

Exporting ponchos to a land 'where the devil lost his poncho'

August 14 2009

University of Leicester researcher reveals history of British textiles trade in South America We may think of ponchos as quintessentially South American, but new research by a University of Leicester historian reveals that there was a time when a great deal of the ponchos worn in the southern end of South America were actually made in Britain.

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A study by Dr Manuel Llorca, recently reported in the journal *Business History*, shows that from the 1810s, following the collapse of the Spanish-American Empire and the trade restrictions it imposed, British exporters began to open mercantile houses in Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Valparaiso and could judge what goods would sell well in those regions.

The Latin American market quickly became as important to British merchants as its North American counterpart, buying increasing quantities of British [textiles](#) and among them, ponchos.

Not that the British had it all their own way. The local people proved to be demanding customers, a local merchant pointing out that the 'inhabitants are very poor and cannot afford high prices, though not one of them will wear second cloth coat'.

British merchants also faced competition from the Germans, Belgians, French and Americans. However, as Dr Llorca discovered, the British did begin to adapt their merchandise to suit the South American market, as British sales of the poncho demonstrate, and soon they became ‘masters of the market’.

As British merchants discovered, Latin American people remained stubbornly loyal to the versatile poncho, above any other form of cloak. The garment could offer protection against rain, dust and wind, warmth day and night, and could become a summer mattress. Ponchos were also, Dr Llorca says, handy in a fight, and could be used as makeshift ‘sails, pillows, carpets and mantles’. Equally, they were an ideal garment for people who ‘lived on horseback’.

Dr Llorca believes British exporters were more dynamic than tradition has suggested, and Yorkshire and Lancashire manufacturers quickly adapted their looms and dyes to suit the South American markets. Exporters were also able to undercut local suppliers, even though local ponchos were reckoned to be better quality.

This research also shows that in the process by which Britain incorporated [Latin America](#) as one of her main outlets during the nineteenth century, there was not always colonisation of taste.

Provided by University of Leicester ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Exporting ponchos to a land 'where the devil lost his poncho' (2009, August 14) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-exporting-ponchos-devil-lost-poncho.html>

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