PART IV
CHAPTER TEN

MAPUCHE-TEHUELCHE SPANISH WRITING AND ARGENTINIAN-CHILEAN EXPANSION DURING THE 19TH CENTURY

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Introduction

Until the collapse of the Spanish Empire, the colonial authorities, both secular and ecclesiastic, systematically introduced the practice of writing among the Mapuche and Tehuelche peoples in the extreme south of South America. The young states of Argentina and Chile continued to promote this discipline and their hegemony over the borderlands during the major part of the 19th century. However, once the expansion into Araucanía, Pampa and Patagonia was completed, circa 1880, the liberal elites of Argentina and Chile, and their historians, made strong moves in the opposite direction. They pursued the Mapuche notaries and lenguaraces (translators), confiscated their work and worked meticulously at erasing the political and cultural effects of writing, and the historicity, of the Mapuche and Tehuelche societies.

From the 18th to the 19th centuries, the great úlmenes, lonko and gamákia — or caciques — had permanent secretaries and notaries, sent their children to the Jesuit and Franciscan missionary schools, received government provisions such as paper, wax seals and ink, formed extensive information networks that crossed the Andes, and conserved their documents for many decades. Even though historians and anthropologists had access to these sources throughout the 20th century, they insisted, blindly, that these colonised, or soon to be colonised, cultures were illiterate, and complained about their primitive vocality. It was only recently that research concerning both nations, and in Wallmapu — or Mapuche country — acknowledged the ethnocentric prejudices of reducing reading and writing to their alphabetic expressions, as the hidden texts were unearthed from the national archives.

Using the correspondence of José María Bulnes Llanquitruz and Valentín Saygüeque, two great northern Patagonian chiefs of the 19th century, we will concentrate on the relationships between Spanish