An Englishman in Patagonia

by John Pilkington

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Contents

Maps

JOHN PILKINGTON'S ROUTE THROUGH PATAGONIA

Acknowledgements

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I left Patagonia in humble admiration for a people who are holding their own in a tough neck of the woods. A single book can barely do justice to their mettle. But if I've sparked some interest in them I'll be more than satisfied, because in a humdrum world the Patagonians are an example to us all. My final acknowledgement goes – with gratitude and respect – to them.

‘A Land of Monsters’

One Saturday morning in 1989, on BBC Radio 4’s *Breakaway* programme, Bernard Falk was trying to describe something boring. Eventually he gave up. ‘It sounds as much fun as a package holiday in Patagonia,’ he concluded.

I pricked up my ears. Radio presenters weren’t often so disdainful. Anywhere with an image that bad must, I thought, be rather special.

I knew that in the eyes of the British writer Bruce Chatwin, Patagonia had been a country of black fogs and whirlwinds at the end of the inhabited world. Chatwin’s American contemporary Paul Theroux summed it up as a ‘fanciful blur of legend, the giants on the shore, the ostrich on the plain, and a sense of displaced people, like my own ancestors who had fled from Europe’. To the nineteenth-century naturalist W.H. Hudson it had a look of antiquity, of eternal peace, ‘of a desert that has been a desert from of old and will continue a desert for ever’. ‘Patagonia?’ screamed Lady Florence Dixie’s friends when she announced her expedition with Lord Queensberry in 1879. ‘Who would ever think of going to such a place? Why, you will be eaten up by cannibals! What on earth makes you choose such an outlandish part of the world to go to? What can be the attraction?’

Such dismissive remarks haven’t diminished with the passing years. The historian Michael Mainwaring observed as recently as 1983 that the name still mystifies outsiders. ‘It is thought by some people to be a fictitious country like Ruritania, or somewhere near the Amazon, or next to Mesopotamia, or somewhere off the Hebrides, or a disease. . . . It is the back of beyond, a nowhere place.’ Such a nonentity, in fact, that when awarded the 1979 Booker Prize and asked what importance she attached to

such literary awards, Iris Murdoch replied that they mattered as much as if it was raining in Patagonia.

But if Iris Murdoch hadn't found inspiration there, other novelists had. Patagonia's typecasting as a place unspeakably remote and teeming with danger prompted Jules Verne to locate *The Children of Captain Grant* and *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* there. James Joyce made a cursory reference to 'the terrible Patagonians' in *Dubliners*. And Sir Arthur Conan Doyle used turn-of-the-century reports from Patagonia as his basis for *The Lost World*.

But for me, on that spring morning in 1989, the name Patagonia meant simply a land that must hold some surprises. From the 40th Parallel to Cape Horn it beckoned: almost half a million square miles. Like Tartary or Siberia, this southernmost tip of South America tantalizingly resisted definition. It was neither a country nor a province, but included bits of both Chile and Argentina; and though a glance at my atlas disclosed the label 'Patagonia' stretched generously across that turnip-shaped appendage to the continent, it looked almost like an afterthought. I rummaged in vain for evidence that the name had ever enjoyed any solid political status.

Most historians agree that Patagonia was so christened in 1520 when Ferdinand Magellan took shelter from South Atlantic storms during his round-the-world voyage for the Spanish Crown. He noticed to his surprise a gigantic figure on the shore. The man, we're told, wore only a guanaco hide and rough moccasins, and was dancing, leaping and singing in a most extraordinary way. When at last this Tehuelche Indian was persuaded to come aboard Magellan's flagship the *Trinidad*, the expedition's chronicler Antonio Pigafetta was greatly impressed. 'So tall was this man that we came up to the level of his waistbelt. He was well enough made, and had a broad face, painted red, with yellow circles round his eyes, and two heart-shaped spots on his cheeks.' Pigafetta added later that even the shortest of the Tehuelche stood taller than the tallest man of Castile. But what most staggered Magellan about this Indian was the immensity of his feet. *'Ha, Patagón!'* he cried – which, allowing for his archaic Spanish and some corruption in telling the tale, may be translated as 'Wow, Bigfeet!' With the arrival of Europeans the days of the Tehuelche were numbered, but their

homeland achieved immortality as Patagonia – 'Land of the Big-feet'.

A package holiday appealed to me no more than to Bernard Falk; but the idea was born. Later that year I'd planned to do some walking in Peru – but within a week of arriving I found myself in Chile, heading with a growing curiosity towards Santiago and the south. It was November; the southern summer stretched before me. I took my map of Patagonia, marshalled what crumbs of information I'd managed to collect, and sketched out a rough route.

Of all things guiding my pencilled line, perhaps the most important was the realization that I was looking at not one Patagonia but two. On the Chilean side, densely forested peninsulas and islands squatted in the teeth of the Roaring Forties, separated by winding fjords whose vertiginous shores sheltered seal colonies, foresters' cabins and the occasional rain-sodden fishing hamlet. Broad rivers tumbled down from the Andes to disgorge themselves into these inlets, their names unexpectedly familiar to a British ear. Simpson, Baker, Cochrane. . . . My pencil strode confidently across them (on no evidence whatsoever that I'd be able to do the same) and came to rest on the great triangular island of Tierra del Fuego – 'Fireland'.

East of the Andes, by contrast, Patagonia was by all accounts made up of rolling, virtually treeless grasslands, the home of guanaco, ostriches and twenty million sheep. The pencil crept up its eastern seaboard, making surges inland where, for instance, a Welsh name like Trevelin stood out among the Río Negros and the Santa Cruzes.

How long would such a journey take? Six months? Six years? Having given up my job in England, for the first time in my life I had no deadline. The Patagonian winter would doubtless propel me towards more temperate latitudes after six months or so. But for all practical purposes I could take as long as I needed.

I ruminated on the enormity of this new-found freedom, as my pencil hovered back to its starting point, where the Chilean railway system and the Pan-American Highway came to an abrupt end in the old provincial capital of Puerto Montt.

Geographically and politically, Chile is the enigma of Latin America. Stretching from the tropics to Antarctica, from sea level

to over 22,000 feet, it encompasses almost every climatic variation on earth. Its people are equally varied: immigrants from the Spanish colonial period mix with twentieth-century settlers from a score of European countries; and a tiny Indian population remains around the city of Temuco.

