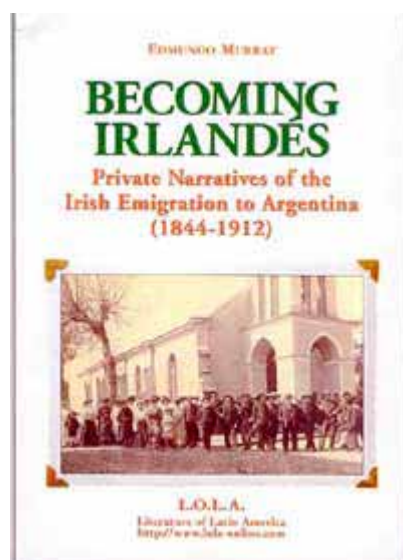


**Review of Edmundo Murray's  
Becoming Irlandés: Private Narratives of the Irish Emigration to Argentina,  
1844-1912**

By José C. Moya



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This revised English version of the author's 2004 *Devenir Irlandés* offers some advantages over the original Spanish edition. It abridges some of the documents that make up the bulk of the volume: two memoirs and two sets of family letters from Irish immigrants in Argentina, without losing any substance. The documents are now presented in their original language. Murray has also added a fuller discussion of the notion, conveyed in the title of the book, that social identities represent processes rather than fixed entities.

In this becoming or *devenir*, Murray identifies three stages that defy linear concepts of assimilation. Early arrivals were identified generically as English and seem to have done little to contest the rubric. Murray's contention that they came to "an informal colony of the British Empire in which everything, except probably meat and hide came from the British Isles" is — perhaps intentionally — exaggerated. Fashion and elite culture, from architectural styles to literary forms, were more likely to originate from continental Europe than from England. Most immigrants came from Italy and Spain, as did deeper cultural traits ranging from language and music to pasta and anarchism. Yet beneath the hyperbole, there is a valid point. The Irish may not have exactly evolved "from colonized to colonizers," but Argentina's ethno-racial totem pole supplied new material for identity construction.



Letter from John Murphy (Salto, Buenos Aires) to Martin Murphy received 5 July 1864  
(Anastasia Joyce Collection)

Being white, Northern European, and British provided status building blocks not available to, say, their compatriots in Liverpool. The label of “backwardness” was pinned at the time on the native inhabitants of the Pampas rather than on the newcomers. Catholicism was not a marker of religious and moral depravity in Buenos Aires. The second stage in this process of becoming coincides with a surge of cultural nationalism, bordering on nativism, among early-twentieth-century Argentine elites. The former “ingleses” now accentuated their *Argentineness*: their connection to the land, to pastoral activities and to the *gaucho* (favoured emblems of nationhood), to military, patriotic rituals, and apparently to Catholicism. Unlike in most other Latin American countries, Catholicism was a particular accoutrement of nationalism in Argentina. Ultimately, they find themselves “becoming irlandés.” Argentina’s socio-economic decline and Ireland’s rising fortunes have promoted a revival of what used to be called in the 1970s “symbolic ethnicity,” that includes conspicuous St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, decorative shamrocks, and the replacement of “mate and bizcochitos” with tea and scones.

A demographic portrayal of the Irish community is subsequently offered. Murray calculates that between forty and fifty thousand Irish came to the River Plate during the century following 1830. About half of these returned to Ireland or moved to other countries, particularly the United States; and about half of those who stayed in Argentina died in epidemics — a mortality estimate that seems abnormally high. The county of Westmeath supplied 43 per cent of the exodus, and Wexford and Longford some 15 percent each. Like emigrants almost everywhere else, these were young people, with an average age of twenty-four. Only 15-17% of them remained in the Argentine capital, probably the lowest urban concentration among all immigrant groups in the country. The majority settled in the province of Buenos Aires, with some later moving to Santa Fe, and engaged predominantly in pastoral activities. Men outnumbered women three to one before 1852. One would imagine that the ratio decreased later because, in general, the female proportion tends to increase as migration flows mature, and Irish emigration in general had a higher female ratio than those of most other contemporary flows. Whatever their gender, few, if any, spoke Irish as a first language: there is not a single Gaelic word in the documents other than place names.



