Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna (1831-1886),
Chilean writer, journalist and historian

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Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna studied in Santiago, Chile, and joined the school of law in 1849. From the beginning of his career he contributed to La Tribuna newspaper, writing political articles. In 1851 he participated in Pedro Urriola’s revolution against the government but was taken prisoner during the attack on the headquarters of the Chacabuco Regiment. On 4 July 1851 Vicuña Mackenna and Roberto Souper managed to escape from the prison disguised as women. In 1852 he lived in exile in the United States, and travelled from San Francisco through Mexico and Canada. A year later he studied agronomy in England, and then visited many parts of Europe including Ireland.

Back in Chile, in 1856 Vicuña Mackenna graduated as a lawyer from the University of Santiago. Although he did not practice as a barrister, his political and other writings were solidly based on legal knowledge. Together with Isidoro Errázuriz, in 1858 Vicuña Mackenna founded the newspaper La Asamblea Constitucional. He was expelled by the government and exiled to England, but was allowed to return in 1863.

That year he began contributing to El Mercurio newspaper. In 1865 he was in New York as envoy of the Chilean government, and founded La Voz de América newspaper. Elected national senator for a six-year term, in 1872 Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna was also appointed mayor of Santiago. His political career was interrupted in 1875 when he was defeated by Errázuriz in the Chilean presidential elections. He dedicated his life to journalism and writing, and in 1880 edited El Nuevo Ferrocarril and La Nación.

muerte' (1868), 'Francisco Moyen' (1868), and dozens of other novels, history books, and political essays, the most popular being 'El Santa Lucía', 'La unión americana', 'El cambiazo', 'Seis años en el senado de Chile', and 'El 20 de Abril'.

Like his contemporary Bartolomé Mitre in Argentina, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna represented the intellectual class of the South American landed elites. They initiated mainstream historiography in their countries, and selected and immortalised the national discourse that served those elites in envisioning a model of national values to be imitated by the middle and working classes.

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