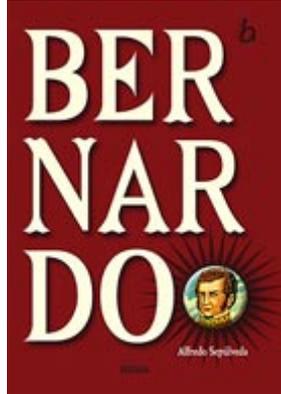


Review of Alfredo Sepúlveda's *Bernardo: Una biografía de Bernardo O'Higgins*

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Recounting history - understood as human events in time - has come to be considered by new generations of historians as a form of power that they have assigned to themselves in their role as custodians of a nation's memory. They have legitimised themselves as authorities who monopolise the production of knowledge and the meaning of history. This is based on a methodological baggage that allows them to control their affirmations, at the same time as proposing a united and unifying memory. This memory is then used to spread the social values and behaviour that they aim at, to naturalise a tie of belonging to an imagined community with the aim of bringing the subjects of the process together. This is the origin of the exaltation and the mythologisation of "great figures", from our republican history, inalterable themes reflected in schoolbooks and teaching.

It had to be a journalist and not a historian who dared to (re)write the story of one of these "great figures" with a fine selection of historical material, resulting in a solid nineteenth-century biography. Thus we get *Bernardo*, a biography that chronologically charts the public and private life of Bernardo O'Higgins, looking

behind the facade of the hero of Chilean Independence. For this reason the first name 'Bernardo' is used as a title, for the author intentionally reveals his actual life and not the 'collective myth' created by Chilean historical positivism. Bernardo was in fact not acknowledged by his father and spent part of his life with only the name Bernardo, and not O'Higgins, which he used only later as an adult.

Alfredo Sepúlveda takes as his starting point this man's grandiose normality, passing through the different periods of his life: illegitimate son, landowner, politician, hero, Supreme Governor and exile.

In the first chapter of the book, "El camarón y la bella", Alfredo takes us inside the silence surrounding Bernardo's infancy. He starts with robust research into his parents' lives: Ambrosio Higgins ('the shrimp' was the nickname by which he was known in Chile), a tireless character who leaves Ireland - faced with England's deliberate destruction of the economy - like many other Irish people who emigrated in the eighteenth century: Catholics preferred Spain and France, and Protestants the United States.

Ambrosio chose Spain in order to seek out a more auspicious destiny. He arrived in the Spanish city of Cádiz, just about to turn thirty, as an entrepreneur merchant, travelling throughout America and later, in a notable military promotion, rising to the position of Viceroy of Peru in 1796, after rising through the ranks as colonel of the Cuerpo de Dragones in 1777 and as Governor of Chile between 1786 and 1788.

With this military promotion, and while camping on a ranch owned by Simón Riquelme, he met a girl of Spanish descent, Isabel, aged 18, who would become the mother of a boy called Bernardo.

In relation to this amorous encounter between Isabel and Ambrosio, the author reflects sceptically on the macho novelistic construction around Isabel (particularly that of Jaime Eyzaguirre), who is described as a 'passionate woman' who seduced the Irish soldier. For the author these interpretations do not have 'the slightest documentary substance'(p. 47); furthermore, he raises suspicions and suppositions in relation to the different visions he compares, though he avoids choosing a single one: "we do not know if Isabel was raped and saw the Irishman as an ugly old man who caused her to be disgraced. Or if she consented to sex thinking that there was a chance to leave the constrained world she was condemned to" (p.48).

The illegitimate son of the colonial administrator - who was forbidden to marry a Creole girl in his role as an official of the crown - was treated harshly by life from early on: he was abandoned by his father, though he was later recognised by the Irish officer "in order to give him an education but not a surname" (p.53). Later on, Ambrosio gave Bernardo his surname and inheritance, which included the Hacienda de las Canteras. In this sense, and despite the distance between father and son, the book highlights very well Ambrosio's intimate concern (and obsession) with Bernardo in later years.

