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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>An Ireland of the Mind: How Irish Argentines Don't Know and Don't Care About Irish Politics</i> , by Sergio Kiernan	47
<i>The Bradys of Giles, Areco and Westmeath</i> , by Edward Walsh	49
<i>Peter [Pedro] [James] Gannon (1874-c.1940), Roman Catholic priest and golf course architect</i> , by Edmundo Murray	53



An Ireland of the Mind How Irish Argentines Don't Know and Don't Care About Irish Politics

By Sergio Kiernan *

One of the shocks of life for an Irish Argentine is to talk politics with an Irishman. If the Argentine truly listens, he will find a New World opening before his eyes, a world made up of Fianna Fail, Clann na Gael, Sinn Fein and other mysterious-sounding names. It's the world of Irish politics, the dark side of the moon for the Argentine-Irish community.

On the other hand, the Irish tend to have a headache when their foreign brethren – those within "the connection" – start talking politics. That is because they suddenly find themselves in a fairy tale of Bad Brits, Noble Bards and Freedom Fighters. The tale is made up of a sequence of invasion, plantation, Cromwell, Ascendancy, rebellion, coffin ships, famine, more rebellion, evictions and yet more rebellion. Then there is Easter 1916 and the movie fades to black with that Big Ambiguity, the Civil War. That is, for all practical matters Irish history ends in 1922 for the Irish Argentine.

It is truly amazing: communities that managed to retain their Irish identity after four, five or more generations abroad, draw a sharp line after the effective independence of the country and fast-forward to The Troubles, a political development that can be nicely fitted in the old fairy tale. More amazing still, the ones that can actually tell the fairy tale are the relatively few who bothered at all to learn some Irish history. It seems that that is all they manage to retain. Why?

Argentina must be a special case of denial, with a community that has some difficulty remembering even the Easter Rebellion. To start to understand this peculiar development, one has to bear in mind that Irish Argentines are the only ones in the Diaspora that didn't settle in an English-speaking country. There is of course some tiny Irish presence almost anywhere, like the 3,000 Brazilian Irish and a few hundred Chileans of Irish descent. But Argentina's is clearly the largest community outside of the US, Canada, Australia, South Africa and of course Britain.

When emigration to Argentina became important, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Irish found a country fast becoming part of the imperial sphere of influence. Development was fueled by British capital and know-how, and being Irish became a competitive advantage over the natives. English-speaking and legally British subjects, the Irish in Argentina behaved mostly as one more variety of Britons, good subjects that happened to be Catholic and have a brogue. A familiar type for people of my generation were the thoroughly anglicized, five o'clock-tea aunts that spoke --or tried to-- the King's English.

The Irish kept their distance from local politics until the 50s and 60s of the past century, when their children entered the lunatic fringe with gusto by joining groups such as Tacuara where Baxter, Lynch and Nell plotted revolution and robbed armored cars. But the founding experience of the community was getting consular protection to avoid being drafted and serve in the Paraguayan war in the 1860s. The first generation was so reluctant to become Argentine that it attracted the ire of President Sarmiento, who wrote article after article damning the Irish as ungrateful.

Community political life in regard to Ireland wasn't that much different. The Irish spent time and treasure building an extensive network of churches, hospitals and schools, started a newspaper – still published as a monthly and the second-oldest in the country – and gradually became more and more Argentine. It would be a matter of interest to know the history of how the Irish here and the Irish Argentines digested the rise of modern nationalism in Ireland, from Parnell – another virtual unknown among locals – to De Valera. Edmundo Murray points the way in the epilogue to his recent "Devenir Irlandés", where he writes of the Irish learning to love Argentina and at the same time learning to see an enemy in Britain.

What is known is that there was a measure of excitement in the years between Easter and the Civil War, when Ireland had a clandestine rebel government. An Irish mission came to Argentina to raise funds and did sell some Irish Republican Bonds, but not many. The last echo of that period is the habit of hanging reproductions of the Independence Proclamation at home, a souvenir as popular with Irish Argentines as it is with Irish Americans.

