Spanish America. In particular, it aims to highlight the achievements of this genuinely different, perhaps unique military and political leader. Arguably the most important and popular caudillo of his time, Artigas was atypical of his class in being a democrat and egalitarian who, even as he exercised leadership among the rural poor, was at the same time trusted by other sectors of society. A skilled military leader, he can be credited with victories essential to the cause of independence. At the same time, his career, especially as seen in retrospect, was riddled with contradiction and ambiguity in every respect and his record of achievements, while worthy of remembrance and honor, was transitional rather than permanent in historical perspective.

The immediate cause for the Spanish American independence movement was the sudden collapse of the decrepit colonial bureaucracy that resulted from the abdication of the Spanish king when French troops invaded his country in 1808. Throughout the Spanish colonies of South America, this set off highly divergent responses. While small groups of idealistic intellectuals announced a new age of freedom and independence, landed cities hastily organized to assure a continuation of order, stability, and property rights. Meanwhile, in some areas exploited workers—both in the cities and the countryside—rose up to demand better working conditions; some committed violent acts against their former bosses, while others abandoned their places of employment to join patriot armies and fight against the Spanish oppressors.

In the Río de la Plata, at the southern extreme of South America, there were several other growing tensions, foremost of which was the rivalry between Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Colonial officials situated in Buenos Aires had grown accustomed to dominate over the less prosperous and less populated neighboring provinces. Yet Montevideo was emerging as a commercial rival of Buenos Aires, challenging Buenos Aires's domination over trade with the interior. This factor, when added to the Banda Oriental's growing resentment toward the colonial bureaucracy, explains the emerging consciousness of the need for Montevideo and the

Banda Oriental to free themselves from Porteño (that is, Buenos Aires) dominance.

In 1810, the outbreak of the independence movement in Buenos Aires initially attracted many in the Banda Oriental on account of a shared loathing of the Spanish overlords. A brief period of Banda Oriental collaboration with Buenos Aires yielded an important dividend: the victory over the Spanish that—at least temporarily—promised an end to Spanish predominance in the southernmost part of the region. But in the immediate aftermath, the Buenos Aires leadership, eschewing any consultation with Montevideo, returned the Banda Oriental to Spanish control. There widespread hatred, formerly directed at the Spanish bureaucracy, now found an additional target in the Porteño leadership. Banda Oriental leaders realized that the dominant faction in Buenos Aires would stop at nothing in its drive for dominance, that they would have to resist with the force of arms to achieve their own autonomy. This in brief explains how, in the Banda Oriental, what had begun as an anti-Spanish revolt evolved into a full-blown movement for local independence and self-government.

The east-bank rebels took up arms under the leadership of Colonel José Gervasio Artigas, the son of a prominent family in the Banda Oriental who had served for over twenty years as a career officer in the colony's rural militia. The path of Artigas's career would now parallel the historical course of the Banda Oriental. In 1810, he had responded to the shout for independence by renouncing his Spanish commission in order to join the patriot army. It was his leadership that figured in the patriots' victory in the Battle of Las Piedras and then the mass exodus of orientales to a brief exile in Entre Ríos. In response to the widespread sentiment of his province, Artigas then made the fateful decision to renounce his commission in the patriot army and assume the leadership of the Banda Oriental's struggle for autonomy, if not independence.

Over the next few years, Artigas's "separatist" movement in the Banda Oriental—with its strong republican thrust and popular and egalitarian character—enjoyed support across the social spectrum. The Banda Oriental's initial success against Buenos Aires aggressions attracted the attention of provincial leaders across the Litoral (the provinces bathed by both the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers), who joined him under the banner of the *Liga de los Pueblos Libres*, or the Federal League. An important visitor—the energetic Scottish trader William Robertson—likened this idiosyncratic leader to a Napoleon in the backlands:

> The most excellent Protector of half the New World, seated on a bullock's skull, at a fire kindled on the mud floor of his hut, eating beef off a spit, and drinking gin out of a cow-horn! He was surrounded by a dozen officers in weather-beaten attire, in similar positions, and similarly occupied with their chief. All were smoking, all gabbling. The Protector was dictating to two secretaries, who occupied, at one deal

> table, the only two dilapidated rush-bottom chairs in the hovel. . . . Soldiers, aides-de-camp, scouts, came galloping in from all quarters. All was referred to "His Excellency The Protector," and his excellency the Protector, seated on his bullock's skull, smoking, eating, drinking, dictating, talking, dispatched in succession the various matters brought under his notice, with that calm, deliberate, but unintermitted nonchalance. . . . He seemed a man incapable of bustle, and was, in this single respect (if I may be permitted the allusion), like [Napoleon,] the greatest commander of the age.[1]

This, one of the few contemporaneous descriptions that survives, suggests both the extent of power that Artigas exercised at the peak of his influence and the fascination he exerted over any visitor. Unfortunately, he and his followers would soon be engaged in destructive wars against both Buenos Aires and a powerful army invading from the Portuguese-controlled Brazil. This maelstrom of competing political forces made this period one of the most complex in the continent's history.

The historiographic currents that predominate in Argentina and Uruguay offer dramatically contrasting views about the objectives, actions, and historical legacy of Artigas. Being that the great majority of historians have written under the heavy influence of their respective nationalist, regional, or ideological agendas, the figure of Artigas has come to represent different things to different people.[2] For Uruguayans, he is the infallible "Father of the Country." For Porteños, he is the maximum incarnation of crude, violent "barbarism." For Entrerrians, Santafecinos, and Correntinos, he is the flawed antagonist of their respective provincial founders. For historical revisionists, he is the precursor of the interior provinces' centuries-long struggle against the tyranny of Buenos Aires.