Nevertheless, in the second chapter, entitled "El Huacho", the author describes how the boy

was stigmatised; no sooner was he born than he was handed over to the care of Juana Olate who - according to some historians, and as noted by the author - "must have been the first woman Bernardo called 'mamá'" (p.55). However, Sepúlveda later casts doubt on this because it has not been proven whether Bernardo did indeed live with the Olates.

As soon as Ambrosio found out about the birth of his son Bernardo, he intervened and sent him to Talca (through his assistant Domingo Tirapegui) to the house of his personal friend, the rancher Juan Albano Pereira. There for the first time father and son met in what the author, with a tone of humour, calls a 'tearful scene'. Meanwhile his mother married Félix Rodríguez, with whom she had a daughter called Rosa. Bernardo grew up alone, and was sent to a boarding school, the Colegio de Nobles Naturales run by the Franciscans in the city of his birth.

At the Colegio, he did meet with his mother and his half-sister, but his father moved him again, this time to Lima, to pursue his studies at one of the Viceroyalty's best schools, the Convictorio Carolino. In Lima, Bernardo first heard the ideas of the European Enlightenment, thanks to a priest called Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza. All of this leads the author to wonder if Ambrosio's efforts to give him a better education had brought him "to a hotbed of progressive ideas" which, with Rodríguez de Mendoza, would have put not only the King's cause but also his own father's cause in jeopardy (p.67). However, Bernardo had to leave that Convictorio due to the fact his father had been appointed Viceroy, and having an illegitimate son there was not a comfortable situation for Ambrosio.

The lack of documentary evidence means that the sub-chapter "London Calling" (making reference to a song by the English punk band, The Clash) is one of the most interesting in the book as it investigates Bernardo's life in England, a real mystery - primarily because it is not known if Ambrosio preferred the army, business or a good education for his son. In the end, according to the author's research, Bernardo was in Cádiz, in the care of an ex-

associate called Nicolás de la Cruz and later, for unknown reasons, he arrived in London in the care of the watchmakers Perkins and Spencer, friends of Nicolás de la Cruz, in order to study at Richmond Catholic Academy. There he met his first love, Charlotte Eelers, daughter of Timothy Eelers, the owner of the establishment, but the relationship ended abruptly.

Bernardo's last months in England were awful. Here Sepúlveda maintains that the financial problems arose from his hectic social life; this led to the watchmakers to cease to provide for his upkeep and, for this reason, Bernardo lived through very tough times in the English capital.

During this time he came into contact with Francisco de Miranda, a revolutionary who had fought against English colonialism at the head of the American Revolution and who was trying to form a network of revolutionaries to fight for pan-American emancipation. Bernardo's meeting with the revolutionary leader caused a rupture with his father (this was starting to show itself in the letters he wrote to the Viceroy, which never received a reply): "how was it that Bernardo decided to cross over to the band of Ambrosio's enemies?" (p.82), the author wonders. Nevertheless, and despite all reports to the contrary, it may be that no such rupture really occurred, as Ambrosio, before he died, left him the best of his legacy: the Hacienda de Las Canteras.

In the following chapters it is inferred that those leading the movement of 1810 were the large landowners and wealthiest businessmen who controlled, for colonial purposes, the main sources of wealth, but which remained in the hands of the Spanish Crown's representatives. Therefore, seizing political power, disguised as a patriotic cause, they also had another aim: lowering the taxes established by the Crown and the implementation of exemptions for the importation of raw materials. (1)

Bernardo himself, owner of a large fortune inherited from his father, was more of a rancher than a revolutionary and made few forays into Chilean political matters. The only exception was when he was sent as a

representative of the city of Los Ángeles to the National Congress of 1811 and put some peasants at the disposal of another large landowner of the colonial period: Juan Martínez de Rozas. Definitively, the author shows a Bernardo O'Higgins in this period as preferring to look after his ranch and be with his mother and his sister Rosa, with whom he had reunited (p.119).

The so-called independence process was made up not only of bloody battles but also of a struggle between the egos and interests of the Creole revolutionary leaders: the disputes between Juan Martínez de Rozas and José Miguel Carrera – a character portrayed as an aristocrat seeking glory for himself - and later Carrera's struggle with Bernardo O'Higgins. The power struggle between the elites reflects that the war was not only fought against the Spanish, but was a real civil war.