Then silence. The agonies and subtleties of post-Civil War politics in Ireland didn't register here. Nobody knows about the founding of modern parties, the tortuous return of De Valera to the mainstream and to power, the role of the Church in society, the Fascist temptation of the Silver Shirts, the Emergency and its almost pro-Nazi neutrality, the changes in Ireland since it joined the European Union (except for the recent prosperity). Informal research shows, in fact, that Argentines assume that since Ireland is a republic, it must have a President in charge, just like Argentina, and the news of the existence of a Primer Minister is disconcerting.

The Troubles are the exception to the rule. In Irish-Argentine eyes, Ulster is a piece of Old Ireland, with an Ascendancy and brutal British repression. This familiar Nationalist yarn creates certain cognitive noises: the IRA translate as patriots and at the same time as guerrillas, a type very familiar and unsettling to the prosperous Irish Argentines. The level of understanding of the complex and courageous peace process in Ulster is abysmal: a pub in Brooklyn would probably yield more insight than the whole community in Argentina.

Curiously enough, there is something deeply Argentine in that attitude. Faced with mass immigration on a scale relative to the population never seen even in New York, Argentina reacted in the late nineteenth century with a thorough and successful program of Argentinization based on a school curriculum that stressed nationality to grotesque extremes. Immigrants were tacitly told to leave their politics at home: Argentina offered a fresh start but the price was to cease being active citizens of their home countries. There were exceptions, of course, notably Italian anarchists who didn't see any reasons to drop their internationalist socialism, and the flare of emotions detonated in the Thirties by the Spanish Civil War. But all in all, there was a thorough process of depolitization that severed ties with Europe.

And of course there is the factor of distance. Argentina is as far from Ireland as China – if your are flying, that is – and tours to the old country were rare until recently. The result is an Ireland of the imagination, a never land of nice people who love the drink and just don't have a political life. I suspect that Irish Argentines prefer to believe in the reality of the Isle of Saints and Bards, willfully erasing the modern country.

A country is, after all, a pretty unromantic entity that levies taxes and has an immigration policy. Our Ireland is hallowed ground, to be touched or thought about with tears welling.

Sergio Kiernan

Acknowledgement

Whatever sense this article makes is due to D.B., an intelligent Irishman with a passion for politics and a very clear mind. The blunders are the author's alone. Pace.

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The Bradys of Giles, Areco and Westmeath

By Edward Walsh

I first met with Sister Columba Brady in 1967 and got to know her well during the years I lived and worked in Argentina. She was a member of the Little Company of Mary, a nursing congregation of sisters, who ran a highly acclaimed and prestigious hospital at 2952 Calle San Martin de Tours, Palermo Chico, Buenos Aires. Deep in the basement of that busy hospital Sister Columba had an emporium from where she directed and controlled the activities of a team of seamstresses and minions involved in the repair of linen and various other works.

Born on 22 June 1901 in Giles, [1] Sister Columba was, according to a member of the community of the time 'a wonderful sister, extremely generous. Her kindness to priests working in the provinces was outstanding, they would come and stay for a rest, and go back refreshed physically and mentally. That was a joy to all of us' [2] She had lived through difficult and turbulent times and her insights and observations on the obsequious behaviour of the great ladies of porteña society towards Eva Perón (to whose attitudes and activities they could scarcely conceal and contain their contempt and disgust) was most revealing.

Sister Columba was the fourth of nine brothers and sisters and spoke perfect English. However, during the course of one of our many discussions, her usage of some word or particular turn of phrase made me enquire where did your Grandfather come from? Westmeath I believe she replied – a fact later confirmed by her sister, Sister Margarita a member of the Mercy Congregation. Grandfather, Christopher Brady was born in Ireland in 1836 and went to the River Plate at the age of 26, settled in the camp [3] and appears in the census returns of 1869 and 1895 at Carmen de Areco. [4] Christopher Brady married Ellen MacGarrell (born 1838) about 1855, and the first two of their eight children were born in Westmeath, the remainder in San Antonio de Areco. [5]



Isabel Brady, later Sister Columba (1901-1973)
(Nosotros, Luján, Vol. 12, N° 139)

But what of the Irish and that great Dominican priest Father Fahy? [6] Sister Columba was fascinating [7]:

Father Fahy met the immigrant boats from Ireland and sent the people off up country. [8] They did not know what to do, and he took charge of all their affairs. He was a great match-maker. He just said 'now Mary you marry so-and-so' and they did. These weddings always seemed to work out well. The people had tremendous respect for him. He could find employment with good families for single girls who came to Buenos Aires. These were the girls who were subsequently 'to build' the Passionist Fathers church Holy Cross.

