



CHAPTER III

THE WILKES EXPLORING EXPEDITION IN BRAZIL, ARGENTINA, CHILE AND PERU IN 1838-1839

ALTHOUGH that sterling Pan-American, John Quincy Adams, had, as early as 1828, while President of the United States of America, advocated an exploring expedition to the South Seas, it was not until May 18th, 1836, that an Act of Congress of the United States of America authorized an expedition "for the purpose of exploring and surveying in the great Southern Ocean in the important interests of our commerce embarked in the whale fisheries and other adventures in that ocean, as well as to determine the existence of all doubtful islands and shoals, and to discover and accurately fix the position of those which lie in or near the track pursued by our merchant vessels in that quarter." This expedition was the first of its character ever undertaken by the United States of America, and its aims were strikingly similar to that of Diego de Barrenechea, when he sailed forth from Callao, Peru, in September, 1772, to Tahiti, under the auspices of the great Peruvian Viceroy Amat y Junient. The interest displayed in her sister republics seventy-five years ago by the United States of America is shown by the fact that Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, U. S. N. (1798-1877), who was

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ordered on August 11th, 1838, to command the squadron on this expedition was instructed to visit Rio de Janeiro, Cape Frio, the Rio Negro, Tierra del Fuego, and Valparaiso. Possibly their touching at these South American points was due to the fact that Joel Roberts Poinsett was then Secretary of War of the United States of America. Twenty-eight years before he had been appointed the first representative of the United States of America to Argentina, Chile and Peru, and his career in Chile and Argentina has been outlined in an article in the *Pan-American Bulletin* for September, 1911.

The journeys of the adventurous Ohioan John N. Reynolds in Southern Chile in 1830 and 1831 had much to do with inspiring this expedition. The squadron sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, on August 13th, 1838. It consisted of the sloops of war "Vincennes" and "Peacock," the store-ship "Relief," the brig "Porpoise," and the tenders "Seagull" and "Flying Fish." Many distinguished scientists were on board—probably as notable a group as could have been sent from the United States of America at that time. Dr. Charles Pickering was the naturalist of the expedition; he made important contributions to its success, especially by his writings on anthropology and on the study of the geographical distribution of animals and plants, to the latter especially, as affected by or as evidence of the operations, movements, and diffusion of the races of man. A graduate of

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Harvard University, he was a nephew of the Secretary of State (Timothy Pickering), who had instructed the United States Minister at Lisbon in 1797 to make a complete report on Brazil. His nephew, Dr. Charles Pickering Bowditch, is an authority on the Mayas of Yucatan.

Horatio Hale was the philologist and ethnographer of the expedition. While an undergraduate at Harvard (where he graduated in 1837) he had written a small pamphlet on the Algonquin language. His chief contribution to the permanent results of the expedition was a collection of very valuable material relating to the ethnology and dialects of the Patagonian tribes encountered by the expedition.

But the most distinguished scientist on board was James Dwight Dana (1813-1895), who was for over forty years Silliman Professor of Natural History in Yale University, and is generally considered one of the most renowned men of science of modern times. He was president of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, and received high honors from many European governments. The early inspirations he received from his scientific explorations and studies in South America may be compared to those that aroused the genius of his friend Darwin but six years before, and he loved to dwell on the impressions that the lofty Chilean and Peruvian Cordilleras had made on him when he addressed his students at Yale, the university that welcomed Francisco

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de Miranda, pioneer of South American liberty, in 1784, and which received the bounty of David C. de Forest, who was in Buenos Aires as early as 1807, and who died in New Haven in 1824.

On November 23rd, 1838, the expedition reached Rio de Janeiro, whence it sailed January 6th, 1839. Captain Wilkes notes that "the Brazilians have a strong bias in favor of the United States, and of the American Government generally. They think the time is coming which will unite the people of this continent in a distinct national policy." Captain Wilkes notes that Rio de Janeiro had then 250,000 people, and that in 1835 a sailing ship had gone from New York to Rio de Janeiro in the phenomenal time of twenty-nine days. On January 6th, 1839, the expedition sailed from Rio, where many interesting specimens and much data had been collected; and on the 18th of January they passed opposite the mouth of the Rio de la Plata. On the 25th of the same month they were off Carmen de Patagones on the Rio Negro, whence they sailed, after exploring the environs somewhat. They found several citizens of the United States of America settled near there, on February 3rd. On February 27th the expedition left Nassau Bay, and after meeting with very tempestuous weather near Cape Horn on April 14th, 1839, the "Relief" arrived at Valparaiso; the "Vincennes" followed her, reaching that Chilean port on May 15th, 1839. Valparaiso then had about 30,000 inhabitants;

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there were then eighty vessels flying the Stars and Stripes engaged in the Chilean trade, and a considerable number of United States merchants doing business there, among whom were Mr. Augustus Hemenway, the benefactions of whose family are so well known in and near Boston, Massachusetts, who had come to Valparaiso in 1830. President Bulnes and the great Chilean statesman Portales visited the ships and were much pleased with them. Wilkes wrote as follows of Valparaiso: "I have had some opportunity of knowing Valparaiso, and contrasting its present state with that of 1821 and 1822. It was then a mere village of straggling ranchos. It has now the appearance of a thickly settled town, with a population of 30,000, five times the number it had then. Most of the buildings are of one story, and built of sun-dried brick. Santiago contains 60,000 inhabitants, and is increasing in wealth and population."