It should be pointed out that, in the first stage of independence, there was little popular participation as this revolution, started by the Creole elites. The revolution did not mean social emancipation because "they had not changed the old relationship between master and servant; the old ways of interacting were simply transferred into the army" (p.198-199). Nevertheless, this situation would change with the Spanish Reconquista due to the popular rejection of the harsh Spanish repression. For example, popular support was a key factor in the success of the guerrillas of the revolutionary Manuel Rodríguez.

With the command given by the Viceroy of Peru, José Fernando Abascal y Souza, to quash the revolution in Chile, Bernardo joined Carrera's army command without having had any military training. This issue has been obscured by traditional historiography, while the author reflects it very clearly - the Escuela Militar de Chile bears his name. It was thanks to Mackenna that he managed to get military advice to fight against the Spanish.

In confrontations the result was negative for the independence cause: this is how the siege of Chillán (1813) is depicted. This event caused Carrera to lose power over the revolution due

to his military blunders, thereby notably lowering his prestige as a leader. Bernardo O'Higgins therefore emerged with military power as General-in-Chief of the Army, after the skill he had demonstrated in El Roble. This was the reason for the enmity between Carrera and O'Higgins.

These two new irreconcilable bands allowed the Desastre de Rancagua (1814) to happen, leading O'Higgins to go into exile in the city of Mendoza in Argentina. In the chapter "Cuando pa'Chile me voy" the author emphasises that exile was an invasion, during which the Chileans earned a terrible reputation in that city: they often stole chickens, harassed women, got drunk and started fights (p.289).

For his part, General O'Higgins met General San Martín - portrayed by the author as an opium addict, as a result of his bodily ailments - to give support and reorganise the Army and thus defeat the Royalists at the Battle of Chacabuco on 12 February 1817. That same month he was named Supreme Director of Chile, and in February 1818, he formulated the Declaration of Independence in the city of Talca.

Despite having lost in a new Spanish attack in Cancha Rayada (some 5 km to the north of Talca), independence was consolidated at the bloody Battle of Maipú on 5 April of that same year.

In the new climate of patriotism and nationalism, O'Higgins reached a level of unusually high prestige for his military leadership on the battlefield, where the value of independence gained meaning. (2) Nevertheless, his government was authoritarian, justifying his dictatorship within a legal framework first protected by the Constitution of 1818, which, inspired by him, made him the Supreme Director for life.

He tried to liberalise Chilean society in his government while distancing himself from the Catholic clergy through his tolerance towards Protestants. O'Higgins infuriated landowners, who, once the war was over, viewed him as a 'foreigner' - for trying to abolish laws and institutions that protected their inheritances.

Moreover, he made himself very unpopular for his 'consent' to the execution of his most bitter enemy, José Miguel Carrera, in Mendoza and the death of the patriot guerrilla Manuel Rodríguez.

But war did not totally characterise Bernardo's life: in the final chapters, "El mejor momento" and "La hora de los fantasmas", the author reveals the romantic life of O'Higgins with Rosario Puga, praised as quite a liberal woman for her era. With her, he had a son called Demetrio, though they later separated due to the fact Rosario had a lover, a Carrera sympathiser, and had become pregnant.

Despite the proclamation of a new constitution in 1822 which abolished the lifelong position of Supreme Director, with the imminent civil war he was forced to relinquish his position on 28 January 1823. From that moment on, O'Higgins spent the rest of his life exiled in Peru, together with Isabel, Rosa and his son Demetrio at the Montalbán ranch, where he passed away in October 1842. His remains were only returned to Chile in 1869, as a 'National Hero' (or 'exquisite corpse'), according to the military honours of the authorities of the time. Years later, General Augusto Pinochet, the bloody dictator, tried to fuse his figure with that of Bernardo O'Higgins in order to legitimate his new regime.