'In service' female employment continued for many years as evidenced by adverts in the English speaking press. 'Convent of Mercy – Ladies who require servants will please call at Calle San Juan 3145. [9] Similar ads appeared in The Standard. [10] It was in some ways a reflection of a society rather like the Ireland they had left behind, in which the rich lived comfortably, supported by a mass of the poor.

Sister Columba often heard her grandfather speak of Father Fahy and always in the highest praise.

Murders in the camp were regular. The bandits would know when the Irish had sold sheep. The Irish did not bank their money, and the bandits knew this; they often stopped them on the way home to relieve them of their money.

Her father [11] never employed a criollo, [12] but always Irish, Germans or Italians:

The criollo was resentful of the outsider and of the latter's advancement by hard work. He – the criollo – was not reliable and could easily turn against you. In subsequent years the Irish chaplain went around in horse and buggy in the 'Irish areas.' The people kept the faith and would gather in for mass from long distances. He was well supported by the people and had a good house. He was a man 'in the old style' who demanded and got respect from all. When Venado Tuerto, [13] Province of Santa Fe, was set up as an independent diocese, it was the Irish there who gave the bishop his house (bought it and completely furnished it) and handed it over to him as a present. In the church in Venado Tuerto today all the statues have been removed (after the Second Vatican Council) but one, a statue of Saint Patrick.

The areas around Giles, Carmen de Areco and San Antonio de Areco were for many years favoured by Irish sheep farmers. Sister Columba died of a brain tumour in 1973, in Buenos Aires. In 1860 shortly after her grandfather Christopher Brady arrived from Westmeath, San Antonio was a journey time of two days by mail coach from the capital.



Irish Chaplain's confession box
in San Antonio de Areco parish church
(photo: E. Murray)

Travel from the midlands of Ireland to Argentina in those days was not unusual. The River Plate Steam Ship Company advertised in the local press and a one way third class passage from Liverpool to Montevideo or Buenos Aires cost £18.0.0 including provisions but excluding wine or liquor. Particulars were available from local agents Edward Coffey of Mullingar and William Mulvihill of Ballymahon. Children under twelve half fare and infants travelled free. Fares to the River Plate were significantly more expensive than a Cunard Line passage from Cobh to New York at £3-15-0 which included 'an unlimited supply of the best provisions, cooked and served by the company's servants.' William Canton of Dominick Street, Mullingar, was Cunard's local agent. The Westmeath Guardian And Longford News-Letter [14] which carried these adverts was distributed widely through every town and parish in Westmeath as well as having 'an extensive circulation in Dublin, Longford, Meath, Galway, Kildare, King's County, Queen's County, Roscommon, Leitrim and the rest of the Midland Counties' [15].

Just how extensive Westmeath emigration to Argentina was is best described by William Bulfin [16] the highly acclaimed newspaper editor and author of Tales From The Pampas. On a cycling tour of the country in the early 1900s (after an absence of seventeen years) he described how he stopped a whole colony of turf cutters at work. 'I am under bonds to tell you of your cousins, brothers, sweethearts, uncles and aunts in South America. I was told by a truthful man up the road that one could not see a soul in this part of the country who has not a relation in Argentina... A few of them remembered their Spanish and plied me with it. They were brothers and sisters of men I had met on the pampas, and nieces and nephews and even parents as well...' [17]