Some observers, studying this fragile ribbon between the Andes and the Pacific, have wondered how it can survive at all. 'You have to be thin to be Chilean,' I was once told. 'Otherwise you fall off.' But despite the lunacy of its boundaries, from 1818 till 1973 Chile enjoyed continuous and mostly peaceful civilian rule – the longest such period of any country on the continent.

I'd visited Santiago briefly ten years previously, so on reaching the city centre I made for Calle Londres, a street I remembered with affection. In 1979 this winding lane had been the centre of a run-down quarter: a district of dark shadows, rotting rubbish and crumpled bodies in corners. Turning the corner, I was amused to see that it had now been declared a conservation area. The tramps had been replaced by fake Victorian lamp-posts, the potholes by reconstituted cobbles. Tourists were poking around where prostitutes had once flaunted their charms; and nearby I found a craft market and a bistro.

Many of the older hotels had become pay-by-the-hour establishments, accommodating the displaced ladies and their clients. Only one, the Londres, remained an authentic *residencial*. By chance this was where I'd stayed on my previous visit. It seemed unchanged – indeed, undusted – and the ring echoed up its marble stairway as I leaned on the bell.

The Residencial Londres occupied a corner building of honey-coloured stone, dating from the 1890s. It had once been a private house, and indeed still boasted some finely proportioned rooms. To my disappointment I was shown to a cubbyhole down a dark corridor; but at breakfast next morning I found myself looking out over a fine stone-flagged courtyard, one of the city's surviving examples. Sunshine streamed through the dining room, dancing on the sideboard and highlighting the cobwebs on the marmalade pots.

At my table sat two elderly ladies, white-haired and so thickly made-up that their faces looked as if they would crumble if touched. '*Buenos días, caballero,*' said the taller, sterner of the two. 'This is Hilda and my name is Greta.'

The pair spoke in a distinctive, heavily accented Spanish, and I was sure I recognized them from my previous visit. 'You're from Germany, aren't you?' I ventured.

'Ja, ja!' replied the one introduced as Hilda.

'How long have you lived here?' I asked, meaning in Santiago.

'Twenty-three years in this house!' replied Greta proudly. 'And before that, across the street. We were exiles, you see – refugees from the Third Reich. We had no family, so for company we stayed together.'

'Didn't you ever think of going back?'

'Oh, many times – but we were afraid of what we might find. You must understand that Germany wasn't a good place to be just after the war. Then, as the years went by, it seemed to us that Chile might prove a better home than the Fatherland.' Greta's lips showed a trace of a pout. 'There are many Germans here, you know.'

I knew something of Chile's German community, most of whom lived in the far south. 'But they're hundreds of miles away,' I protested.

'Richtig!' She thumped the table triumphantly. 'Which is exactly why we remain in the capital. Far enough from the disgusting beer and sauerkraut – but close enough to hear all the gossip!'

Unusually for Latin America, Santiago enjoys a mild climate, and now, in late spring, the weather was at its best. I strolled in shirtsleeves, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere, the ready smiles, and the tomfoolery as youngsters sprayed passers-by from newly restored fountains.

Chile was reportedly at last emerging from its recent traumatic years, and I was exhilarated to see this evidence of it in the capital; but at the same time I felt restless to carry on south. With an increasing sense of urgency I rummaged for facts about Patagonia. I'd always thought the place to be somehow more imaginary than real: a kind of never-never land, quite disconnected from the rest of the world, and desolate in a schoolboy-fiction kind of way – like the moon. So I was surprised to find ordinary Chileans quite well informed on the subject. 'Patagonia,' announced the Residencial Londres receptionist, 'has the worst weather in the whole of South America. It appears on the television forecast every day. Wind and rain. Wind and rain.

Even when the rest of us are sweltering, the forecast for Patagonia is always wind and rain.'

Some equally startling information was thrown up at the Chilean Society for History and Geography. In a splendid Edwardian chamber, distinguished past members squinted down at me from gilt-framed portraits as I waited for an interview with one of its vice-presidents. After a few minutes the oak door creaked open to reveal a rotund figure. Like his predecessors on the wall, he was amply waistcoated, and out of a well-worn wing collar rose an equally ample face, wrinkled and bewhiskered like the Walrus in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. 'You were asking about Patagonia?' he wheezed.

The vice-president listened to my questions with the patience of a man for whom time was no longer measured in minutes or even hours. 'Patagonia,' he remarked finally, 'is unique in all the world. Do you realize it has no capital, no government, no boundaries and no flag? It takes up more than a quarter of my country's territory, and the same of Argentina's; but after a lifetime of studying history and geography I've yet to put my finger on what exactly Patagonia is.'

'Hasn't anybody ever fixed its boundaries?' I asked.

'Many have tried. On the Chilean side, some say it starts at the River Bío-Bío south of Concepción; others at the 40th Parallel; yet others at the boundary between our so-called tenth and eleventh regions beyond Puerto Montt. Yet ask in Chaitén – a Patagonian town by two of these definitions – and they'll say they want none of it! On the Argentine side the choice is between the Río Colorado, the Río Negro and the 40th Parallel again. But I've spoken to Argentines from the province of La Pampa, north of all these boundaries, who consider themselves Patagonians through and through.'

'It sounds as if being a Patagonian is more a matter of how you feel than where you live?'

'You could say that. It's certainly something to do with the way Patagonia has been settled. Its original immigrants had to overcome untold obstacles, and the survivors developed a common bond, an understanding which united them over great distances. If you want my opinion – and remember I'm not a Patagonian – anybody whose parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents suffered as those pioneers did will carry Patagonia

in their blood, wherever they may live and whatever comforts they may enjoy today. Conversely, Patagonia's newcomers will never be true Patagonians – however much they may try to convince you otherwise. Patagonia itself may be undefinable, but you can tell a Patagonian by the sweat and the tears.'

We sat in high-backed, exquisitely carved chairs, facing each other across an antique mahogany table in one of the most sophisticated cities in Latin America; yet my mind was already hundreds of miles south. Patagonia was beginning to look like more than Chatwin's black fogs and whirlwinds; more than Theroux's giants on the shore; more even than Hudson's 'desert from of old'. Not only did it defy physical description, extending as it did from the wet, fjorded, forested Pacific seaboard, across several thousand square miles of ice-cap, to a virtual desert where it reached the Atlantic. But for the first time I also glimpsed a more metaphysical attraction. A thousand human tragedies must have been played out on this desolate stage.