From Valparaiso Dana wrote to his sister Harriet on May 29th, 1839: "We left Santiago in a gig for the foot of the mountain, which was distant about fifteen miles. A ride of two hours brought us to our stopping place. Here we procured a guide who was accustomed to the route, and, mounting our horses, commenced the ascent. Our path at first ran along a deep valley, through which a little water was gurgling quietly along; only a temporary quiet, however, as the torrents rush down the gorge with tremendous violence during the thawing of the mountain snows.

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Winding our way up the sides of the valley, we reached an open square, covered here and there with a little shrubbery, along which our route continued for an hour or two with little to interest or attract attention. As we advanced, however, the scenery of the mountains increased in grandeur, and the acclivity became more steep and difficult for the horses. Our ears were often saluted with a noise much resembling the watchman's rattle, which, on nearer approach, was found to proceed from guanacos, an animal of the deer species, which lives on the mountain. After about four hours' toilsome ride, we reached the summit of an elevated ridge, from which we looked down on the surrounding country. It was a most magnificent scene—the fertile plains of Santiago, the numerous mountain ridges surrounding it, and towering above all, the Andes, mantled with snow and streaked along as far as the eye could reach, make one of the most glorious prospects any country can show. We now turned to the right, following the summit of this ridge, making a gradual ascent, and in the course of half an hour came in sight of the snowy peak we had before seen back in Santiago. A valley of about 4,000 feet separated us from it; and from its bottom this peak rose up to a height of at least 8,000 feet, the most perfect picture of utter desolation I ever witnessed. It was a scene that I not only saw, but could feel through my whole system—it was so impressively, so awfully grand. It appeared like an immense volcano

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whose fires were but just extinguished. We continued in sight of the peak the remainder of our route. At 4 o'clock P.M. we reached the region of snow, and a desolate region it was. A few tufty Alpine plants were seen where a streamlet was running down the valleys—all else was dreary and lifeless. We collected some of the plants and rocks, and as it began to grow dark soon after sundown—about 6 P.M.—we early prepared for our night's accommodations. We laid down our furs, etc., which we had brought up under our saddles, and formed as soft a place as we could to rest our bodies—placed the saddles near our heads to keep off the winds, and then snugly stowed ourselves away under three thick blankets. The winds whistled over us by night, and in the morning we found ice one-half an inch thick but a few rods off; but we were tolerably comfortable and made out to get about eight hours' sleep out of the twelve we were in bed—between dark in the evening and the next morning's dawn. Our poor horses stood up all night long without anything to cover them and nothing to eat—an example of the utter indifference of the Chileans to the comforts of their animals. We finished the small stock of provisions we had with us in the morning and commenced our descent on foot, in order to make collections of specimens along the way. Seven hours found us at the foot, and in two more we reached Santiago. The trip, though one of exposure, had no injurious effects upon my health. Indeed I

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never felt better than when up the mountain. We only reached the limits of perpetual snow. The mountains yet rose some four or five thousand feet above us.

“Santiago is the finest city in Chile, and much the largest. It is the residence of all the wealth and aristocracy of the country, and some of the houses are very beautiful; the part fronting the street never gives any idea of the richness of the building within the court.”

From Valparaiso the squadron proceeded to Callao, whence it sailed for Tahiti on July 13th, 1839. While in Peru many points of interest were visited, including the ruins of Pachacamac; and Dr. Pickering ascended the Andes to a height of 16,000 feet, discovering a large ammonite near this altitude. Dana himself attained the height of 12,000 feet, and writes thus of his experience: “The Andes were the first objects we saw on approaching the coast. They form the background in the Chilean and Peruvian landscape. The eye climbs mountain beyond mountain in the front of the scene, and finally rests on the snowy summits of this towering ridge. The general character of it was more massy, more even in its outline, and unbroken in its surface than my fancy had pictured to me. Here and there, however, conical peaks tower aloft, and by their wide, turreted shapes and columnar structure diversify the character and heighten the grandeur of the scene. I made two ex-

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cursions among the Cordilleras, and in one reached an elevation of 12,000 feet. I had the pleasure of sleeping through a windy night near several acres of perpetual snows. Water froze half an inch thick within a few feet of us; but the interest the scene had excited, together with a couple of blankets, and a fire of Alpine plants, kept us comfortable through twelve hours of darkness. These Alpine plants, as they were the first I had seen of them, astonished and delighted me with their singularities. Although regular flowering plants, they grow together in the form of a short tuft, the whole so hard and the leaves so closely compacted that the foot struck against them scarcely makes more impression than on the adjoining rocks; they can prevent in these wintry regions the escape of the little heat they originate. One little flower particularly attracted my attention, and led my mind upward to Him whose wisdom and goodness were here displayed. It was scarce an inch high and stood by itself, here and there one, over the bleak, rocky soil. A small tuft of leaves densely covered with down above formed a warm repose for a single flower which spread over it its purple petals. I should delight to add some of these strange forms of vegetation to Benjamin's flower-garden. But they lose all their peculiarities in a warmer climate. Even the hard Alpine turf, a few hundred feet below, spreads out and assumes the forms of the plants of temperate latitudes. I find that these mountains are mostly composed of—

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I was about to transgress. I, however, may state that I have been highly interested in the geology of this region, and I only regret that I had no opportunity to make my observations more extensive by crossing the mountains to Mendoza, situated at their eastern foot. Dr. Pickering, Mr. Rich and others who were at Lima much of the time our vessel remained at Valparaiso, ascended and passed the summit of the Peruvian Andes. They reached an elevation exceeding 16,000 feet. I will add one fact, as the knowledge of it by yourself will prove of no injury to the expedition; it is, that Dr. Pickering collected a large ammonite near the summit of the Andes at 16,000 feet elevation. The existence of extensive deposits of red sandstone and accompanying shales in this part of the Andes has long been known."