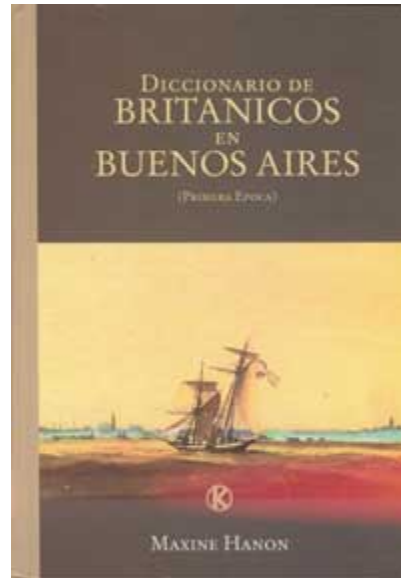


Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

Review of Maxine Hanon's *Diccionario de Británicos en Buenos Aires (Primera Época)*

By Edmundo Murray



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Compared to other published works, dictionaries of biography present particular challenges to a team of highly specialised professionals, including contributors, editors and publishers. Contributors of entries are usually constrained by the relatively short texts they are required to write. Editors need to deal with style and, particularly, with scope, which is a constant restriction to their eagerness to cover the subject more thoroughly. Publishers who finance the project are faced with the technical burden of limiting the text length - and sometimes its quality - in order to keep the production expenses in paper and printing costs to budget. As a break with the norm, the *Diccionario de Británicos en Buenos Aires (Primera Época)* is the intelligent and dedicated work of just one person.

Maxine Hanon, an independent historian and lawyer practising in Buenos Aires, is not new to the research of the English-speaking community of Buenos Aires. She published *El Pequeño Cementerio Protestante de la Calle del Socorro en la Ciudad de Buenos Ayres, 1821-1833* (1998, co-authored with Jorge Alfonsín), and *Buenos Aires desde las Quintas de Retiro a Recoleta 1580-1890* (2000), as well as articles about colonial and post-independence Buenos Aires and its British residents, [1] including biographies of Santiago Wilde and John Whitaker. From the beautiful cover and back-cover aquarelle depicting Buenos Aires by Emeric Essex Vidal, to the detailed information about thousands of immigrants in Buenos Aires, Hanon's new book is an important addition to the bibliography on the British and Irish in Latin America, and a major reference work for researchers of the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh in the city of Buenos Aires up to the fall of Governor Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852.

The author excluded the British residents in other parts of the Argentine Republic from her study. However, it is important to mention that, at least during the first half of the nineteenth century, the city of Buenos Aires was the principal urban centre in the pampas. An important share of the total exports and imports of provinces like Buenos Aires (excluding the city), Santa Fe, Córdoba, Tucumán, and even countries like Uruguay and Paraguay, were transported through Buenos Aires. Furthermore, several landowners and merchants with land and businesses in those areas lived in Buenos Aires and only visited their estates occasionally. Therefore, the vast majority of the English-speaking landowners in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe and others, and some in Uruguay and Paraguay, had temporary or permanent residences in the city of Buenos Aires.

Hanon's choice of the period up to 1852 - which she titled *Primera Época* - is also relevant. The arrival in Buenos Aires of a number of British immigrants in the closing years of the eighteenth century and up to the British military campaigns of 1806 and 1807 was the result of the growing British influence in the South American region of Río de la Plata at that time. Yet the most significant British presence began after the Treaty of Friendship, Navigation and Commerce signed by the two countries on 2 February 1825. This bilateral agreement allowed the legal residence of British subjects in Buenos Aires, as well as sanctioning their commercial and religious activities. In the subsequent period, during the extended rule of Governor Rosas, thousands of Irish, Scottish and English sheep-farmers, artisans and labourers were enticed by the opportunities in the pampas of Buenos Aires. After Rosas's fall in 1852, as Hanon rightly points out in her introduction, 'many other British landed in Buenos Aires to work in the railways, meat-packing plants, utility companies and large ranches. British settlements were established in Patagonia, Irish-owned palatial homes were built on Avenida Alvear, and football, tennis, polo, rugby began to be played [...] But that is another story' (15). After 1852, British and Irish immigration was significant both in magnitude and in variety of social origins and labour specialisations, therefore justifying the chronological framework of *Primera Época* in order to achieve a thorough coverage of persons and institutions before that year.

Strictly speaking, this book - a solid volume of about 900 pages - is more than a dictionary of biography, and with some alternative editorial arrangements it could have been categorised as an encyclopaedia of the British in Buenos Aires before 1852. It includes twenty-eight British institutions in Buenos Aires, three festivals - among them, a story of St. Patrick's Day in Buenos Aires - seventy-five emigrant ships from Britain and Ireland, and about 4,250 entries on British residents in Buenos Aires. [2] This amounts to well over a half of the 6,000-7,000 persons that some sources estimated as the English-speaking population in the country in the 1830s.