None of these perspectives are without substance; all, to one degree or another, are based on documentary evidence about the life and times of Artigas. Impressive is the fact that this one historical personage—in life and legacy—has inspired such different and contrasting historical narratives.

Artigas himself was partially to blame for these historical confusions. On the one hand, many, and perhaps his most important, acts rightfully deserve the praise of posterity: his leadership in the defeat of the Spanish royalist forces in the Banda Oriental and the fact that his acts and writings have subsequently served as inspiration for individuals struggling to create a more just and democratic order. Yet—on the other hand—the accounts written by reliable contemporaneous observers (Generals Paz, Iriarte, San Martín, and the Robertson brothers) provide less positive appraisals. Add to that the visceral hatred that he provoked in a whole range of individuals who interacted with him—some of them (admittedly) were scoundrels, but others were principled leaders. All this contributes to the difficulties experienced by those readers today seeking an

impartial and historically accurate understanding of this individual and the web of competing interests that forms the backdrop for his most important actions.

Unfortunately, two important studies about Artigas written in English do not fully succeed in this last quest. John Street, in his otherwise exemplary 1959 biography *Artigas and the Emancipation of Uruguay*, seems bent on fortifying the standard Uruguayan myth of Artigas as "Father of his Country" and, in doing so, excludes negative appraisals made by many of Artigas's contemporaries. Much the same could be said about the twenty pages of *The Invention of Argentina* (1991) in which author Nicolas Shumway limits his consideration to Artigas's populist ideas that constituted one of several "guiding fictions" in the construction of a national identity.[3]

My first intention in this book is to go beyond these shortcomings by returning to the existing historical documentation of Artigas's life and times and avoiding embracing a single—and therefore distorted—ideological interpretation of that data. Instead my objective has been to write a new history of Artigas based on a wide range of historical documentation that Uruguayan patriots, Argentine opponents, historical revisionists, and provincial partisans would find impossible to ignore.

My second intention has been to briefly reconstruct the context of his actions and provide a convincing interpretation of the motivations of that man who inspired such contrasting reactions on the part of both contemporaries and posterity.

The first chapter of the book treats Artigas's accomplishments through 1816 in the Banda Oriental (in that year his governance there was terminated by yet another Luso-Brazilian invasion). Admittedly, English historian John Street has treated much of this in the previously mentioned work. I add to the discussion some new information from important studies that have appeared in the sixty-some intervening years.

In chapters 2, 7, and 9, I enter into new historiographic terrain in treating the rise and fall of the Federal League, for which Artigas was the maximum leader. Curiously, the hundreds of books focusing on Artigas have largely avoided this topic. Why? One explanation is that the existing national boundaries separating present-day Argentina from Uruguay have surreptitiously circumscribed the historical imagination. As a result, most historians have treated the impact of Artigas only with regard to their own national space, with all the limitations this implies. That is to say, Uruguayan historians, in their great majority, have treated in detail the acts and activities of Artigas only within the Banda Oriental, and therefore have almost totally ignored his interventions in those provinces currently belonging to Argentina that participated in his fledgling Federal League. And Argentine historians, who have regarded Artigas as little more than a "barbarian" caudillo intent upon obstructing the path toward independence, have either ignored him or have distorted his lega-

cy. As such, the influence of Artigas in what are now provinces of Argentina's Litoral has been almost totally ignored. (Three important writers who have not fallen into these traps and have therefore succeeded in overcoming myopic nationalist impulses are Salvador Cabral, Tulio Halperín Donghi, and Ernesto Palacio.)

In the last two of these three chapters, I treat yet another aspect of Artigas's career that—in my opinion—has been inadequately treated by the existing scholarship: the gripping events leading to his final battles and then path to a thirty-year exile in Paraguay. This tale is punctuated by his forces' worst military defeat and their most celebrated victory; his two most trusted lieutenants turning against him and emerging as embittered foes; his army hounded and chased; and Artigas—like a phantom of the pampas—miraculously escaping to recruit yet another band of impoverished but devoted Guaraní Indians who are committed to defend him one more time. Even though these events have fueled the regional folklore for nearly two hundred years, they still await a director willing to cast them onto the world screen.

In chapters 3 through 6, I analyze in greater detail Artigas's activities in his role as "Protector" for each of the provinces of the Litoral: la provincia guaranítica de misiones (not to be confused with the present-day Province of Misiones), Corrientes, Santa Fe, and Entre Ríos. In performing this research, I have encountered serious obstacles. In the case of Las misiones, most of the archives from that period, in addition to the correspondence between Artigas and the acting governor there (Artigas's adopted step-son Andresito), have not survived. With regard to the other provinces, existing documentation is fragmentary and disorganized. That in addition to the fact that for two hundred years the great majority of works written by historians—whether motivated by localist passion or ideological furor—have distorted the legacy of the Banda Oriental leader in their respective provinces. Because these chapters treat events occurring in the same temporal span but in different locations, I ask the reader to tolerate the brief repetition of contextual data.

Chapter 8 offers a short reprieve from traditional historical narrative in reproducing contemporaneous descriptions of the soldiers constituting Artigas's fighting forces, their weapons, and battle tactics.