So much for Patagonia's past. What, I asked, about its future? The vice-president smiled. 'Look closely at the trees along the shore,' he suggested. 'The far south is being engulfed by the sea. I know this is something you're also concerned about in Europe, but here it's happening rather faster. If you know where to look, you'll see that much of the coastal vegetation is drowning before your eyes.'

It was true that some European governments – the Dutch in particular – had been expressing anxiety about the shrinking polar ice-caps. The resulting rise in sea level would presumably hit Patagonia as elsewhere. But what about the Patagonian Ice-Cap, the greatest body of ice outside the polar regions? Like those at the poles, it had supposedly been showing signs of melting. Wouldn't a reduction in the ice-load counterbalance the rising of the sea?

The old man weighed his reply. 'As a scientist, I'd like to be able to answer that,' he said at length. 'But as a realist, I have to say that it's in the lap of the gods.'

We climbed a staircase to a musty gallery, home of the society's geographical archives. Chart after chart bore the annotations of eighteenth-century navigators: 'This Channel May Have Outlet', 'Peaks Not Surveyed' and the ominous 'This Coast Unexplored'. They were smeared with the stains of salt water

and had the yellowed edges of documents left too long on wheelhouse tables. These were no mere reprints. We pored over them like schoolboys, the vice-president straining to read the spidery flourishes almost as excitedly as me.

Eventually we turned to the topographical sheets of Chile's official mapmakers, the Instituto Geográfico Militar. Some of the Patagonian ones hadn't been revised for 50 years. 'Look here,' urged the vice-president suddenly, pointing to the vast Lake Viedma, over the border in Argentina, which was shown as draining to the Atlantic. 'Do you see how this lake is dammed up against the ice-cap? Its outlet is to the east, but can you imagine what would happen if the ice-cap were to shrink?' He paused a moment and looked me in the eye. 'Why, the waters would drop straight down to the Pacific!'

With the maps in front of us I could see the logic of his argument. What was more, there were other lakes along the frontier in the same condition. If even one of the great ice dams were to rupture, drainage would be altered over thousands of square miles. Forests, wildlife and any pockets of human settlement would be decimated. For the first time I began to grasp the immensity of things in this region on which I had set my sights. I also realized how very few of its shores had felt the wash of the surveyor's skiff, the tread of the explorer's boot. The thought was chilling; those yellowing charts might just as well have borne the words 'Here Be Dragons'.

In the Natural History Museum, a classical pile crumbling to dust, I came face to face with some of the extraordinary monsters which have inhabited Patagonia through the ages. Their size seemed in scale with the land. After inspecting the leg bones of a *ligua*, a kind of dinosaur, I entered a room to find a reconstruction of a *chacabuco*, fully eight feet tall, gazing questioningly down at visitors like a camel that had lost its humps. In a gallery the size of a small aircraft hangar there followed the complete skeleton of a blue whale – 90 feet long, and in its living state weighing 120 tons.

But I had to hunt for the animal I most wanted to see. After an hour's pursuit I found Patagonia's oddest creature of all in a corner, hidden amongst the stuffed steamer ducks. To be exact, it was hardly more than the ghost of an animal: a piece of pelvis, a bit of jawbone, a vertebra, a photographic montage and a thick,

brittle, curling fragment of hairy reddish skin. These relics represented almost all that is now left, anywhere in the world, of the Giant Ground Sloth or *milodón*. They were discovered in 1895 in a cave near an inlet called Last Hope Sound, together with several thousand years' worth of sloth droppings. The montage showed a figure looking rather like King Kong, perhaps ten feet tall, advancing on hind legs with an evil look in its eye. Three-clawed feet left huge pancakey impressions in the ground. The sloth's curled upper lip was extended like a salamander's tongue, catching the insects and grubs on which it subsisted. A scaly skin completed the hideous picture.

It was this gross animal which had first aroused Bruce Chatwin's interest in Patagonia. A fragment of skin had been brought home by his mother's seafaring cousin, Charley Milward. In 1974 Chatwin conceived the idea of going to look for further evidence, and at the same time seeing if Milward's outrageous tales had any truth in them. Like others before him, Milward had painted a picture of empty plains stretching to a craggy horizon of wind-swept, untrodden peaks – the ultimate wilderness. For Chatwin it was a heady mix. What lured him even more was the fact that Patagonia seemed to have provided a last refuge, not only for the *milodón*, but also for a number of outcasts and oddballs of the human kind. In the twelve years since it had been published, his book *In Patagonia* had done much to nurture this impression of a land peopled by eccentrics. I relished the thought that I would soon be among Patagonians and could draw some conclusions for myself.

The southbound traveller from Santiago is treated to a succession of visual delights. For the first 300 miles the view is of wheatfields and vineyards – a Loire Valley complete with arrow-straight avenues of Lombardy poplars – and in the towns a visitor with time and curiosity will find the *bodegas* of Chile's most famous winemakers. But the distant Andes are a constant reminder of a harsher land, and crossing the Bío-Bío one gradually becomes more aware of its volcanoes and dogtooth peaks. The gap between mountains and sea narrows, and bit by bit the forests and lakes close in on the Pan-American Highway, overwhelming its tacky roadside trappings.

For me southern Chile evoked sensations already forgotten.

After the long desert journey from Peru I relished the whiff of rain in the air; the feeling of renewed energy now that my body was no longer clammy and hot; and, most of all, the sight of a landscape no longer biscuit-coloured but green. My eyes feasted on green pasture, green verges, green beech, oak and elm: a dozen glorious shades at every turn.

My bus rolled southward. Coffee was brought, and I sipped it slowly, staring at a notice above the driver's head. 'God is my Co-driver', it read. A watery sun showed briefly amid gathering rainclouds; then the first fat drops hit the windscreen. For ten deafening minutes the vehicle echoed to staccato drumming as the driver peered frowning through the spray. It all seemed decidedly European, until I remembered that unlike in Europe these raindrops were pure. The trade winds which cross the Pacific encounter no cities and carry hardly any pollution. The only way the industrial world could ruin this land would be by melting the ice-caps and drowning it.

Nearing Puerto Montt, I had the unsettling impression that I'd stepped into Germany before the First World War. Men with Teutonic faces, bristling moustaches and flat caps walked arm-in-arm with women in headscarves. Tired-looking horses drew carts down gravel lanes through countryside which, to my European eye, looked vaguely neglected. The fields here had been hacked out of the forest by hand; so they were small, and full of abandoned patches where the drainage was poor. Vast areas were given over to rough grazing. Southern Chile's farmers, not having the capital or chemicals available to their Western European counterparts, were working their land more gently.

