

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

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Thomas Armstrong (1797-1875)
(Portrait in Casa Bemberg, Buenos Aires)

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Thomas St. George Armstrong
1875 - 9 June - 2005

His Obituary in *The Standard and River Plate News*, Vol. 15 - N° 3947, Buenos Aires, 10 June 1875
Transcription kindly contributed by Eduardo Garcia Saenz

Death of Mr. Armstrong.

Yesterday morning Buenos Ayres lost one of its most trusted and influential citizens in the person of Mr. Thomas Armstrong, who held a prominent place here for more than half a century. His long and useful career terminated after a few days' illness and had passed away quietly in the bosom of his family, leaving behind him the recollection of many important public services, and numberless acts of private generosity unknown except to his most intimate friends.

Mr. Armstrong was the oldest living member of an ancient and honorable family for two centuries settled in Ireland, remarkable alike for the gallant deeds of many of its scions and the longevity of those not killed in fighting. The original name was Fairbairn, of Scottish origin, but they seem to have crossed the Tweed in the 13th century, and settled at Corby in Lincolnshire, at Tynedale in Northumberland, and at Thorpe in Nottinghamshire. Tradition says that one of the family was knighted for saving the King's life in the battle, who gave him for sobriquet "Fairbairn of the Strong Arm".

The first settler in Ireland was Christopher Armstrong, whose brother was executed in the time of Mary Stuart; he built Mangerton Castle in Fermanagh, 1550, and his sixth descendent was General Sir John Armstrong, founder of Woolwich Arsenal who had done such gallant service under Marlborough. The Armstrongs of King's County, from whom the deceased gentleman drew his descendent had for ancestor Colonel Armstrong who fought for Charles I, and was taken prisoner by Cromwell in the battle of Worcester; his son was killed in the capture of Gibraltar in 1704. They were always fighting family, and during the 18th century we find, in Burke's records, several officers of rank, descendents of Archibald Armstrong of Ballylin, who died at Banagher in April, 1747, age about 100. One was Colonel and Coldstream Guards, another Chamberlain to George III in 1794; same died in India, others came home wounded and spent their closing years in Ireland. Some went to Jamaica, and embraced a planter's life, others entered the church, while the subject of our notice came to Buenos Ayres in 1817, being 20 years of age.



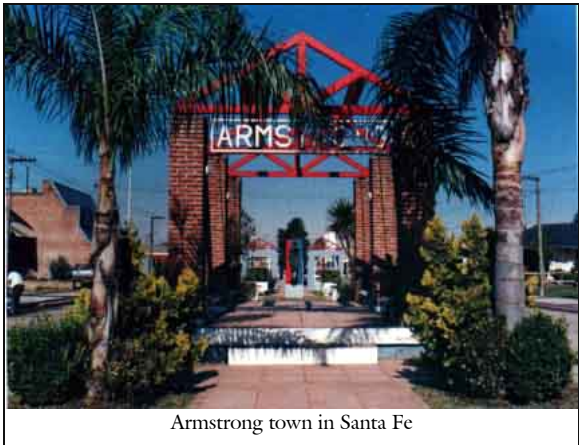
So far back as 1824 we find the name of Thomas Armstrong on the committee of British merchants in Buenos Ayres and even since that time, during more than 50 years he has been one of the foremost men of our society. Having married into the wealthy Spanish family Villanueva, he was intimately connected with the interest of the country; This may of our greatest and most successful enterprises are connected with his name while his estates in Buenos Ayres and Santa Fe represent an enormous value. For the last 20 years he occupied himself in banking; previously he was a saladerista and export merchant.

As a public man he took no part in political but always felt a lively interest in charities of every kind, besides acting as trustee for the American church and the British Hospital. Before and since the fall of Rosas, he was repeatedly director of the Provincial Bank, and member of the Municipal Council, lending his valuable experience and weight to the interest of the city in which he was one of the largest house proprietors.