In chapters 10 through 12, I treat yet another aspect of the Protector's legacy that until now has received inadequate attention: his correspondence with three of the most distinguished military leaders of those chaotic yet glorious times—Generals José de San Martín, Martín Güemes, and Manuel Belgrano. To all appearances, none of the three were well informed about Artigas's republican advocacies, the far-sighted agrarian reform he attempted to implement in the Banda Oriental, the firm guidance in democratic governance that he offered for over five years to both the Correntine cabildo and his representatives in Las misiones, and the fact that principled citizens across the Banda Oriental—over the greater

part of his career—held him in the highest esteem. All three of these generals chose to minimize the importance of Artigas's pitted resistance to both Buenos Aires's attacks and the Portuguese occupation of the Banda Oriental. Instead they believed that his defense of Banda Oriental autonomy and the concomitant abandonment of his commission in the patriot army constituted an obstruction, rather than an asset, to their life cause, which was the struggle for Argentina's independence from Spain. How could they not? They did not walk in Artigas's shoes. Even today, the impartial reader might have difficulty taking sides. My felt responsibility has been to recreate, as accurately as possible, the perspectives held by these three important South American leaders about their principled yet maverick contemporary.

In writing this history, I have had to deal with a few notable problems. First, few documents survive from the period in question. There are outstanding exceptions; for example, the *Archivo Artigas*, whose fifty-some volumes preserve a treasury of documents authored by Artigas that mainly treat his activities in the Banda Oriental; regional archives containing land tenure documents, over which Rosa Alonso Eloy, Julio C. Rodríguez, Lucía Sala de Touron, and Nelson de la Torre, while rotating in the role of lead author, have published four definitive studies; and the communications Artigas wrote to the Corrientes cabildo, as reproduced in Hernán F. Gómez's important 1929 compilation. However, almost no personal correspondence survives—that is, letters written by Artigas to family members or intimate friends, or them to him. (Nothing comparable here to the multiple personal accounts and abundant personal correspondence written two centuries earlier and thousands of miles to the north by the Mayflower Pilgrims.) What's more, there survive few if any memoirs or letters—whether published or unpublished—written by contemporaneous collaborators or observers (or their wives). Why? One explanation has to do with the relatively unlettered populations involved. The Robertson brothers observed about the six thousand inhabitants of the small river city of Corrientes in the year 1807:

> [they] were simple and kind-hearted; but with the exception of two or three lawyers, half a dozen old Spaniards, and a very few Creoles, there was not, in the general population, the remotest pretension to learning or erudition. The great mass of the lower classes were unable to write, and a large proportion could not read. Some of the clergy and friars had an inkling of Latin; but a really classical book, or one prohibited by the Inquisition, was rarely to be found in any library.[4]

The inhabitants of Montevideo and Buenos Aires, with more access to the outer world, possessed only a slightly greater "pretension to learning." Indeed, what jolted the famed naturalist Charles Darwin during the months he spent in and around Montevideo a quarter-century later was

his encounter with a letter carrier who, "although he had passed through some of the principal towns in Banda Oriental, his luggage consisted of two letters!"[5] Darwin abruptly realized that neither public figures nor their wives or children, unlike their counterparts in his native England, carried on active epistolary relationships with family members in the neighboring villages. All this goes a long way toward explaining why there exist only a few accounts of personal encounters written by learned contemporaries who visited Artigas himself. Most outstanding of these is that rendered by a Robertson brother—one of the few travelers daring enough to travel by boat to the Protector's encampment along the Uruguay River—and another by Father Dámaso Larrañaga—who had to brave the 200 kilometer horseback and coach trip from Montevideo. One has to conclude that the Protector, even during the brief period of his government over the Banda Oriental, was as much a phantasmagoric presence for the city populations of his time as he is today for even the most committed of historians.

A second problem in writing this work is the unavailability of important biographical data. Most glaring is the nonexistence of an authoritative biography of Artigas himself. While some studies (which I duly cite in the following chapters) treat the lives and legacies of his most important lieutenants, they leave untouched or unexamined important—and controversial—chapters of those different careers: Francisco Ramírez, Estanislao López, Fernando Otorgués, Blas Basualdo, Pedro Campbell, friar José Benito Monterroso, and Frutuoso Rivera. The only Artigas associate adequately treated by the historians is Andresito—fortunately the subject of recent books. Yet there exists no authoritative biography to date written about other key Artiguista associates: Bautista Méndez, Pedro Siti, Diego Manduré, and Miguel Barreiro.

Yet a third problem has been my difficulty in assessing the reliability of much of the existing documentation. In several sections, I have included long quotes from the letters or official dispatches written by Artigas, perhaps some of the finest political writing ever penned by an Uruguayan.[6] Is credit due mainly to Artigas himself or to his very talented secretary? How much credence should be granted to the written word? Artigas the writer appears in some instances as an unapologetic optimist or master of spin. That is to say, his (and/or Monterroso's) words seem to have been carefully penned more as a rhetorical exercise aimed at influencing the reactions of intended recipients than as hard-headed responses to real situations or possibilities. In other instances—most notably the instructions he wrote for the Banda Oriental agrarian reform or the governance of Corrientes—the exceptional character of the man shines through.

There is a fourth, and more troubling, historiographic dilemma: while the existing correspondence with his loyalists reveals a widespread admiration for that leader's high-minded motivations and acts, other impor-

tant sources provide a negative view of the influence of the "Artigas system" over the provinces of his Federal League—and especially over the rural areas. In the following chapters, I call attention to the highly successful efforts of his enemies to spread lies about Artigas's character and leadership. Unfortunately, that misinformation has influenced two centuries of scholarship about the historical man. Therefore in many instances my most difficult task as an historian has been to decide what published information should be left aside and which details are of lasting historical value. This has been especially relevant with regard to the texts authored by the Robertson brothers (contemporaneous observers of the Atlantic ports, settlements along the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers, and daily life in the Province of Corrientes) or renowned Argentine historian Bartolomé Mitre (writing well-documented histories a full generation after the events studied here).[7]

All of the reasons discussed here have led me to write what might be most appropriately characterized as an "interpretative historical essay" (a century ago it might have been labeled "moral history"). I ask the pardon of the reader if I have not sufficiently repeated the tiring refrain, "It is to be supposed that . . ." With all its potential shortcomings, my "existential" brand of cultural history attempts to restore to Artigas and his contemporaries their roles as protagonists in and witnesses to the events they lived and suffered.

