Andy Beckett
Pinochet in Piccadilly
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Its undoubted legal significance apart, the story of Pinochet's enforced sojourn in London in 1998-2000 was a matter of emotion. How else could the case of a personage of only the most marginal concern to this country's strategic and economic interests clog the Home Office with 70,000 letters and e-mails?

Andy Beckett's book reminds us, however, that Chile has at one or two crucial moments in Britain's recent past, been more than a screen on which to project our dreams and nightmares. Margaret Thatcher's conversion to monetarism and free markets owed much to the advice of Alan Walters, who had been impressed by the 'Chilean model' long before 1979. And but for Chilean help, we might not have won the Falklands War – and Michael Foot might have become Prime Minister. Pinochet's economic radicalism was at first regarded as madness by all except the Milton Friedman faithful, yet within ten years the country had become a 'model' of neo-liberal economic, and even social, policy worldwide – even for New Labour!

Beckett's book consists of a series of very well drawn vignettes. The inclusion of some sinister figures on the UK extreme right, who did enjoy a brief moment of fame in the 1970s, may be a little forced, but it is somehow humiliating for us all that a former Prime Minister campaigned to exempt Pinochet from legal process. His sensitive portrait of Dick Barbour-Might, a former civil servant who went to Allende's Chile in search of a model of social justice, and still today, in a flat in Birmingham, gives his life to Chile, epitomizes the eccentric Englishman in pursuit of a lost cause. Touchingly, Barbour-Might readily told Beckett that when arrested (for no political act) in the days following the 1973 coup his first panic-stricken reaction was to invoke the British Ambassador. I too would probably reacted likewise – and the torture he subseuqnetly witnessed during his subsequent detention in the infamous National Stadium certainly justified his panic.

The portraits of the Chilean exile community in this country, and of Scottish trade union solidarity are also well done, with a judicious mix of humour and bemused reverence. Beckett is astonished at the Chilean exiles' fixation with the world they left, and their preservation of the collective character of political experience which, in Chile as in Britain, is so much a thing of the past.

Beckett parades the colourful nineteenth century precursors of our Chilean connection. Lord Cochrane and Alfred North: the former a man of more ambition than judgment, but substantial military cunning, who found an appropriate niche in South America's Wars of Independence: in Brazil they made him the Marqués de Maranhão, and in Chile they paid him – but not enough. North was a robber baron who made tons of money in nitrate and associated public works, spent even more and died while still able to enjoy it. Decades later, in the late 1940s, the nitrate camp he founded was made into a concentration camp commanded by – guess who? – the young Augusto Pinochet. This was the time of the early Cold War when the United States herded all of Latin America into a tame security arrangement, and various real or potential leftishor nationalistic regimes were turned (as in Chile) or turned out (as in Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil). I used to think it was paranoid to see gringos under every bed, but recent research by Jonathan Haslam of Cambridge University has shown that they had several parallel plots in train to overthrow Allende's government, and that there was no way they would allow this 'experiment' to survive, let alone succeed. Like many people on the left in Chile I for long resisted believing that their great left-wing experiment and its cruel failure could be reduced to a sideshow in the big geopolitical picture, but now in the cold light of history, the naïveté of their notion that a small country would be allowed to indulge in such fantasies (as Henry Kissinger saw it) is all too plain.

The frustrating missing element is an account of Pinochet's own personality. Unable, like many others, to get a purchase on it, Beckett keeps to his taste in tweeds or tea, but this is no substitute for an understanding of how he managed to deceive his colleagues for so long before the coup, how he persisted with systematic persecution long after he had won the political battle against the left, how he side-stepped the traditional fondness of Latin American military men for the corporate state, and how

he outwitted the Americans who put him in power, to the point of instructing a murder to be committed on Pennsylvania Avenue. How, in short, such an apparently crude man could be so clever. He hardly seems to be a man of ideas – though he did write a book on geopolitics - yet he entrusted his economic policy to a band of ideological desperadoes whose devoutly Catholic leader once said that 'God is a monetarist'.

Beckett has not thought too hard about our own local hero either, but for whom Pinochet and his clique of wealthy supporters would have made a mockery of us all. Thank God for Jack Straw who, called upon to take a snap decision, trusted his instincts. Was it New Labour's only moment of passion? I hope that when he retires he will take a triumphant trip to Chile, for it was his decision to wave on the extradition procedure which eventually forced the General and his accomplices onto the defensive back home. Ironically, the discrediting of the General opened the way for a renewed, mildly populist, right in Chile, squeaky clean and sponsored by Opus Dei, to emerge from his shadow.They will probably win the next Presidential election, so Jack had better go there soon.

Biographical Note:

David Lehmann is working on a book on ethnic and religious renewal in Israel.