Among matters of wider range affecting the general welfare of the Republic we may mention Mr. Armstrong's friendly offices in restoring amicable relations with Great Britain in January 1857, after an interruption of four years caused by the minister of Foreign Affairs sending H.M. chargé d' affaires Capt. Gore his passports. The difficulty was arranged by the Retiro battery it ring a salute of 21 guns to the British flag, and her Majesty seems to have offered, through Mr. Christie, to knight Mr. Armstrong, but he declined the honour. He subsequently arranged the Buschental Loan in 1862 when before congress. His connection with the Central Argentino railway and the Ensenada port and railway may be said to have formed the chief feature of his life in the last 12 years, and successful completion of this enterprises owes only less his efforts than to those of Mr. Wheelwright himself.

The Argentine Government wisely placed the utmost reliance in Mr. Armstrong as local director of these railways, which greatly smoothed and facilitated the mutual relations; So much so the when Mr. Armstrong, owing to advanced age, resigned a past fraught with so much constant anxiety and care the Government refused to admit his successor and insisted on dealing only with Mr. Armstrong. At one period the works of the Central Argentine were in danger of suspension, when his influence with the government mainly induced Mr. Rawson to subscribe £300,000 more, and push on the line to completion. Subsequently a serious dispute arose relative to the land company in connection with the railway but this was arranged, as were other questions about income tax, etc., through the never falling tact and good temper of the resident director Mr. Armstrong was eminently a practical man although Irishmen at home and abroad are so often taxed as visionaries.

He never undertook what did not see a fair probability of carrying through successfully, and he never left unfinished anything he once began. We can hardly pay him a higher or more deserved compliment; unless to add that his charities were numerous. His purse freely open for the relief of distressed countrymen, and his name always kept in the back ground unless when it was his purpose by force of example to achieve some work of public benevolence. Thus when 160 British and German settlers had died of hunger and sickness in Paraguay, and it was proposed to rescue the surviving 670 sufferers, he went round with Mr. St. John from house to house, and at last made up the required sum of £2,400 to send home a poor Englishman or pay the funeral expenses of these who died here homeless and penniless. And when Father Fahy himself died (during the yellow fever) so poor that 5 of his friends made up \$10,000 m/c for his funeral expenses, Mr. Armstrong paid several small sums due by Father Fahy and interposed to save the Irish hospital from being sold. He was equally generous to Protestant charities and his last act was a donation of £1,000 for a new English church.



Armstrong town in Santa Fe

He never lost sight of the dignity and importance of British interest in the River Plate. In 1871 when the Duke of Edinburgh arrived in Montevideo Mr. Armstrong sent him a congratulatory telegram on the part of the British residents of Buenos Ayres. Last year when the bishop of the Falkland islands arrived he gave a banquet in his honour, as he would also have done to any Roman Catholic dignitary. He never lost an opportunity of throwing his powerful influence in the scale in favour of his countrymen; As president of the S. Patrick's society he wanted on the government to solicit the removal of some grievances, and his request was promptly attended to. Notwithstanding an absence of 60 years from his native country he cherished the recollection of the old land, and his eyes would brighten at the mention of the Shannon banks near which he first saw the light, or any other association that brought up the scenes of his boy hood. He only revisited Ireland twice; the last time in 1858, and on this occasion found most of his relatives had been gathered to their fathers, one of the few survivors being Major Thomas Priaulx Armstrong of Banagher, who upheld the fighting character of his race by showing the decorations of the Legion of Honour, Medjidie, Balaclava medal, etc., won in the hard fought Crimean campaign.

Mr. Armstrong will prove a great loss to our society, not only for his business experience and high position, but still more because he represented one of those valuable links that connect native and foreign society in Buenos Ayres, an element of the highest importance in perpetuating the friendly relations

between us. The Argentines may inscribe on his tomb what we read on that of his memorable friend and countryman, Admiral Brown that "although he was an Irishman by birth he was an Argentine by his services". No man ever more fully paid the double loyalty that he owed to the flag at his native country, and to the land of his home and adoption; At the same time he always kept aloof from politics, and in this respect set an example that has doubtless had beneficial effect in saving many of his countrymen from the misfortunes that inevitably befall those who venture in such a troubled sea.