It is appropriate to recognize here a few historians whose analyses of archival research have proven indispensable for my own project: Arturo Ariel Bentancur (the Port of Montevideo); Salvador Cabral (archives in Corrientes, in addition to his remarkable book on Andresito); Ana Fraga (the Uruguayan Department of Soriano); Enrique Piqué (the Masonic Lodge); John Lynch (United Kingdom); Edgar and Alfredo Poenitz (Las misiones); Ana Ribeiro (Paraguay and the Artigas archives); Oscar R. Tavani Pérez Colman (correspondence between Artigas and Ramírez); the research team of Nelson de la Torre, Julio C. Rodríguez, and Lucía Sala de Touron (eighteen important Uruguayan archives holding documentation of Artigas's agrarian reform); or the same research team led by either Sala de Touron or Rosa Alonso Eloy (land tenancy documentation in Argentine and Uruguayan archives). It is my conviction that similar *estudios artiguistas* yet await us from Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, and Brazil.

I wish to thank, in addition, the editorial staff of the Fairleigh Dickinson Press—and especially its director, Harry Keyishian, whose advice has led to significant improvements in the writing of this book.

The translations of original Spanish quotations into English are my own, unless otherwise indicated, with the assistance of Caitlin Cullimore.

## NOTES

1. J[ohn] P. Robertson and W[illliam] P. Robertson, *Letters on South America: Travels on the Banks of the Parana and Rio de la Plata* (London: John Murray, 1839) [Facsimile edition, USA: n.d.], 3:101–3.

2. I offer a summary explanation of these issues in William H. Katra, "Artigas in the Writings of Sarmiento," in *Sarmiento and His Argentina*, ed. Joseph T. Criscenti (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), 143–59.

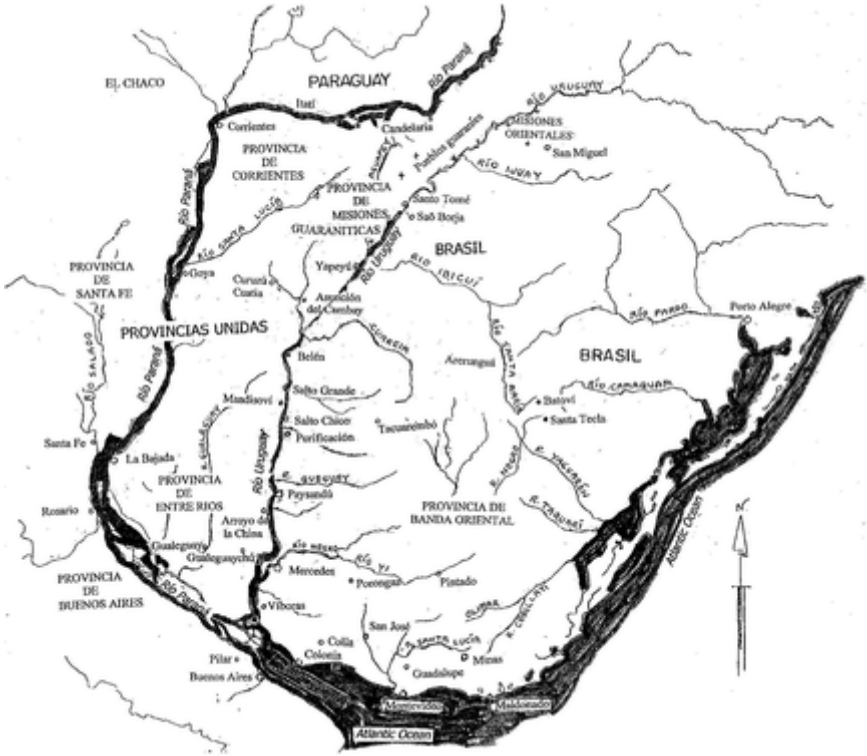
3. Two other works in English that have not circulated as widely as the two cited here, but which treat the Artigas phenomenon with greater impartiality, are Tulio Halperín Donghi's groundbreaking study with the English title *Politics, Economics and Society in Argentina in the Revolutionary Period*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and John Lynch's *The Spanish American Revolutions (1808–1826)*, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

4. Robertson and Robertson, *Letters on South America*, 1:97.

5. Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle* ["The Harvard Classics," Vol. 29] (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909), 56.

6. An unfortunate omission in William H. Katra, "Uruguay," in *Handbook of Latin American Literature*, 2nd edition, ed. David William Foster (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 595–630. I reject the contention of historian Bartolomé Mitre in Mariano de Vedia y Mitre, ed., *El manuscrito de Mitre sobre Artigas* (Buenos Aires: La Facultad, 1937), 90, that Artigas's letters express "many confusing and incomplete ideas and, on account of his lack of good models; his exposition frequently loses its focus," and also the assessment of Félix Luna, *Los caudillos* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1976), 59, of their rambling structure and curious diction. More to my agreement is the opinion of Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 53, that they "often reflect careful thought."

7. Few historians writing in Spanish have thoroughly read either the English originals or the complete Spanish translations (by Carlos A. Aldao and José Luis Busaniche, respectively) of the Robertson brothers: *Letters on Paraguay* (1839—three volumes) and *Letters on South America* (1843—also three volumes).