I always find it difficult to pinpoint the subtleties of the southern seasons. My diary told me that it was 1st December – equivalent to 1st June north of the Equator – but at this latitude spring had only just given way to summer. On all sides, nature seemed to be hurrying to make the most of it. Hedgerows were full of energy, young green tendrils reaching out luxuriantly to wave in the slipstreams of passing vehicles. Roadside verges were thick with buttercups and ox-eye daisies; copses were almost choking with dog-rose. And just to remind me that this was Chile, at the corner of a field stood a monkey-puzzle tree.

Puerto Montt, where road and railway ended their 660-mile journey from Santiago, was on the receiving end of a cloudburst

when I arrived. I hurried through deepening puddles to Raúl Arroyo's tumbledown guesthouse, a shack at the foot of a bluff. In the dining room a dozen drenched travellers were sitting on rucksacks, tucking into mountains of fish and chips. 'Come in, come in,' urged Raúl – then, seeing that the room could hold no more, he shrugged his shoulders with a grin. 'You think this is a squeeze? One day last year I had 40.'

But though he made the most of his modest guesthouse, Raúl was no Rachman. His charge was minimal, his hospitality generous. 'I just can't turn people away,' he told me. I chose a secluded eight-by-four-foot cupboard, dumped my luggage on the bed, and left the others to their fish and chips. The rain had eased; so I ran the two blocks to the promenade, sea shells crunching under my feet. Clambering onto a parapet, I let my gaze revolve slowly across the 180-degree horizon. To the west, the wet, green island of Chiloé lay diffidently in the shadow of the receding storm. East, the 9,000-foot volcano Osorno shimmered in bright sunlight like a heap of gems. And straight ahead – due south – my eyes drifted beyond the leaden and forbidding waves towards the place whose secrets might, I hoped, soon be revealed.

Puerto Montt was a monument to the versatility of timber and corrugated iron. Founded in 1852 by German colonists, it had made certain concessions to the twentieth century, but they were widely spaced and grudging. Timber, especially, was everywhere: in the painted shingles of the houses tumbling down to the shore; in the horse-drawn carts which rumbled along the Costanera; in the old railway carriages, pensioned off on a siding beside the railway station; and piled high on the lorries chugging in from the forests to fuel the ovens and stoves of the town's 120,000 inhabitants. All this wood gave Puerto Montt a grainy look, enhanced by the corrugated roofs whose red, green and orange surfaces were thrown into dramatic relief when the sun shone low in the west. Their roughness mimicked the ever-turbulent waters to the south.

Back at the guesthouse, I found the next cubicle occupied by a young German, dishevelled and staring dreamily through the polythene-covered hole which passed for his bedroom window. Fritz was waiting to buy a boat. He'd left home four years previously with his life's savings in the heel of his shoe. For a

while he'd wandered aimlessly around Peru and Bolivia; then, on a friend's recommendation, drifted into Chile and hitchhiked south. Reaching the forests east of Puerto Montt, he found at last what he was looking for. 'It's like Tyrol without the people,' he grinned, still gazing through the window.

Fritz had spent his first summer hiking from lake to lake, asking directions from farmers with names like Zimmermann or Reichert, who had pointed towards hidden passes and pressed jars of honey and home-made cottage loaves into his hand. Here was somewhere, he thought, where a man could live unmolested and perhaps find peace of mind. He began to hatch a plan.

He was no farmer, but he knew he had a practical streak and was good with his hands. 'Here in Puerto Montt I took the plunge,' he continued, turning to face me at last. 'An estate agent was offering 100 hectares of rough country by a lake, two days' walk from the nearest road – so I invested what was left in my shoe.' Within two summers he'd built a house, planted cereals and fruit trees, and filled his farmyard with hens, geese, pigs and a horse.

At first he'd been absorbed by the tasks, content with his own company and confident of success. But then his luck ran out. The second spring brought almost continuous rain – not unusual in that part of Chile, but sufficient to wash away his seedlings and cut him off completely from the outside world. 'No one came to ask how I was. My friends in Germany stopped writing; then, would you believe, the farm became infested with rats!' He winced at the memory. 'Do you know, I spent the whole summer hunting and trapping those bastards, sometimes 100 of them each day. For me it was a very bad year.'

But Fritz remained a dogged optimist. After finally exterminating the rats, he borrowed some money to finance the new boat. The holding would produce a surplus in the coming year – he was sure of it – so he'd need the boat to ferry the produce across the lake. 'Next year will be the turning point,' he insisted. 'And just to make sure, I've ordered a kilo of rat poison.'

By any definition of Patagonia, I was now on its brink. But before continuing south I wanted to visit an island whose history has been linked with Patagonia for more than 100 years. Chiloé, half the size of Wales, separates Reloncaví Sound from the Pacific.

Lying in the teeth of the Roaring Forties, it's a stormy place – the name means 'Land of Seagulls' in the language of the Mapuche Indians, suggesting that seabirds are often driven far inland. Over the centuries its several thousand 'Chilote' farmer/fishermen have developed an abiding *esprit de corps* and a judicious distrust of mainlanders. In 1826 they were the last in the whole of Latin America to join the liberators and boot out the Spanish.

In 1834 Charles Darwin, arriving on HMS *Beagle*, found the Chilotes well fed but miserably lacking in creature comforts to improve their damp lives. They would eagerly barter a duck or goose for a little tobacco. Castro, the island's capital, he found 'a most forlorn and deserted place . . . the streets and plaza coated with fine green turf, on which sheep were browsing.' There was not a watch or clock in the whole town, he observed caustically. 'An old man struck the church bell by guess.'

News of Patagonia reached the Chilotes in the 1870s, when the first of the great 'estancias' or sheepfarms were being established in the far south. The pioneer ranchers were desperate for farmhands. Although it would be many years before the Chile/Argentina frontier was properly defined, most of the estancia lands had been granted by the Argentine government, so their new owners looked first to Buenos Aires for their labour.

Display advertisements were placed in Argentine newspapers, offering handsome wages for anyone prepared to make the move to Patagonia. People consulted ships' captains and ticket agents. Where were Río Gallegos, Punta Arenas, Ushuaia? What, indeed, was Patagonia? Some thought it was an Argentine province, others a foreign country. Within a few months Patagonia became the talk of the Buenos Aires cafés and bars. But the call to the south happened to coincide with a period of relative prosperity in the capital, and few workers actually made the trip. The rigours of Patagonia, it seemed, held little appeal for townsfolk.