The foreign residents cordially sympathise with Mr. Armstrong's family in their present sad bereavement, and testify to the many public services of the venerable and esteemed gentleman who was so long the doyen of the foreign residents in this republic.

The funeral takes place today at 1 p.m.

The Standard (11 June 1875). The remains of the later Mr. Armstrong were interred yesterday in the vault at the Recoleta cemetery, in the vault of the Villanueva family. The burial service was read by the Revd. Dr. Smith, A.M., English chaplain. The funeral cortege was the largest ever seen in the city, comprising over 500 of the leading men of Buenos Ayres of all nationalities and creeds; There could not have been less than 200 carriages in the mournful procession. Among those unavoidably absent were the British minister, who is at the present in Chascomus, and Mr. St. John, who is confined to his house by a bad cold.



Images of the Camp People Irish Life in San Pedro, 1875-2005

To celebrate St. Patrick's Day in San Pedro, the local Irish-Argentine Centre organised an exhibition of old photographs (*Fotografías de viejas familias irlandesas*), including images of Irish settlers and their families in the region. On 25-27 March 2005 hundreds of visitors went to appreciate the eighty-odd collection of photographs in the municipal rooms of Centro de Comercio e Industria at San Pedro. A new series of photographs has been added in March 2006.

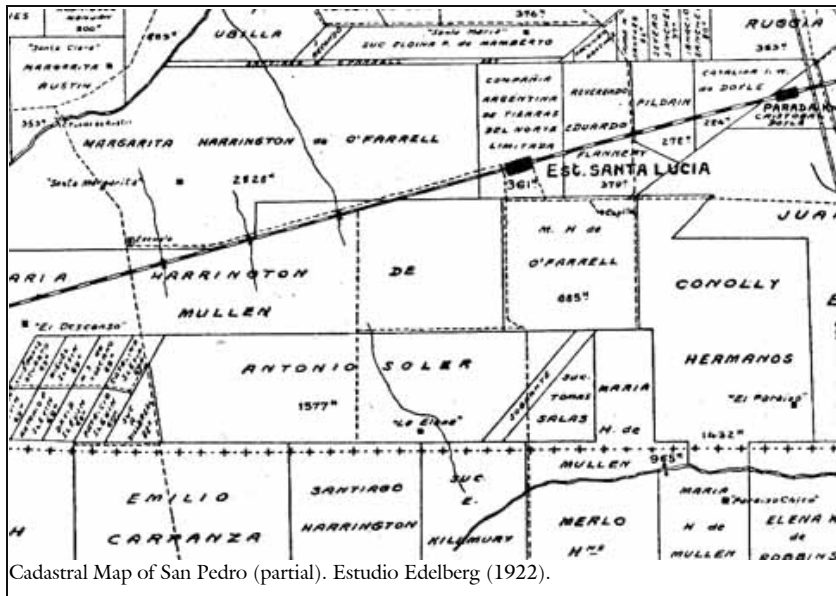
*Por estas callejuelas
ancestros invisibles
caminan con nosotros.*

Homero Aridjis
(Mexico, 1975)

San Pedro is a town and department in Buenos Aires province, 180 kilometres north of Buenos Aires, on the bank of the River Paraná. In the nineteenth century San Pedro was among the ten most important Irish settlements in Argentina, with immigrants from counties Westmeath, Offaly, Wexford and Clare. The *Handbook of the River Plate* of 1892 describes San Pedro in the line of the Buenos Ayres and Rosario Railway Co. 'Population 6,000, dates back to the year 1770; it is a thriving port of the Paraná, and has a resident Irish priest. Two wayside stations are passed, Castro and Paraiso, in a good sheepfarming district; then two others, Ramallo and Sanchez, the lands here being some of the best in the province' (Mulhall, M.G. and E.T., *Handbook of the River Plate, comprising the Argentine Republic, Uruguay and Paraguay* Sixth edition, Buenos Aires, 1892, pp. 78-79).