**The Provinces Constituting Artigas's Federal League.**

# ONE
# Artigas in the Banda Oriental

> Your Honor, how much longer will you continue pretending to be concerned over our suffering? Eight years of revolution, of dreams, of dangers, of defeats and miseries should constitute sufficient justification for my decision and validate the support given me by its government. That body has recognized the loyalty and dignity of the people of the Banda Oriental, has . . . recognized my commitment to defending their sacred rights. And you, Your Honor, now threaten to profane them?
>
> The greatness of the Orientals is measured best by how they have weathered misfortune. They know how to face up to and challenge dangers and triumph over them. They have opposed the imposition of those who might oppress them. And I will put myself at their head whenever danger presents itself. Your Honor, you know this well. You should fear the punishment that the people will impose upon you when they at last possess the power to do so.
>
> —José Artigas

*The Banda Oriental—literally, the "East Bank" of the Uruguay River—would become, in 1828, the independent country of Uruguay. It is separated from Argentina to its west by the Uruguay River that, along with the Paraná River, empties into the forty -mile-wide estuary, the Río de la Plata (the Plate River, in English ), a land border with Brazil to its north and east, and the Atlantic coast to the south and southeast.*

*Before any permanent European settlement, wild cattle and horses reproduced profusely on the country's fertile plains, providing food and shelter for the small tribes of nomadic Charrúa Indians. By the middle of the eighteenth century, white settlers were arriving by the thousands to profit from the sale of cattle hides to bullish European markets.*

*The Banda Oriental was, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, yet one more province participating in the struggle for independence from a decadent*

*Spanish colonial bureaucracy. Yet patriot leaders in Buenos Aires—the region's largest city—viewed Montevideo as a commercial rival, and they saw in the Banda Oriental's popular leader, José Artigas, a dangerous threat to its centralist politics and predominance.*

*Today Uruguay, the second-smallest nation in South America, is home to 3.3 million people of whom 1.8 million live in the metropolitan area of its capital and largest city, Montevideo. The country is ranked first in Latin America in democracy, peace, lack of corruption, and quality of living.*

Artigas's early career, and also his final legacy, is closely identified with La Banda Oriental, the name for the region that now constitutes the country of Uruguay.

His paternal grandfather was one of the first settlers in Montevideo in 1726; at that time, the rest of the Banda Oriental was almost devoid of European presence. It was a frontier area, previously of little interest to the Spanish colonial bureaucracy that had prioritized investing its resources to develop the economic potential of mining areas in today's Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia, or of those regions with indigenous populations that could provide cheap labor for a plantation economy. Neither of these two criteria was relevant for the extensive lands to the south.

The Banda Oriental, sparsely inhabited by nomadic Indians, was blessed with a benign, temperate climate conducive to the natural proliferation of wild cattle and horses. At the beginning of the eighteenth century (that is, the mature years of Artigas's grandfather), the rising European demand for cattle hides motivated enterprising ranchers from Buenos Aires to ride westward into Banda Oriental territory with crews of ten, twenty, forty peons to carry out vaquerías, that is, the once-a-year roundups resulting in the slaughter of hundreds, if not thousands, of *ganado cimarón*—wild cattle. All would be accomplished in the period of forty or so days. Riders, carrying media-luna (half-moon shaped knives) tied to the end of their long lances, would cut the animals' rear leg muscles to facilitate the throat-cutting slaughter, their rapid deskinning, and then the staking of hides over the ground for three weeks of drying in a hot summer sun. Carts would then carry piles of folded hides with huge two-meter-high wheels to a nearby river, where they would be loaded on riverboats and floated downstream to Buenos Aires storehouses. From there, they would be shipped, at enormous profit, to eager markets in France and England. In this early moment of European presence, the Banda Oriental was already one of the Rio de la Plata region's most important "cattle emporiums."

A few decades later, when Artigas's father was employed by the colonial bureaucracy to patrol and police Montevideo's surrounding areas, this situation had evolved considerably. The economic importance of the region had attracted the attention of the Crown, which passed the Cédula (Ruling) of 1854, whose result was the division of almost all the territory

within a hundred kilometers of the coast into huge estancias. These were owned and operated by already powerful or well-connected individuals who, in their majority, chose to reside in Buenos Aires. They staffed their cattle operation with a mixture of black slaves, criollo (that is, Spaniards born in the Americas) workers, Christianized Guaraní Indians (those migrating south after the closure of the Jesuit missions in 1768), and the half-cast offspring of the surrounding Indian tribes. These latifundia—or large land-holding—owners quickly learned the politics of laying claim to huge extensions of territory, upon which a skeleton staff of gaucho peons would slaughter the wild cattle and carry the dried hides to the nearest waterway. Well connected in power circles, they were able to take advantage of the short-sighted policies that typified the Spanish colonial system: almost always they succeeded via the courts and the existing bureaucracy to obstruct colonization efforts and to impede the division of lands into smaller holdings for ranchers desiring a more concentrated cattle-raising operation.[1]

The easy profits afforded by the abundant wild cattle also attracted a growing population of vagrants, range wanderers, and rootless Guaraní Indians. All these, in addition to a new group, the *gauderíos*—the origin for the later term *gauchos*—those "young men born in Montevideo and in the neighboring areas" who, in groups of five and six, carried on a lazy lifestyle going to the countryside, sometimes with a guitar, but always carrying their *lazo* (a rope), a *boliadoras* (two or three leather-covered two-inch-diameter round rocks, joined by rawhide thongs, that they swung over their heads and threw at an animal's legs to trip it up), and a long knife carried at the waist in a sheath. (A widely disseminated publication of 1773 made the first written mention of these.) They enjoyed an easy subsistence, with food and shelter needs provided by the cattle they butchered: sewn hides provided a tent-like residence, and they ate only the most desirable cuts of meat, leaving the rest of the animal for the abundant vultures and wild dogs inhabiting the pampas.[2]

