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Strangford, Independence and the London Missions

By 1807, Napoleon Bonaparte’s domination of Europe was at its peak. A year later his invasion of Spain eventually provided the British army with the scenario in which to confront his army. This naturally meant a new alliance between Great Britain and Spain, added to the traditional alliance Britain already had with Portugal, whose Prince Regent, the future King Joao VI, had in 1807 decided to move his court to Brazil, due to the menace of a French invasion in the Iberian peninsula.

This event is most significant for the analysis of Britain’s relations with Latin America during this period. For the first time, Britain had direct participation and representation in the South American continent. Lord Strangford was appointed as British representative to the Portuguese Court in Rio de Janeiro, where he remained for the next nine years. Strangford had been instrumental in convincing the Portuguese Emperor to move to South America.1 The importance of Strangford’s presence in Rio de Janeiro was magnified even more by the outbreak of independence movements in 1810 in Caracas and Buenos Aires, both of which occurred as a result of the French occupation of Spain, and the attempt to make Joseph Bonaparte the new King of the Spanish Empire.

These two revolutionary movements did not, however, declare complete separation from the Spanish Crown; they remained loyal to Ferdinand, son of the deposed King Charles IV. Nevertheless, the River Plate revolution marked a crucial twist for relations with Great Britain, as the revolutionaries rapidly sought British recognition and
assistance. For the next fourteen years diplomatic missions were repeatedly sent to London. Great Britain was in an awkward position: allied to Spain on the one hand, and on the other receiving delegations from the revolutionary governments of both Caracas and the River Plate who were trying to obtain protection from Spain. This situation would begin to clarify only in 1815 when the defeat of Napoleon and the formation of the Holy Alliance allowed Britain to view her relations with Spain and its Colonies from a different standpoint. Furthermore, in 1816 the River Plate declared its complete emancipation from the Spanish Empire.

Naturally enough, during this period 1807–16 the internal affairs of both Great Britain and the River Plate were affected, in one way or the other, by the events which were taking place in both continents. In England three different Governments were formed during these nine years, the Administrations of the Duke of Portland, Spencer Perceval, and Lord Liverpool, who would remain in power until 1827. The Río de La Plata received during those years the last Viceroyos, Sobremonte, Liniers, and Cisneros, and the first experiences of revolutionary government: the Primera Junta, the two Triunviratos, and the three Directores Supremos – Posadas, Alvear, and Pueyrredón – who followed.

The Ministry of the Duke of Portland succeeded the Talents who, apart from being largely responsible for the misfortunes of the River Plate invasions, had also failed to reach a peaceful solution with France. The Portland Administration was absolutely convinced that no peace was possible as long as Napoleon was in power, and therefore it decided from the start to adopt a Pittite line in foreign affairs. It was no surprise that the Cabinet should be composed almost entirely of Tories. Among them were George Canning and Viscount Castlereagh, who, as we have already seen, were the two most prominent Tory opponents in the House of Commons of the Talents’ policies in South America. Canning became Foreign Secretary, and Castlereagh took the War Office. Castlereagh had been the first of the two to take an interest in South American affairs, and this was reflected almost as soon as he had resumed his ministerial functions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he