

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

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



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(C. Gautiere, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile)

Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín (1831-1886), Chilean writer, journalist and historian. Born in Santiago on 25 August 1831, son of Pedro Félix Vicuña and Carmen Mackenna, and grandson of General John Mackenna (1771-1814) of the war of independence.

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*.

Vicuña Mackenna's most important works are 'El sitio de Chillán' (1849), 'La agricultura aplicada a Chile' (published in London, 1853), 'Chili' (Paris, 1855), 'Tres años de viajes' (1856), 'Ostracismo de los Carrera' (1857), 'Historia de la revolución del Perú' (1860), 'Ostracismo de O'Higgins' (1860), 'Diego de Almagro' (1862), 'Historia de la Administración Montt' (1861/62), 'Vida de Don Diego Portales' (1861/62), 'Historia de Santiago' (1868), 'Historia de Chile' (1868), 'Historia de Valparaíso' (1868), 'La guerra a

muerte' (1868), 'Francisco Moyén' (1868), and dozens of other novels, history books, and political essays, the most popular being 'El Santa Lucía', 'La unión americana', 'El cambiazó', '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.

Edmundo Murray

References

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