Only a few decades hence—now during the time of José Artigas's own youth and early manhood—the social and economic situation of the Banda Oriental had evolved into yet another stage. The large landowners were a mixture of Spanish aristocrats and wealthy criollos who had leveraged profits from trade in either Buenos Aires or Montevideo for a new economic powerbase derived from the lucrative sale of hides. Most of these lived in the two coastal cities, from which they sent detailed instructions to their employees for procuring hides from the wild cattle found on their lands—this was less problematic and usually more profitable than the labor-intensive tasks of domesticating cattle, limiting their geographic movement, and branding them as personal property. Given their economic power and insatiable greed, and given the very infrequent presence of judges or colonial agents, they usually ignored official directives aimed at providing a semblance of order to the province's economic

activities. An anonymous critic of this system wrote to the viceroy in about 1794: "the most constructive of governmental regulations . . . are helpful for the poor cattle ranchers, that is, the true cattle ranchers. But they are seen as impediments by the richest landowners who, in the true sense of the term, are not cattle ranchers nor do they desire to be so; what they want is the title of cattle rancher, but what they really desire is that the work involved in real cattle ranching be done instead by the poor ranchers."[3] The agenda of the large landowners was to maximize profits with a minimum of labor. Instead of sending an official tabulation of the hides sold to foreign merchants—upon which they would have had to pay taxes to the colonial administration—they preferred selling their hides to Portuguese contrabandists. Instead of supporting official efforts to combat the spread of lawlessness, they contracted with unscrupulous *changadores* (free-roaming gauchos living off the land and available for seasonal hire) to round up cattle to either drive to the Brazilian border or kill and then remove the hides as they saw fit.

> On account of this absurd and monstrous principle [that any cattle found on your property belonged to you], robbery in the rural areas has become a legitimate path for acquiring wealth and a means to evade the jurisdiction of the different applicable laws and the catalogue of wrongdoings. . . . From the largest landowners to the smallest, whether one is poor or rich, from the most timorous to the most depraved, all rob, and any person can lay claim to whatever animal is born in the countryside.[4]

The colonial administration made high-sounding announcements about ameliorating this scandalous situation, but whatever actions taken proved ineffective. A relevant example: its half-hearted efforts to increase the population of the interior. Nothing even remotely resembling the free land policies of the newly independent United States of North America had ever existed for the Banda Oriental or the other Spanish-controlled territories in the Americas. Instead the colonial administration only reluctantly encouraged the establishment of small settlements in frontier areas by a mobile, nevertheless impoverished, underclass that had managed to free itself from indentured servitude. But as for the areas populated by wild cattle, well-connected large landowners tenaciously defended their self-proclaimed territorial rights. They stridently opposed the petitions of settlers in the already existing towns who sought state intervention to obtain land for their own small estancias, for the construction of a church, or for growing food on small garden plots at the perimeter of their communities.

By now, the number of rural "vagrants" had grown a thousand fold. No longer were they the adventurous urban youth seeking harmless short-term recreation in the countryside. Now, everywhere, there existed individuals—indeed, a wholly new social class—who had been born and

raised in rural squalor. Thousands were squatters eking out a living in any way possible. Colonial policies made it nearly impossible for them to own and work their own lands. Most sought a rural livelihood by choosing a desirable site in the vast—and until then deserted—plains, building a sod structure for their families, enclosing a small area for a cow or two, and then venturing out to slaughter a wild steer when hunger became an issue.

Another identifiable group among the growing rural underclass was the semi-nomadic males, accepting temporal employment with an estancia during the vaquería season, but spending most of their time in idle pursuits. The plentiful herds of wild cattle supplied all their food and shelter needs. Like the squatters, most never washed with soap or owned a clean set of clothes, never had to obey a law or listen to the sermon of a priest. Instead they were a hardened, violence-prone population whose children mounted horses before learning to walk and slit the throat of their first bull before beginning to talk.

Many of the male adults of this rural society earned a pittance as changadores. Skilled in the handling of their weapons, they violently defended themselves against any authority intent on putting a stop to their activities. One observer denounced "the frequent assaults made by bandits, robbers, cattle rustlers and other delinquents, who are not satisfied with simply spoiling other peoples' possessions, but also torch the buildings of an estancia without regard for the honor or lives of their victims. This evil, this terrible whip blow against human decency, has grown to infinite dimensions in recent times . . . it is comparable to the destruction caused to a neighborhood by a flash flood."[5] Vying with the changadores for the available hides were Portuguese adventurers and indigenous rebels. Frequent were the raids to steal cattle from Banda Oriental estancias and then drive them toward the Brazilian frontier. Owners of pulperías—the combination of a country store and bar—became protagonists in this illicit pattern of trade, which attracted the participation of even military leaders and colonial officials.

With the herds of *ganado cimarón* disappearing near Montevideo and in the southernmost areas, *estancieros* began to cast their eyes on the abundant wild cattle still remaining to the north. There they continued their customary pattern of currying favor with Spanish colonial officials in order to lay claim to huge new territories. Land disputes filled the courts. Any areas previously designated as belonging to the Crown or managed by a hospital became targets for litigation. In the northern territories both to the east and west of the Uruguay River, unscrupulous criollos curried favor with court officials to gain ownership rights over terrain that had been reserved for Christianized Guaraní Indians, whose parents and grandparents had been raised in the now-extinct Jesuit missions.