The Chilotes on the other hand were used to hardship. Their island's fertility had proved to be a mixed blessing; farmers battled constantly with dense forests which, brought on by copious rains, forever threatened to engulf their fields. Being natural seafarers, Chilote men were also used to being away from home. They soon began to spend their summers in Patagonia, joining the teams of sheepshearers which moved from farm to farm. Later, many settled there permanently. Some

encouraged their families to join them; others preferred the single life, sending monthly allowances back to their loved ones rather than lead them to what for many years was thought of as 'a man's place'.

I was taken to the island by Pedro Bórquez, a chocolate salesman. He was in a great hurry, but not too great to swing his car to a spectacular halt at the sight of a hitchhiker on the outskirts of Puerto Montt. We caught the Chiloé ferry with moments to spare, and crossed in a heavy swell with dolphins pitching round the bows. Chilote folklore maintains that these waters are haunted by *El Caleuche*, a ghost clipper whose great translucent sails lure fishermen to put out to sea on stormy nights. Invariably the victims are never seen again. Some Chilote sailors are still said to make a point of locking themselves inside their cottages on blustery evenings, just in case.

After the Pan-American Highway, Chiloé's roads seemed uncannily quiet. They reminded me of the lanes of Pembrokeshire, and in fact the landscape was like west Wales too: a hotch-potch of small fields, whose freshly turned nut-brown soil would soon be covered by the deep, luxuriant green of potato crops brought on by spring rains. Many of the clapboard houses were gaily painted and approached by twin rows of whitewashed stones. Others stood empty and derelict. If their owners hadn't left for Patagonia, they must certainly have decamped to Puerto Montt, and their once productive plots were reverting to wet grassland and sphagnum bog.

We arrived at the port of Ancud, and Pedro rushed off to sell chocolate. After our high speed journey I was happy to pass an hour by the quayside, watching the fishermen unload their catches from brightly painted *chalupas* and listening to the seagulls screaming as they fought for scraps.

There wasn't much to explore. Although more than 200 years old, Ancud was largely destroyed by an earthquake in 1960. A few buildings survived the tremors, only to collapse under the tidal wave which followed them. Chile's earthquakes are legendary, but this one seems to have taken everyone by surprise. The main road to Castro remained impassable for months, and the island's only railway never operated again. Ancud's stately nineteenth-century cathedral, one of its few stone buildings, was reduced to rubble, to be replaced years later by an inconsequential

wooden one – the only single-storey cathedral I've ever seen.

Wandering later in the surrounding countryside, I chatted to a farmer putting out silver milk churns to be collected later by the dairy dray. The roadsides were home to a giant species of rhubarb, which he told me Chilotes eat raw with salt. I replied that in my country we prefer to boil it and add sugar, a comment which so amused him that he nearly split his sides. Like many Chilotes, he kept a dozen or so pigs in his yard, and as we talked they scampered at our feet, piglets squealing after their mothers as they rooted among the wild fuchsias.

The Chilotes excelled themselves when it came to giving lifts. I walked out of Ancud on the Castro road, and no sooner had I left the town than a lorry pulling a heavy trailer ground down through innumerable gears and hissed to a halt. A door swung open. Familiar music wafted from the cab. Two young faces grinned down. 'Castro?' they called. I nodded, and strong arms leaned down to take my rucksack. Carlos and Mario were carrying fish, but they were too full of questions for me to discover much about them. When Mario found that I could translate the English lyrics of one of his cassettes, I was immediately set to work. He explained that he'd fallen in love with the singer, Tracy Chapman, and his inability to understand her words had been causing him great distress.

Carlos and Mario's lorry was a modern one, equipped with the latest gadgets, and after I'd completed my translation the CB radio was brought to life. *'Naranja Mecánica. Atentivo Spártacus. ¿Copias?' Crackle. 'Spártacus. ¡Atentivo! ¿Copias?'* More crackle. To distract them from the tiresome thing, I mentioned that *Una Naranja Mecánica*, or *A Clockwork Orange*, had been the title of a well-known film of the seventies. They chortled in disbelief.

Castro had the atmosphere of a medieval town being dragged unwillingly into the twentieth century. Horses still limped along the waterfront, hauling carts piled high with potatoes or fish; but they now shared Castro's steep, narrow streets with juggernauts of the kind driven by Carlos and Mario. On the quayside, the town's famous *palafito* houses still jutted over the water, wobbling picturesquely if rather perilously on their spindly stilts. But Chiloé had begun to attract tourists from Santiago, and some of the *palafitos* had become fake-rustic restaurants, offering lobster and king crab at absurd prices to a clientele which, as far

as the Chilotes were concerned, might just as well have come from Mars.

In my pocket I had an introduction from a Santiago friend to Renato Cárdenas, a local historian and writer. I'm always a little wary of waving introductions on people's doorsteps, but Renato had been recommended so warmly that I asked in Castro if they recognized the name. They all did. '*Por supuesto, señor.* Don Renato lives *arriba* – up the hill.' I followed the directions of a dozen willing hands, and found myself climbing a broad street which gave way to a deeply rutted lane as it left the town.

Eventually the house came into view, a decaying two-storey structure built, like everything else, of wood. Renato answered my knock – a slight figure with deep-set, enquiring eyes under a shock of black hair. His goatee-bearded face was that of a 40-year-old, but the ripped sweater, baggy corduroys and carpet slippers hinted at someone more elderly. A picture flashed through my mind of a mad scientist having a day off. At first he stood framed by the doorway, momentarily nonplussed by his unexpected visitor, but then I mentioned the name of our mutual friend and his eyes lit up. 'Why, yes! Francisco Valiente's a good fellow. How is he? Do come in and have some tea!'

Renato already had several guests in his kitchen, and I found them earnestly discussing Chile's forthcoming general election, now less than two weeks away. Along with a great many other Chileans, they'd been looking forward to this moment for nearly 20 years.

I knew some of the background. In 1973, with help from the United States, the armed forces had ousted Marxist president Salvador Allende and installed in his place the Army chief, Augusto Pinochet. There followed a decade of violence unequalled in Chile's history. Allende's supporters (real or imagined) were hunted down, arrested and interned. Many were subjected to the most brutal forms of torture, and 2,000 were never heard of again.