By the end of the nineteenth century, some of the families present in San Pedro were Austin, Bannon, Barry, Brennan, Cardiff, Carmody, Carthy, Casey, Cleary, Connell, Cormick, Crowley, Cummins, Dalton, Delaney, Devereux, Dillon, Dinnegan, Doran, Doyle, Duffy, Duggan, Gill, Harrington, Hoare, Howlin, McCormack, MacDonnell, McGuire, McInerny, MacManus, MacNamara, Murphy, Nally, O'Dwyer, O'Neill, O'Reirdon, Quinn, Rath, Reynolds, Robbins, Rooney, Shanahan, Slevin, Stafford, Sullivan, Tumulty, Walsh, Wheelahan, Wheeler, York, Young, and others (1895 census returns in Table IV of Eduardo Coghlan's *El Aporte de los Irlandeses a la Formación de la Nación Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1982). Fr. Edmund Flannery was both the Irish Chaplain and a local estanciero, as well as a strong supporter of Republicanism in Ireland.

According to Thomas Murray, who published *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* in 1919, 'San Pedro being a river port, at one time of great importance, is one of the old towns of the Province. In the latter Twenties [1820s] I find a few Irish names amongst those who sought passports to the district, but it was not until about '55 that Irish sheep-farmers reached the place, and then not in large numbers. By the year Sixty, however, a good number of our people had established themselves there and soon purchased large estancias. The first subscriber towards the O'Connell Monument Fund came from this district, in '63.'



Cadastral Map of San Pedro (partial). Estudio Edelberg (1922).

The district was included in Fr. Michael Leahy's Chaplaincy of Carmen de Areco' continues Thomas Murray, 'until the coming of Father Edmund Flannery in 1869. About twenty miles, westward, in the open camp, in the year 1875, Father Flannery commenced building his church. The place was then the center of a populous Irish district, and lay from fifteen to twenty miles from the nearest church or chapel. Such an edifice was a deeply felt want, indeed, as the response of those concerned, to the appeal of their pastor, in the matter, proclaims

as decisively as it does their generosity and piety. The Church and priest's house were completed and opened to service in 1876. A press report of the inauguration of the new Chapel had this to say: "The chapel and priest's house built by the parishioners of Father Flannery surpass anything of the kind we have seen in this country. The new buildings are situated on very high ground; the steeple of the church is visible at a distance of seven leagues. The worthy pastor deserves the highest praise for his exertions to establish a permanent Irish mission in San Pedro by building there an Irish Church with a residence for a priest attached. The disinterestedness of Father Flannery is well known to his flock; hence their willingness to assist him. The church is a handsome building with a handsome spire. The priest's residence is a well-built brick house of five rooms. The land was generously given by Mr. John Harrington, who also gave a handsome donation towards the erection of the church, heading the list with \$10,000 m/c. The building cost £2,000 sterling; there is yet a deficit of £500 sterling, but it will be paid off. The Irish were well represented at the ceremony. There were the Harringtons, Mooneys, Austins, Kennedys', Doyles, Youngs, McDonnells, Owens, Newmans, Martins, Griffins, Keoghs, Eustaces, Quinns, Flahertys, Walls, Cullens, Kearneys, Roches, Wheelers, Cummins, Riardons, Nallys, Cloughisseys, Cavanaghs, Hogans, Brownes, Daltons, Kennys, Wades, Streets, Caseys, Brennans and a host of others. Wexford, Longford and Westmeath were well represented." The writer should have said that Clare was also well represented. Soon after the opening Father Flannery published the following statement: "All the neighboring Irish people and many natives have subscribed liberally. The accounts stand thus: Cost of Church, \$261,402; amount subscribed, \$195,846; balance due, \$65,556." The building is eighty feet long, twenty-six feet wide and thirty feet in height; it has a tower fifty feet high. Archdeacon Dillon performed the ceremony of consecration' (Murray, Thomas. *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1919), pp. 259-261).