Major players continued to be the Portuguese merchants near the frontier, who would purchase any hide available without concern for Spanish colonial laws and then export them from the Atlantic ports of Río Grande do Sur. At the same time, profits were to be made selling live cattle and horses to the owners of new estancias in nearby Portuguese-controlled areas. In 1795, an observer wrote about a group of more than eighty armed men, the majority Portuguese, who were driving a huge herd of cattle toward the Portuguese border, under the command of a certain "Artiga."[6]

In the Banda Oriental, midnight raids for a protected herd were frequent. Armed and dangerous changadores roamed the countryside. Sometimes a whole contingent of robbers, and always the Indians, attacked the estancias, sometimes slaughtering whatever animals were at hand. The stench of rotting carcasses would fill the air. The most powerful *estancieros* constructed solid dwellings out of stone, with fortress line towers at the corners, in which not only their families, peons, and slaves, but also the nearby neighbors, could find refuge from an Indian raid; it was common that a single *estanciero* could count on forty or fifty armed men. However, such preventions did not offer a guaranteed protection against a large Indian raid.[7]

By most accounts, the lawless condition of the Banda Oriental's countryside was a result, at least in part, of Spain's disastrous colonial policies. From about 1770, surviving documents communicate the colonial bureaucracy's concerns, especially about the possible extinction of wild cattle from the southern half of the province (this meant less tax revenues for meeting their expenses). Viceroy after viceroy ordered studies to ascertain possible remedies. New efforts were made to force the labor of squatters and idle gauchos; construct forts and found colonies in frontier areas in order to discourage both indigenous attacks and Portuguese territorial impingements; prohibit the slaughter of cows as a means of increasing wild cattle herds; require the branding and then registration of hide sales as a means of limiting contraband activities; and fund a rural police force, the Blandengues, to pursue renegade Indians, cattle robbers, and bands of armed Portuguese raiders. But the colonial hierarchy, whose thought was encapsulated within in a "feudal" paradigm, refused to recognize that the root cause of their problems was its marriage with the latifundia. Reforms would be enacted, but the colonial society continued with its fundamental structure largely unchanged: that of a small group of individuals benefiting from the Banda Oriental's natural wealth, while offering few options to the great majority of indigent people.

Although there existed a spattering of settlements in the Banda Oriental's interior at the turn of the century, demographic growth was stunted. The great majority of these were "settlement colonies,"[8] whose sites had been chosen without regard for future trade possibilities. That is to say, most

were located inland, distant from the rivers that a generation hence would facilitate commerce, promote industry and agriculture, and provide ready contact with an outer world. In these, mercantilist colonial policies discouraged the founding of any trade or industry that would compete with those in the Spanish metropolis. Given their disadvantageous locations and the subsistence-sized plots of land available, these settlements attracted only the most abject and impoverished of inhabitants. Among these, Canelones had 3,500 people, Melo 820, Soriano 1,700, Víboras (today's Rosario) 1,500, and Minas—only recently founded—about 150. A few settlements were more advantageously located: Mercedes, with 850 inhabitants, the combined total of 2,000 for Colonia del Sacramento and Real de San Carlos, and the recently founded Maldonado. Most of these settlements saw only stagnant growth and economic marginality. Myriad impediments obstructed the efforts of aspiring settlers. Their petitions to the Real Hacienda—that arm of the colonial bureaucracy in charge of infrastructural issues—were almost always denied. A representative decision rendered in 1815 by one official body reads:

> The most advantageous productive wealth of our country comes from its cattle ranches, whose promotion has to be the most important of Your Honor's and this Government's responsibilities. It is clear that whatever settlement that is established within the region of these ranches will cause no other result than their destruction, as what happened in the case of the towns of Pintado and Minas, whose mere existence undermined the [economic viability] of all the estancias that were to be found nearby.[9]

This communicates the "feudal mentality" that governed the highest circles of the colonial administration. Large landowners mounted aggressive campaigns to uproot squatters and oppose proposals for new settlements. The end result—as identified by the anonymous critic writing to the sitting viceroy—was that the countryside "is only inhabited by large landowners, with their rural peons, without any presence of churches or towns."[10]

* * *

Montevideo, in contrast to the small population centers in the interior, experienced a slow but steady growth and, by the turn of the century, was home to two-thirds of the Banda Oriental's sixteen thousand people. It lacked the refinery and cleanliness of older Río de la Plata cities in the north, such as Tucumán and Salta, and it could hardly compete with Buenos Aires's promise of future growth. The rough life of the open prairies invaded the city spaces, with a few pacified Indians begging in the plazas and uncouth gauchos wandering its streets. You could count

on the fingers of two hands the number of citizens who dressed in the *frac*—or suit coat—in their daily tasks. Absent was a social class rising from a colonial aristocracy or state bureaucracy that would have fortified the influence of an urban culture vis-à-vis the countryside. Nevertheless, this city-port-fortress represented the interests of the Crown, European values, and a systematic plan of colonization. Only there authorities attempted to implement the organized distribution of land for settlers to transform into cornfields, vegetable gardens, or even small ranches for tame cattle. Land was also available for public institutions, the founding of new settlements, and the development of the region's economic potential.[11]

In fact, the last two decades of the eighteenth century saw an extraordinary rise in Montevideo's commercial activity. The Crown's opening of the city to free trade in 1778, and then the peace declared between Spain and England a few years later meant that England's merchant fleet made Montevideo, with its excellent natural harbor, the center for its commercial operations linking Europe, Buenos Aires, and the hinterland. At the same time, the city quickly established a leadership position in the region with regard to the production and sale of dried meat—the saladera—in addition to the African slave trade. Within a few years, and on account of the previously mentioned factors that benefited the city in particular, Montevideo emerged as an important port, while at the same time the exploitation of cattle wealth from its countryside grew rapidly.