In 1988, after years of domestic and foreign pressure, Pinochet agreed to hold a plebiscite on the question of whether he should step down. Not surprisingly – except, apparently, to himself – the vote was resoundingly that he should. So now a new president was to be chosen and the campaign was in full swing. Chile's last general election had been so long ago that more than

half the population had never voted before. I'd seen them listening on the hustings with a variety of expressions, ranging from curiosity through bewilderment to frank disbelief.

'When Pinochet agreed to the plebiscite,' said Renato, 'the door to democracy was opened a crack. Now it's been pushed ajar. But once his successor is installed it'll be thrown wide open, and the military bigwigs will be furious! What we're afraid of is that they'll slam the door shut again.'

'Don't forget Pinochet will still be in charge of the Army,' one of the others reminded him.

'And he's infiltrated the ministries with his henchmen,' chipped in a third. 'Whoever steps into his shoes is going to be surrounded by Judas Iscariots.'

'I simply don't trust that man,' declared Renato. 'I haven't forgotten 1984.'

'What happened in 1984?' I asked.

'Well, I suppose it was inevitable,' he said, sipping his tea reflectively. 'I've always kept my views fairly private, but on that occasion someone reported a remark I'd made in confidence, a sarcastic quip about the junta.' He grimaced. 'The *Investigaciones*, the Secret Police, came for me on Christmas Eve. At first I was really worried; I thought I was going to join the ranks of the disappeared. Then they explained that the comment hadn't been sufficiently subversive for that.' He smiled momentarily. 'I was simply to be put in "internal exile" for a bit.'

'Internal exile?'

'Yes. They had two camps for people they wanted out of the way for a while: one in the north of the country, one in the south. I was sent to Quillagua in the north. The name means "Place of the Moon" – quite appropriate really, as it's out in the desert. I spent several months there under a kind of open arrest. I could go for walks, but never very far, because I had to report twice a day to the camp commander. They also let me write to my family and friends. I sent dozens of letters, but it turned out to be an empty privilege because none of them ever arrived.'

I thought of the thousands who had been dispatched to such camps, never to return.

'I'm surprised you're still alive.'

'Yes,' he grinned. 'I suppose I should have been a bit more subversive.'

I knew that Renato had written several books. Had they contributed to his trouble with the secret police?

'I don't think so,' he replied. 'Most of my writing was about Indians and "unimportant" things like that. But I did do some political canvassing – very discreetly, of course – so that we'd be ready when democracy returned.' He looked towards the others. 'That reminds me. We must finish our posters!'

We trooped into another room, where a pasting board was covered with artwork in various stages of completion. The posters were asking people to attend a Communist Party rally. A silk screen stood in a corner. Now I began to see why Renato had been put into 'internal exile'. Considering that the Communists were arch enemies of both the junta and their North American backers, it was a miracle he hadn't been shot.

I visited Renato several times during my stay in Castro, helping with the posters and sharing many cups of tea. On the third day he asked, 'Would you like to see an old Chiloé tradition?'

'Of course!'

'It's called a *minga de tira de casa*. Many years ago, when a Chilote family wanted to move house, they did just that – they took their house with them. Being timber framed, it would simply be jacked onto a kind of raft, and each farm in the neighbourhood would send a team of oxen to help pull it. The tradition has almost died out; but there's one happening tomorrow in San Juan, my home village.'

San Juan turned out to be a minuscule hamlet, set in a sheltered inlet on the east of the island. It was approached by a track so steep that only four-wheel drive vehicles could reach it – we had to abandon our car and walk the last half mile. A dozen houses lined a makeshift street, giving on to a beach of coarse shingle. There were no shops or bars: but the community was not without a focus, for at its centre stood a towering wooden church. I looked inside and was surprised to find row upon row of dusty pews: clearly it had been designed to serve a congregation either much larger or more devout than San Juan could muster today. The soaring roof echoed to the sound of rain dripping from gutters, and a few yards beyond the vestry I could hear waves breaking.

But then came a more distant noise. Waxing and waning on

the breeze, it was the unmistakable bellowing of oxen. The *tira de casa* had begun.

I raced along the shore, following my nose as much as my ears, for 20 sweating oxen assail all the senses. The house was lying at a drunken angle just above the waterline, and the beasts were being driven in bursts of 30 seconds or so, covering perhaps 20 yards at a time. Each pair of animals had a handler who goaded and whipped them at a signal from a foreman perched on the house's stoop. *Minga* means 'community job', and so it was; the few villagers not actually taking part were lining the route and cheering passionately. In between pulls, strong homemade cider was passed round in demijohns, and the men drank deeply from the bottles and wiped their mouths on their sleeves. The bulls, I noticed, were uncastrated. This would undoubtedly explain their prodigious strength, though it occurred to me that it would also make them pretty aggressive if encountered out in the fields. I made a mental note to beware of uncastrated bulls.

By tradition, the family whose house is being moved provides victuals for the handlers (though not for the bulls). This *tira* would be a long one – more than half a mile – so at midday the foreman called a halt. The men sprawled in a meadow, oblivious to the rain which had been falling in sheets since mid-morning. Soon the mother of the family arrived with a vast stewpot, followed by her daughters bearing tablecloths, loaves of bread and more demijohns.

Renato had gone back to San Juan to distribute posters, but his cousins the Bahamondes asked me to join them in their house by the beach. Here I found another stewpot waiting. The stew consisted mainly of a small fish called *pejerrey*, the staple diet of San Juan fishermen, which comes up by the hundred in every net. We piled our plates high, and I asked my hosts why it was that everyone I'd met in the village seemed to be called Bahamonde.

'Ah,' they replied. 'So you've noticed our little secret!'

For more than a century, they explained, Chiloé had suffered from inbreeding. On the remoter islands the practice had become almost a matter of necessity. With boats visiting only once a week, the opportunities for meeting potential marriage partners were rare. To stop the rural population dying out altogether, the Church had made hundreds of dispensations for Chilotes to

marry their first cousins, and there were even examples of nieces and nephews marrying uncles and aunts. On the island of Acuy this had led to mongolism. Another symptom, less publicized but equally common, was over-calcification of the joints.