Father Fahy's influence on the immigrant community was immense; newcomers were encouraged to move out of the city and into the grass land provinces of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe and engage in sheep farming. This is a scene marvellous portrayed by W.H. Hudson [18] in *Far Away And Long Ago* [19] subtitled – a childhood in Argentina. Hudson's father, Daniel (the son of a Devon father and an Irish mother) purchased the estancia [20] *Los Veinte y Cinco Ombúes* from Tristán Valdez, a brother-in-law of Juan Manuel Rosas the Dictator. The estancia was near the village of Quilmes and about sixteen kilometres from the city of Buenos Aires. Hudson himself was born in wild surroundings, grew up among shepherds, gauchos and vast flocks. He is without doubt the most uniquely perceptive observer of wild life but also of social life, customs, and his nearby Irish neighbours. But who was The New Schoolmaster [21] Fr O'Keefe? [22] This Irish priest, whose mild rule and love of angling left a lasting impression on the youthful Hudson. After a year teaching W.H. and his younger brother, the priest left the Hudson household; he had been working out his salvation. Fr O'Keefe – a pseudonym perhaps for a wandering Irish cleric, one of a few not unknown to Father Fahy. [23]

The cupboard of memory while often full of hoarded riches can also be like a waste paper basket crammed with discarded and forgotten remembrances. There is a vibrant freshness about these recollections – recollections that had inhabited Sister Columba's memory over many years and were recounted before the portcullis finally closed on her life and all the tales were told.

Edward Walsh

Notes

[1] San Andrés de Giles was founded in 1826 and takes its name from a farmer Giles to whom the lands were given.

[2] Details from a letter of Sister Helen Burke, Little Company of Mary, San Pierre, Indiana, USA, 7 March 1993 to the writer.

[3] Camp is essentially an Anglo-Argentine word abbreviated from the Spanish campo, countryside. One's camp is one's land or estancia.

[4] Carmen de Areco, 145 kilometres north west of Buenos Aires was a frontier outpost established in 1779 to protect the highroad to Peru.

[5] San Antonio de Areco, 119 kilometres from Buenos Aires was the home town of the celebrated Ricardo Güiraldes, author of *Don Segundo Sombra*, one of the classics of Argentine gaucho literature.

[6] Anthony Fahy O.P. (1805-1871), see James M. Ussher *Father Fahy: A Biography of Anthony Dominic Fahy O.P., Irish Missionary in Argentina (1805-71)*, Buenos Aires, 1951.

[7] These comments and observations were made by Sister Columba Brady to the writer in Buenos Aires, January 1968, and written down on that occasion.

[8] James Joyce's Dubliners short story *Eveline* paints the dilemma of a possible emigrant who wished to go away with 'Frank to be his wife and live with him in Buenos Aires where he had a home... He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Aires and had come to the old country for a holiday...' See James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Paladin, London, 1988, pp.39-40. Joyce was not the only the literary commentator for Peig Sayers observed how '...the crossroad was full of people. Betty Kelly's son (Tim) was there, after coming home from South America and the people of the parish were before him at the crossroad.' Tim was shipwrecked, rescued and later declared 'when I came to myself again, where I was in the big hospital in Buenos Aires.' See Peig Sayers *An Old Woman's Reflections: The Life of a Blasket Island Storyteller*, OUP, Oxford 1962, Ch. 9, *The Story of Betty Kelly's Son and his Bright Love*, p.56 and p.63.

[9] *The Buenos Aires Herald*, Friday 18 May 1900.

[10] 'Good servants are generally to be found at the House for Immigrant Irish girls under the care of the Sisters of Mercy, 248 Chacabuco, The most convenient hours for ladies to apply are from 3 to 5 pm.' See *The Standard*, 28 November 1874.