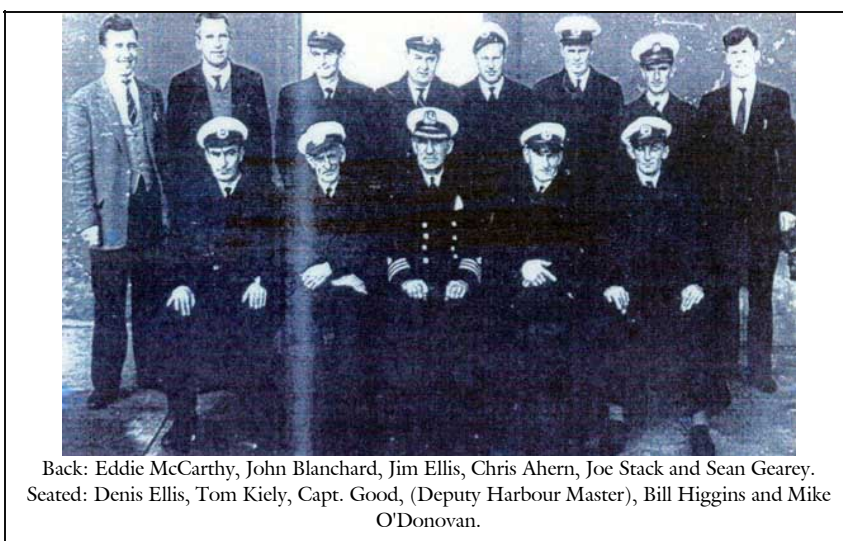
Photo Exhibition 25-27 March 2005.

A Cork Harbour Pilot in Bahía Blanca

By Edward Walsh

Cobh today with its many different coloured houses and elegant buildings is a delightful place to live. But it was not always so. At one time it was a great British naval base and local people were well accustomed to the constant comings and goings of warships and sailors. This was the ill fated *Titanic's* last port of call on its maiden and last journey to New York and it was here that the many bodies of victims from the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine off the Old Head of Kinsale were brought for burial in a mass grave. As an emigration port it witnessed many scenes of great sadness and distress as thousands departed for a new life in some other distant part of the world.

This attractive port town, nestling on the side of the hill dominated by the Pugin designed St Colman's Cathedral, is situated on the estuary of one of the world's great natural harbours. In some ways the vista from high up above the town resembles Sydney Harbour; a military fort sitting atop Spike Island, the naval installations on Haulbowline, the twin forts (Carlisle and Templebreedy) and on either side of the narrow harbour entrance and the Atlantic glistening in the distance.



Back: Eddie McCarthy, John Blanchard, Jim Ellis, Chris Ahern, Joe Stack and Sean Gearey.
 Seated: Denis Ellis, Tom Kiely, Capt. Good, (Deputy Harbour Master), Bill Higgins and Mike O'Donovan.

Many emigrants departed Ireland from here for the new world – never to return - during the sombre years of the famine and on to the halcyon days of the great passenger liners. Ships like the *Lusitania*, *Mauritania*, *Bremen*, *Isle de France* were regular callers in those heady days before the age of the jet decimated transatlantic passenger liner trade.



Cork harbour sunset (www.cork-guide.ie)

There was a buzz in Cobh in those days when liners dropped anchor at Whitegate or stayed outside off Roche's Point. Cork harbour pilots were renowned for their navigational skills and some achieved unintentional fame, as unable to return to the pilot cutter due to stormy weather at sea, they sailed perforce west to New York or up the Channel to either Cherbourg or Southampton.