A further difficulty was the one I'd noticed in San Juan: everybody ended up with the same name. In just two villages, for example, there were seven Juan Bahamonde Bahamondes – the first 'Bahamonde' being the father's surname and the second one the mother's maiden name. To avoid total confusion the villagers had given them nicknames; the village liar was called Juan Bahamonde Bahamonde de la Verdad ('Honest J.B.B.'), and a seven-stone weakling had become Juan Bahamonde Bahamonde el Gordo ('J.B.B. the Fatty'). Later, I discovered that the problem was not limited to the villages. In the Castro telephone directory there was a Luis Cheuquepil Cheuquepil, a Felipe Bórquez Bórquez, and an Elías Segundo Gómez Gómez ('Elías Gómez Gómez the Second').

Eventually the *tira* got under way once more, and the house began to creep towards its newly prepared plot. When the job was nearly done, the demijohns started being refilled not with cider but with wine. The men struck up a *saloma*, an old ploughman's song, but some had become quite drunk by now and had difficulty remembering either the tune or the words. Later, the family whose house it was would throw a party for the whole village, with dancing till midnight. But the rain had soaked me to the skin, and I decided to leave San Juan. As I climbed the hill, the strains of inebriated yodelling wafted up through the drizzle, almost drowning the bellowing of the toiling bulls.

To get a better idea of what Chiloé's early settlers had faced, I decided to make a trip into the sparsely populated centre of the island, where streams had carved valleys deep into the Piuchue Cordillera, its backbone ridge. Much of the area was virgin forest, but in 1947 a local woodsman had hacked a track through to the Pacific coast, and Renato thought it might still be passable. The morning after the *tira de casa*, I walked out of Castro and quickly left the fields and houses behind.

At first the path was wide – more like a road, really – and though it was still raining heavily I felt a surge of exhilaration at being on my own. This was one of the things that had drawn me

to Patagonia: the endless opportunities to explore an uninhabited land. A tent, stove and sleeping bag lay deep in my rucksack, and in my pocket was a scribbled map, copied from one I'd discovered on the wall of Castro's forest service office. As the track began to climb, I looked back over the distant scattered farmsteads and felt my journey had begun.

In such a Welsh-looking landscape it seemed entirely appropriate that it should be pouring with rain. How many times had I squelched in identical conditions out of Old Radnor or Llandrindod Wells? Yet the downpour was also worrying, because it would be adding water to rivers already swollen by the previous day's rains. In Castro they'd warned me that 30 inches had fallen the previous week – more than London receives in a year.

My fears turned out to be well founded, for after a couple of hours I was brought to an abrupt halt by the River Puchabrán. I'd been assured that a fallen treetrunk would provide a safe crossing, but now I saw 60 feet of brown, fast-moving water separating me from the opposite bank. The path led straight into the river. I cast about for several hundred yards upstream and downstream before resigning myself to the fact that the trunk must have been washed away. Indeed, quantities of other vegetation were bobbing past me. The rain was, if anything, getting worse, and I was about to go and find shelter when an old man shouted from away to my right.

'Caballero!'

I trudged over and he confirmed my fears. 'You mustn't try to cross today; the river's in a dangerous state. See how it's about to break its bank over there? Come, my house is on higher ground; you'll be able to dry your clothes, and perhaps cross tomorrow.' As an afterthought, he added matter-of-factly: 'I haven't seen it like this for 30 years.'

José Hemmelmann was a forester: wrinkled and slightly stooping, he looked every bit his 70 years. But his appearance was deceptive, because he outpaced me on the path to the house, and for most of the way seemed to talk without pausing for breath. He'd been born in Temuco, the son of a German labourer, but had lived on Chiloé since the Second World War.

'What brought you to Chiloé?' I gasped.

'I fell head over heels in love,' he replied, eyes twinkling. 'My sweetheart was a Chilota – a Chiloé lass. Her name's Eliana;

you'll meet her when we get home.'

We approached the house through a yard full of pigs and geese, rapidly becoming a quagmire under the onslaught of water from the heavens. Eliana was busy in the kitchen, entirely unconcerned by the deafening drumming on her corrugated iron roof – or, indeed, by the presence of two figures steaming and dripping all over her kitchen floor. She signalled me to take off my sodden outer layers, then continued at the stove.

Relaxing on a bench, I asked José about his work as a forester. He'd retired some years ago, but had spent much of his life working with the alerce, *Fitzroya cupressoides*. This magnificent, soaring tree, a relative of the sequoia, grows so slowly that even after 60 years its trunk measures only four inches across. It is one of the longest-living organisms on earth. Left alone, an alerce can live to 3,000 years or more before crashing down upon its neighbours. Unfortunately the rich, red wood is both durable and attractive, and demand for alerce panelling and furniture has become so great that the forest service recently imposed a nationwide ban. José thought this an idiotic idea, dreamed up by bureaucrats in faraway Santiago who knew nothing about the real situation. 'They say the alerce needs protecting, but I could show you hundreds of hectares of untouched alerce forest in this valley alone!'

I asked about that other mainstay of the Chiloé economy, fishing; but he saw little future in that either. 'It's been bumped off by the multinationals,' he lamented. 'Take the company Salmón Antártica, for instance. Since they brought their factory ships here, Castro's *chalupas* hardly go out any more. They catch so little, it's just not worth their while. After all, why should a young man get cold and wet in a Chilote fishing boat, when he can earn four times as much in Concepción or Santiago?'

I recalled that Carlos and Mario's lorry had had 'Salmón Antártica' emblazoned down the side. But before I could dwell on the connection between those amiable characters and such an evil business, José was rummaging angrily in the larder. 'And another thing,' he bellowed. 'You see this tin of sardines?' He jabbed a finger at the label. 'Do you know where it comes from? Iquique! I ask you! That's 2,000 miles north of here. They haven't caught a sardine in Iquique since the Book of Genesis. These are Chiloé sardines, shipped up to Iquique to be tinned, then

brought back for me to buy, at three times the price, in my local grocer's!'

I mentioned how, in the European Community, the people of Cheddar had to suffer the insult of eating Dutch and French Cheddar cheeses.

'These politicians, *tschaa!*' snorted José. 'I wouldn't give you ten pesos for any of them.'

But by now Eliana had laid a table for five. Their son and daughter-in-law had arrived from a neighbouring farm, and after a spirited introduction by José we sat down to vegetable and egg soup, a plate of mutton, a bowl of sweetened blancmange, and – as Christmas was approaching – a liqueur known as *cola de mono* ('monkey's tail'), which looked and tasted exactly like Irish Cream.