John Murphy's estancia *La Flor del Uncalito*, Salto

The documents, of course, may not be entirely representative. As Murray notes, the family papers that survive tend to be those that families consider important, normally meaning that they present the family's history in a positive light. Positive or not, the documents here shed much light on the process of migration from the bottom up. Edward Robbins' memoirs basically list, chronologically, family events: an uncle's military campaign with Simón Bolívar in 1819 and his death soon after in Bolivia, the building of a farm house back home, the birth of children and death of parents, the emigration of thirteen family members to Argentina in 1849, rural work, business deals and so on. The letters to the Murphy family in Wexford start from Liverpool in 1844 with the promise that others would arrive as soon as the ship docked in Buenos Aires. However the first letter from Argentina in the volume comes nine years later, perhaps because early correspondence was not preserved. This collection is particularly illuminating of the immigrant experience. It includes requests for pre-paid passages and remittances, observations about foreigners' lack of involvement in local politics, descriptions of the workings of a sheep farm, news of the Paraguayan War, details about family feuds and duties, and the assertion that Argentina is not "a half civilized, half savage desert wilderness such as we read in *Sin-Bad the Sailor* and other like fairy tales," but a sophisticated country with greater opportunities than Ireland. The third collection includes letters from three young women in Buenos Aires to their relative John James Pettit, who had been born there in 1841, ten years after his parents had arrived from Ireland, but moved to Australia with his son in 1852. The last document, as the first, is a memoir but written much later (in the 1920s), and in a more literary style, by a third-generation Irish-Argentine who remembered, among many other delightful tidbits, a creole *gaucho* who "spoke English with as good a brogue as any Irishman." That this writer was born in 1864 and was the grandson of immigrants highlights the pioneering role that the Irish - along with the Basques - played in Argentine immigration and the settling of the Pampas.

This, however, is not a book written in the hagiographic genre of "immigrant contributions." It does not celebrate great deeds and exceptional accomplishments. It does something more difficult and intellectually satisfying. It rescues from obscurity the stories of people who toiled, lived, loved, and dreamt beyond the spotlight of official histories. These are stories of everyday life, of home, as Murray's interesting discourse analysis demonstrates, rather than nation. Yet these seemingly mundane narratives are often more captivating than national epics and, in their simplicity, at times poetic. Murray's introduction, epilogue, and notes place these stories in their broader historical context and over fifty photographs and illustrations offer a complimentary visual component to the text.

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### Authors' Reply

I would like to thank Professor Moya for his thoughtful reading of my book and for a generous review. When I started working with the documents of an obscure group of rural settlers in Argentina, I did not imagine that a leading historian of migrations in Latin America would be interested in drawing connections between the cases included in my book and those of other migrations. There is little with which I disagree in this review, and I will therefore deliberate further on some of José's thoughts.

On the issue of hyperbole, I would like to quote *Five Years in Buenos Ayres 1820-1825* (generally attributed to George Thomas Love, the editor of the *British Packet* newspaper): 'en la ropa del gaucho - salvo el cuero - todo viene de Inglaterra. Los vestidos de las chinas salen de los telares de Manchester. La olla de la comida, las espuelas, los cuchillos.' Indeed this book was published in London in 1825, so the author refers to that specific period after independence, when pioneering Irish (and Scottish) sheep farmers were exploring the southern districts of Buenos Aires province. Perhaps the metonymy can be extended to the second phase, when the Irish moved their flocks to the western and northern *partidos*, probably up to the fall of Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852. At that time, the dominant presence of English-manufactured products in Argentine every-day life, particularly in the cities, is unquestionable. Even if overstated, my assertion points to the remarkable Anglophile society that received the Irish, especially in the early stages of migration. The other point is about mortality. I based my estimation on the number of settlers provided by the thesis (1994) and articles of Patrick McKenna, who elaborates on Sabato and Korol's study of 1981. Not only was mortality unusually high during the 1860s and 1870s due to outbreaks of epidemics - the letters to John J. Pettit provide tragic examples of the cholera epidemic of 1868 - but it is also important to note that numbers of male Irish settlers remained unmarried. Therefore, the size of the Irish community decreased significantly owing to return migration, mortality and lack of offspring.

I would also like to add here that some of my thinking changed after the first edition of this book in Spanish was published by Eudeba. This was not totally unrelated to the human nature of *devenir*, but it was also part of my own learning process in the study of emigrants' identities. Some rather personal aspects changed radically. For instance, nowadays I do not seek an Irish passport as I once did, in a somewhat Romantic fashion, a few years ago. I must acknowledge the significant influence of the referendum of 11 June 2004, when an overwhelming majority of the Irish voters denied *jus soli* to children born in Ireland of foreign parents. In contrast, I am currently trying to obtain Colombian nationality (if the consulates in Bern and Buenos Aires agree on a less bureaucratic method)! My interest in the larger, and richer, aspects of the Irish in Latin America was prompted by a myriad of stories that I found in rare books or other sources, and that are leading my present writing.

I wish to thank Prof. Moya for what is, in overall terms, a very generous review. To him I am truly indebted.

Edmundo Murray