- [11] Santiago Brady, the seventh of eight brothers and sisters, born 1870 in Carmen de Areco; married Ana Thompson in Giles in 1894 and died in San Antonio de Areco 23 June 1949. See Eduardo A. Coghlan *Los Irlandeses en la Argentina su Actuación y Descendencia*, Buenos Aires, 1987, pp.56-57.
- [12] Criollo, a person of Spanish descent born in South America. In Argentina the word is used to apply to persons, situations, customs, breeds of cattle, horses or sheep that are essentially Argentine.
- [13] Venado Tuerto was founded by Edward Casey in 1883 and today is a thriving town of 60,000 inhabitants. Casey was a prominent businessman, farmer and colourful character. His father Laurence Casey, born in Westmeath in 1803, went to the River Plate circa 1830 and married Mary O'Neill (born Wicklow 1806 and resident in the River Place since 1834) at Ranchos in 1837. Edward, the fifth of their nine children was born at the Estancia El Durazno in 1847. He purchased 70 square kilometres of land from the provincial government of Santa Fe in 1879, and the following year sold lots for a colony and decided the town area. 'He brought out two shiploads of immigrants from Ireland, but when the time allotted for settling his grant was up he had not fulfilled all the terms of his contract. So when the government inspectors came out from the capital to investigate, he got them drunk and showed them the same ranches three or four times.' See Coghlan *op. cit.* No. 11, pp. 128-129, and William Lytle Schurz, *This New World*, New York, 1964, Ch.6, *The Foreigner*, pp. 229-238.
- [14] *The Westmeath Guardian And Longford News-Letter*, 6 August 1863.
- [15] C. Mitchel & Co., London, *The Newspaper Press Directory*, 1864, p. 110.
- [16] William Bulfin (1864-1910); see Benedict Kiely, *Man From The Pampas*, in *The Capuchin Annual*, 1948, pp. 428-436.
- [17] See William Bulfin, *Rambles In Eirinn*, Dublin 1915, pp. 410-415.
- [18] William Henry Hudson, (1841-1922) see Ruth Thomalin, *W.H.Hudson - A Biography*, OUP, Oxford, 1984.
- [19] *Far Away And Long Ago* first published London 1918.
- [20] Estancia, an estate or ranch.
- [21] See *Far Away And Long Ago*, Ch.18, *The New Schoolmaster*, pp.237-242, Eland Books, London 1982.
- [22] Fr O'Keefe is not identified by Santiago Ussher in his *Los Capellanes Irlandeses en la colectividad Hiberno-Argentina durante el siglo XIX*, Buenos Aires, 1954.
- [23] Fr Kenelm Vaughan (brother of Cardinal Herbert Vaughan) possibly best epitomises the phenomena of the wandering cleric on a begging mission. He travelled widely through South America preaching and raising funds for the building of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in Westminster Cathedral (1897-1905) and left a fascinating account of his travels, trials and tribulations. See Kenelm Vaughan *Viajes en España y Sud América*, Christian Press Association, New York, 1904.

**Peter [Pedro] [James] Gannon (1874-c.1940),
Roman Catholic priest and golf course architect**

By Edmundo Murray



Peter Gannon (1874-c.1940)
Engadine Golf Club, 1909
(Meister 2005)

Gannon, [James] Peter [Pedro] (1874-c.1940), Roman Catholic priest and golf course architect, was born in Buenos Aires, the ninth child of Patrick Gannon (c.1820-1895) of Clara, Co. Offaly, and Elizabeth Walsh (d.1913). Patrick Gannon left Ireland in 1848 and settled in San Andrés de Giles, where he worked as sheep-farmer and acquired land. In 1877 the family returned to Ireland and purchased a property at Belmont, Kilbeggan (Co. Westmeath). Peter Gannon's brother Eugenio Gannon (1875-1942) worked with Tomás Mullally, the founder of Realicó in the province of La Pampa, and then settled as a wine grower in Cañada Seca, Mendoza. The eldest brother, Diego Gannon (1859-1930), physician, studied in Dublin and practised in the Jarvis hospital, and in 1887 settled in Buenos Aires.

In 1901 Peter Gannon was ordained a priest in London, and was appointed secretary to Dr. Graham, bishop of Plymouth. In Plymouth he played golf at United Services club. In 1908 Gannon was runner-up at the South of Ireland championship at Lahinch, and the next year he was asked to redesign the Old Course at Karlovy Vary, Carlsbad, after winning the championship of Austria. In 1910 left-handed Fr. Gannon won the French and the Italian amateur championships. He abandoned the religious life and in 1912-1913 settled in St. Moritz, Switzerland, and got married. Peter Gannon won the amateur championships of Switzerland in 1911 and 1923, and the amateur golf championship of Italy. In 1923 Gannon was responsible for the golf course of the Engadine Golf Club, where the members used to call him "Peter the Great".

But his long-lasting contribution has been the design of first-class golf courses in Europe, South Africa and probably in Argentina, among them, Milano (1928), San Remo, Villa d'Este, and Florence in Italy, Baden-Baden in Germany (1927), as well as others in Switzerland, France, and South Africa. Peter Gannon was also a good cricket and football player. He later moved to South Africa and died in or about 1940.

Edmundo Murray

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