I'd been warned that some of Chiloé's out-of-the-way farmsteads were occupied by evangelists, who spent a great deal of time trying to convert those still ignorant of the joys of churchgoing. If such people existed, José Hemmelmann definitely wasn't among them. After the fifth *cola de mono* he announced that as well as cutting down alerce trees he'd once run a bar in Castro. He'd called it 'El Gringo'. He brought out a photograph album in which almost every picture showed him drinking heartily at formica-topped tables with robust Germanic men. Though the snapshots were old and faded, the flushed cheeks and merry eyes were the same as those before me. José Hemmelmann, I decided, had led a full and frolicsome life.

After a night curled up by the oven, I thanked the Hemmelmanns and took my leave. 'By the way,' José called after me. 'You remember you said your friend told you the path was cut through in 1947?'

'Yes?'

'Well, it was 1946. I know, because I was the one who cut it.'

The rain had died out overnight, but the Puchabrán was still running too high and fast to wade across, and with no sign of the treetrunk I reluctantly turned east once more.

The walk back to Castro was a good deal easier than the walk out. Not only did I now know the way, but I soon had company as I marched along. The next day, 14th December, was the day of the long-awaited election. With voting compulsory for adults,

Chiloé's country folk were already setting out for the polling stations in the town. For those under the age of 40 it would be a new experience, and an air of expectancy hung over the ragged bands of pilgrims filtering in from the forest. Some were quite nervous at the prospect. 'They say it'll be a secret ballot, but how can we be sure?' The older ones feigned nonchalance. 'Oh, you just write crosses on the paper – you don't sign anything.' The youngsters looked doubtful, and I noticed that one or two of their elders did too. They'd heard too much about rigged elections, blackmail, intimidation and torture to treat the matter so lightly.

But despite all the apprehensions, polling day in Castro passed off peacefully – almost disappointingly so. Canvassing was banned, a public holiday had been declared, the bars were shut and the main street was closed to traffic. Anyone who'd come along hoping for a carnival would have been disappointed, for the mood was solemn. Queues had been forming since early morning in front of the schools which were to be the polling stations – women at one, men at another – and now the voters filed into the buildings under the watchful gaze of navy cadets. Renato and his friends were there; and the Bahamondes from San Juan; and Carlos and Mario; and Pedro Bórquez the chocolate salesman; and at the back of the queue, dressed up to the nines, I even spotted old José Hemmelmann.

There were three votes to be cast: one for the president, and one each for a deputy and senator to represent Chiloé. Each voter was ushered into a classroom, where a dozen invigilators stood by the yellow, white and blue ballot boxes, watching gravely as the ballots were cast. To make sure no one tried to vote twice, everyone was required to have their thumbprints taken. With some 80,000 on the electoral roll in Chiloé alone, this struck me as rather a futile check, but the procedure itself looked intimidating enough to deter anyone from going through it twice. The voters I saw looked quite petrified.

Renato wanted me to stay for what he was sure would be a victory celebration. I was tempted, not so much by the promise of revelry as by the opportunity to spend more time with this unusual man. But Patagonia was calling and I could wait no longer. Early next morning, as Chiloé's votes were still being counted, I boarded a ferry back to the mainland.

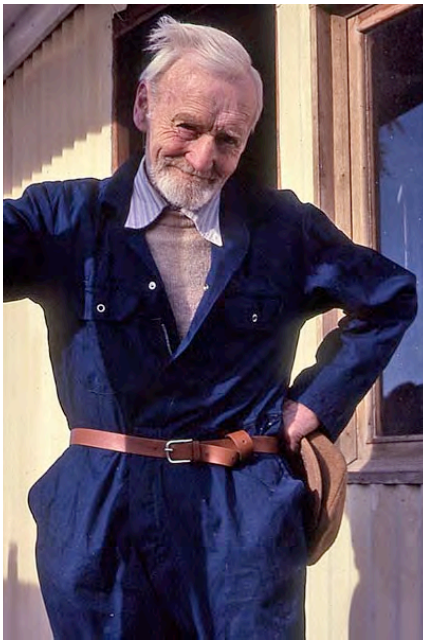
Above: Viewed in a February dawn, the Torres del Paine present their 4,000-foot east faces to the morning sun.

Right and below: Two thousand Corriedales arrive for the last day of the 1990 shearing at Estancia Chacabuco.

Top: Tommy and Edward Davies – Chubut Valley farmers since the pioneer days of the Welsh settlement.

Above: The housemoving at San Juan on Chiloé. 'I made a mental note to beware of uncastrated bulls.'

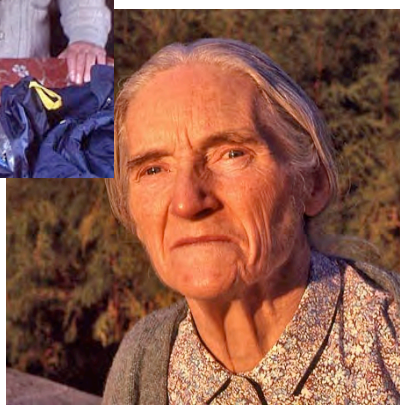
Left: Guanaco in the Torres del Paine.



Above left: Cabbages and seaweed for sale on Chiloé.

Above: Maurice Lewis outside his Santa Cruz cottage.

Left and below: Claus and Walther Hopperdietzel in their kitchen at Puyuhuapi; and Phillis Kemp.



Above: Patagonian jalopy.

Left: The congregation at St David's in the Chubut Valley.

Below: A relic of the 'six-day crisis' of 1978, when Chile and Argentina came close to war.

Of the hundreds of bridges John Pilkington crossed, the best one *(above)* carried the Carretera Austral over the River Baker. The worst *(right)* linked Chile and Argentina near Chile Chico. Neither country seemed responsible for its repair.

Right: The Magellan Strait shore is littered with wrecks.

Antarctica: the last unspoilt continent. Or is it?

Above: Discarded fuel drums on King George Island.

Left: The Soviet Bellingshausen base was one of the worst environmental offenders.

Below left and right: Elephant seal and Chinstrap penguin.

'Patagonia without wind would be like Hell without the Devil.'

Dried-up lake bed near San Julián. 'When you've hit rock-bottom you can't sink lower,' said one drought-stricken farmer.

Photographs

Top: Aladín Sepúlveda shows John Pilkington the cabin of the *Yanquis*.

Inset: Its builder, Butch Cassidy, pictured on the 'Wanted' poster of 1906.

Left: Chilean welcome.

Below: The Old Patagonian Express.

END OF SAMPLE MATERIAL