Surveys taken of the active commercial firms showed that British and American vessels now outnumbered those owned by the Spanish and Portuguese merchants who, thirty years earlier, had predominated. But Spanish merchants still played a preeminent role in the city's social and political life. (These were the individuals who would resist the 1811 call for independence and would become stalwart enemies of the region's rising star, José Artigas.) One Spanish merchant wrote to a trade partner in Chile: "It is impossible to count the number of small merchant ships, originating in the ports of Catalunia, that have arrived in recent days at the port of Montevideo."[12] Along with the impressive growth in "legal" commercial operations, one can assume that the volume of "illicit" commerce remained significant. There were no factories, even artisan workshops, of importance. One found neither the materials nor skilled labor necessary for the construction of launches capable of sailing up and down the region's rivers. Except for the production of hides and salted meat, all aspects of the region's trade, including the transportation and sale of goods, were almost entirely in the hands of eager merchants from abroad.

In almost all the small cities of the interior, the new class of landowners and ranchers chafed under Buenos Aires control. The same could be said about Montevideo, whose new class of entrepreneurs resented their de-

pendent status vis-à-vis the colonial bureaucracy with its headquarters across the estuary. Everywhere citizens protested over the scant control they themselves exercised over even the most incidental of problems affecting their own communities. More substantial complaints went unanswered—for example, about the proliferation of *vagos* (idle gauchos) and miscreants in the countryside and the insufficient deployment by the Crown of militias or soldiers to guarantee their personal protection.

* * *

In 1811, Jose Gervasio Artigas, at forty-six years of age, already enjoyed the reputation of an up-and-coming leader in the rural areas of the region. He hailed from a prominent family of Montevideo. His grandfather, one of the original settlers of the newly established town in the year 1726, went on to hold different positions in the cabildo, or local government, in addition to his official capacity as chief police officer for the surrounding rural areas. In that last capacity, the elder Artigas spent considerable time patrolling the countryside in order to pacify hostile Indians and chase away Spanish and Portuguese bandits and cattle rustlers. That man's son—the father of José Artigas—also distinguished himself as a landowner, soldier, and civic leader. He retired from active military service in 1796 after forty years of patrolling the rural areas and protecting settlers from both Indian and Portuguese threats, while also serving in various capacities in the municipal government. The male Artigas line enjoyed longevity: the grandfather lived to see his grandson complete his eleventh birthday; the father survived to participate in the Exodus of 1811, to witness Artigas's whole period of prominence across the Litoral, and to suffer vicariously from his son's 1820 defeat and then path to exile in Paraguay.

Alongside the sons from the city's other prominent families, Artigas spent his childhood years studying in the school kept by the Franciscans in the monastery of San Bernardino. Perhaps even more important were the informal lessons learned from both father and grandfather, exploring the countryside on horseback and managing the family's estancia. He was a youth with decidedly independent criteria. Whereas his brothers found their places managing the family possessions, the adolescent Artigas rebelled against anything smacking of city life and sought every pretext for striking out into unsettled regions further and further from the coast. None surpassed him in horse-riding prowess and few equaled him in living off the land. His personality lent itself to mixing with the lower-class gauchos and joining with them in a freedom-loving lifestyle. When pressured to contribute to the family's economy, he and his small coterie of adventurous youth would absent themselves for weeks at a time, traveling into the unmapped frontier lands bordering Brazil to slaughter wild cattle and sell their hides to merchants at the nearest pulpería. Little

matter to them that the Crown labeled this as "contraband" cattle rustling because in these activities he was hardly alone: almost the whole active population in rural areas—from powerful landowners down to the most impoverished of changadores—were doing the same. A 1793 description depicts Artigas as a hearty gaucho of thirty years, respected and surrounded by a cadre of young admirers.[13]

Little or no documentation survives about his activities during the 1780s, which later gave rise to accusations from his detractors about Artigas's abandonment of his family and alleged activities as a cattle rustler and contrabandist. A credible supposition is that he lived for extended periods of time with a friendly tribe, and with a young female (historians have no information about this person) he fathered a child who, bearing his name, would become an important ally leading Charrúa warriors in military campaigns lasting up to the time of Artigas's final exile.[14] During that period, he developed a lifelong affection for these people that later extended to the Guaraní Indians of the Las misiones area. This—at least in part—explains his (reputedly) easy use of the Charrúa language and why, in his future military campaigns, he never lacked for willing warriors from that tribe to accompany his fighting forces. It explains his motivations for acquiring, in 1805, a vast tract of land that would have provided permanent protection for Charrúa settlements.[15] It explains how and why his ambitious projections for a prosperous Federal League uniting all of the Litoral provinces dovetailed conveniently with the most ambitious plans of any American leader for the protection and promotion of indigenous people.

Artigas's personal trajectory at this stage intersected with what was now an all-out crisis in the region's rural areas. The policies of the corrupt Spanish Crown that favored the concentration of land into relatively few hands had led to a proliferation of desperate, dispossessed, individuals. Many of these former squatters were now exploited sharecroppers with the legal obligation of paying for their continued residence. The other option was eviction. Come 1810—with the first "shout" for independence—hundreds of these individuals would eagerly join the fighting ranks of Artigas, believing that he and the forces answering to him offered perhaps the only channel possible for their families' economic viability.

In addition to poor settlers and sharecroppers, there was the enormous spread of vagabond Guaraní Indians and miscreants—fierce enemies of any ordinances or laws emanating from the Crown—who lived off the bountiful herds of wild cattle. Many of these had collected into bands that assaulted estancias and pulperías in order to carry off herds of cattle to sell to contraband purchasers in Brazilian border areas. All across the Banda Oriental—but to a lesser degree in all the future provinces of the Litoral—chaos was the order of the day; settlers fled to the cities and large landowners formed their own gaucho militias to protect