William P. Higgins (1893-1972), Bill to his friends, was a native of Cobh, County Cork, who went to sea in 1910 as a teenager and spent the following decade at sea, mostly in sailing ships.

About 1922-23 he became a pilot in Cork harbour and retired from service in 1963 on reaching the then retirement age of 70! Bill was no mere mariner, for he left a 'diary' or more correctly, a handwritten copybook of reminiscences of his career. A perceptive eye

dipped the pen of mirth in ink of seasoned maritime experience to write a racy dialogue of one sailor's tale of adventure, a tale salvaged from the depths of cobwebbed memory.

I think it was in the year 1915 I joined a Belgian steamer in Newport Mon. (Monmouthshire, Gwent, South Wales) going out to the River Plate with a cargo of coal. We took about thirty days on passage. Having arrived at Insinada (sic 'Ensenada') it took about ten days to discharge, we received orders to proceed to Bahía Blanca to load grain for London.

While we were loading I went ashore one afternoon to have a look around. The port's name is Engineer White, because Bahía Blanca was named after the engineer who built it. Things were quiet ashore, and warm. I went into a saloon to have a drink, it was a lovely evening just to laze around with nothing to do.

I was on my second beer when suddenly the door opened to admit two vigilantes. Coming up to the barman they held a conversation in Spanish. I had a good chance to study them both.

One was dressed a little better than the other, he wore silver spurs with sharp rowels, riding boots and tight riding pants. The other was a foot vigilante, he went into the back of the saloon and closed the door and called the barman in with him leaving the one with the spurs standing in the bar.



Bill Higgins

I was able to spatter a little Spanish, so I thought I would ask him to have a drink. 'Usta cara una botoll selvesa' (sic 'Usted quiere una botella de cerveza') I said, 'will you have a bottle of beer.' He replied in English 'I don't mind if I do', turning round to look at me. It shook me a bit to hear him speak English so good. Then he spoke again, 'by your speech you are a Southerner', and the thought flashed through my mind he was taking me for a Yank. I must be coming on. 'A Southerner from where?' I said, 'south of Ireland', he replied. That was sharp shooting I thought.

All I could do was nod my head in reply. Then he was speaking to me in Irish and all I could understand was 'agus' (Irish language word for 'and') and in fact that is how I knew he was talking Irish. I was ashamed not to be able to answer him. He knew alright. 'You are a hard Irishman' he said 'can't speak your own language'. I tried to explain that seafaring people on the Irish coast got little chance to learn it. He seemed to accept that explanation rather reluctantly shaking his head.

How come I said you are able to speak Irish, English and Spanish, it's rather strange. 'Well' he said, 'did you ever hear of Portainens' (sic 'Porteños'). No I said. So he told me how it happened. 'It was about sixty years previously there was free emigration from Ireland to Argentina, so a lot of Irish families

availed of the chance to go there.'

'That is how I come to speak three languages. The old people never forgot their Celtic-origins'. We shook hands and parted, hoping we would meet again some day.

I am indebted to Tim Cadogan, Executive Librarian, Cork County Library, Model Business Park, Model Farm Road, Cork, for giving me access to this manuscript. There is a typed version which was used in a radio broadcast on the RTÉ network, but I have used the original hand written document which internal evidence suggests was written in 1963. I am also indebted to Philip Thomas, Assistant Curator at the Cobh Museum, Old Scots Church, High Road, Cobh, County Cork for providing me with a copy of a Cork Harbour pilots group photograph of taken circa 1950. Bill Higgins is seated in the front row second from right.

Edward Walsh

The author is an independent scholar who lives in London. Contributor to the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* and the *Dictionary of Falklands Biography*. He wrote *Documents and Correspondence concerning and from James Foran, Irish priest and chaplain in the Falkland Islands 1876-86*, in 'Collectanea Hibernica, Sources For Irish History' Nos.46 and 47 (Killiney, Co. Dublin, 2004-2005) pp.241-274.