Finally, in relation to the book's formal aspects, Sepúlveda's writing skills must be praised. The way that the facts flow into one another enables the reader to easily understand, particularly the review of the existing bibliography on Bernardo and the independence period. In the same way, the author is consistent in his reasoning, explained in the prologue, and he develops and confronts several ideas of other authors. At the same time, there is the impression that he opens up many lines of enquiry which are not concluded. Writing history is not narration alone but also interpretation. The author's own explicit interpretation should be more detailed in comparison with the other views that appear in the book.

In relation to the above there is, moreover, a severe limitation in consulting primary sources. Archive consultation is non-existent, leaving the positive information that can be found there aside. Also, there are quotes in many of the book's passages, but the problem is that we do not know where he takes them from as there is no footnote to reference them and this distances the book from being a historical text.

On the other hand, the man behind the hero, Sepúlveda, has the journalist's maniacal obsession with retaining data and facts, filling whole pages with the same material - at times this is unnecessary.

Sepúlveda's greatest contribution is precisely the fact that he puts the re-reading of the study of our 'heroes' back on the agenda, something that seemed to have been abandoned by our national historiography. More importantly still, he calls into question the canonical beliefs of

our historical schools about our patriotic figures.

This biography is without doubt neither the definitive nor the 'true' biography, nevertheless it is an interesting book for anyone interested in the subject, if only in order to motivate and explore new hypotheses and re-readings on O'Higgins.

Lastly, history, as accumulative knowledge, is continuously enriched by new contributions from contemporaries who propose and search for their own responses to their uncertainties. Perhaps Sepúlveda's taste for history will make him continue and further develop the biography of Bernardo or another character in Chilean history, though perhaps with a little more historical rigour.

Fabián Gaspar Bustamante

Notes

(1) In 1796, Great Britain set up a marine blockade between Spain and its American colonies causing the shortage of products and the Metropolis's inability to control trade in the colonies, leading local traders to seek other markets.

(2) An idea raised by Alfredo Jocelyn-Holt in *La Independencia de Chile: Tradición, modernización y mito* (Santiago: Editorial Planeta, 2001), p. 251.

Author's Reply

In general I agree with these comments. Bernardo is an attempt, from the perspective of journalism and not history, to publicise the figure of the Independents' leader, with whose surname half of the streets of Chile have been baptised, not to mention an entire region, together with the Military School itself. This publicising through a commercial book, not aimed at specialists, seemed to me to be necessary because he is not a popular hero (in fact, in the Chilean version of "Great Britons", he is not even among the ten selected). The reason for this lack of attention to the figure of O'Higgins lies perhaps in the fact that he was the favourite hero of Pinochet, and that during

the years of the dictatorship, he tried to symbolically connect with O'Higgins: both men were, according to this particular point-of-view, 'fathers' of the land. One founded it and the other 're-founded' it.

It seems evident that O'Higgins was much more than the desires of Pinochet and it was for this reason that I wrote the book: to once again present his life to the readers of today (in 2010 there will have been 200 years of independent Chilean governments), as far away as possible from prejudices and biased official interpretations.

It is true. In Bernardo, there are quite a number of questions that are left unanswered. This is one of the oldest journalistic maxims; 1) asking

questions is, in some way, also giving information and 2) if someone does not know the answer, it is better to say so. I am not trained as a historian and so I sought to leave it open to interpretation, although I do believe that there is a certain level of 'informed speculation' in the book.

I recognise the absence of primary sources. I would have loved to have had the time to dive into the archives, but journalists work fast and to a deadline. I preferred to limit myself to secondary sources and to point this out in the book.

The references were an issue that was a source of some headaches to me. I did not want this text to be full of footnotes. I think this conspires against one of the main strengths of the work: the agility of narration. Therefore I recognised, in the prologue, my three main

documentary sources and I pointed out that I would not be citing them all the time.

"The journalist's maniacal obsession with retaining data and facts, filling whole pages with the same material" is curious. In the world of Anglo-Saxon journalism, where I was educated, this is a positive value. Show, don't tell. Love for details. In the Hispanic world, however, this way of narrating always encounters a certain reticence.

I accept the criticism of being an ally in this crusade to go beyond the canonical views on history. Coming from journalism, which generally has to do with the present and not the past, this was what I tried to do.

Alfredo Sepúlveda Cereceda