Additionally, there is a short but thorough introduction (7-17), in which the author summarises the formation of the British community and its different groups in the Río de la Plata from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, as well as an interesting discussion about the sources. To complete the references, the author included a timeline (19-20), details of the illustration by Emeric Essex Vidal (879), a list of people buried in the first Protestant cemetery (881-886), a bibliography, and tables with equivalencies and the currency exchange rates.

Although in many aspects this *Diccionario* is a pioneering work, there are three possible groups of precursors to Hanon in her research. The first group is dominated by journalists; Michael G. Mulhall initiated the cycle with *The English in South America* (1878), a collection of short biographies and records of British accomplishments on the continent. He was followed by his brother Edward T. Mulhall's *Saudades: a collection of obituaries from The Standard of Buenos Aires* (1923), Octavio Batola's *Los primeros ingleses en Buenos Aires* (1928), and the multi-authored *Antología histórica de Británicos vistos por ojos argentinos* (1941). In this first group is also included Andrew Graham-Yooll's wide-ranging work, particularly *The Forgotten Colony: A History of the English-speaking Communities in Argentina* (1981), *Small Wars You May have Missed* (1983) and *Así vieron a Rosas los ingleses, 1829-1852* (1980), as well as the three volumes of Emilio Fernández-Gómez's *Argentina, Gesta Británica* (1993, 1995, 1998). The second group are genealogists, led by the exceptional work of Eduardo A. Coghlan, whose 'great contribution' Hanon recognises (17). In her book, the Irish settlers' family background is frequently cited from Coghlan's two major works, *El Aporte de los Irlandeses a la Formación de la Nación Argentina* (1982) and *Los Irlandeses en la Argentina: Su Actuación y Descendencia* (1987), and in other cases from private publications of individual family histories. Finally, the third group are academics. Although the author does not seem to have consulted any unpublished scholarly

study - they are not included in the *Bibliografía General* (887) - there seems to be an indirect influence by Deborah Jakubs's PhD thesis *A Community of Interests: A Social History of the British in Buenos Aires, 1860-1914* (Stanford, 1986), and Patrick McKenna's M.A. dissertation *Nineteenth Century Irish Emigration to, and Settlement in, Argentina* (Maynooth, 1994).

In addition to these three groups, there are diverse identity paradigms of the British settlers outside Britain and Ireland. Among them, the case of the Irish and their *Irishness* is worthy of note. In some ways, with an excessive focus on the Irishness of the immigrants, Eduardo Coghlan (1982, 1987) and Patrick McKenna (1994) exclusively worked with people from that island, and sometimes fell into the anachronism of conceiving generalised Irish nationalism before the 1880s, thus failing to recognise the significant day-to-day social and business contacts with, and reliance of the Irish on, other English-speaking groups. Furthermore, these authors occasionally neglected to acknowledge *Irishness* among Irish-born immigrants who bore English names or who had religious backgrounds other than Catholic. Conversely, Hanon preferred to follow the same paradigm that Deborah Jakubs did in her thesis, that is, viewing the British as a community of diverse origins but with common interests. She explained that among the British she included 'the Catholic and Protestant Irish residents who participated in the community's life. At that time, they were all British subjects' (12). I believe that, confronted with the native population and in the peculiar situation of being foreigners in a new place sometimes perceived as hostile, the Irish in Argentina during this period were not only 'British subjects', but they actually considered themselves *ingleses* and thus much closer to the English, Scottish or Welsh than to the Creole, Afro-Argentine or Amerindian groups that populated Buenos Aires at that time.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the author's very appropriate use of a variety of sources. Most notably, it is the first time that the records of the British Consulate in Buenos Aires have been used as a major primary source in a dictionary of biography. Among these records is the register of British subjects starting in 1824, including the immigrant's name, age, place of origin, occupation, year of arrival, family information and ship. Although this register is a significant source for the study of the British residents in Buenos Aires, until now it has been neglected by almost all researchers and scholars. [3] Other sources include baptismal, marriage and burial records from the Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Buenos Aires, as well as sexton records and grave inscriptions in certain cemeteries of the city and in Montevideo, Uruguay. The *British Packet*, a newspaper published between 1826 and 1858, is another primary source repeatedly cited in this book. For the Irish immigrants, taking into account that Coghlan's genealogical catalogue (1987) did not include these sources, Maxine Hanon's work represents a significant improvement in our knowledge of their settlement in Buenos Aires. Furthermore, in several of the entries the author cross-referenced the information in the consular register with Coghlan's book, obtaining broader data. She also used documents held in the Archivo General de la Nación (National Archive) in Buenos Aires, other contemporary newspapers, and genealogical information. In all cases, the sources are meticulously referenced at the end of each entry. It is regrettable that some entries in the book do not include data from sources held in British and Irish archives, such as the baptismal, marriage and burial records in Catholic and Protestant parishes. However, it would be unfair to place this additional burden on the author, whose research is the work of a team of one, and who has not been supported financially by any university or academic institution to conduct research in distant archives.

For this same reason, it is difficult to find weaknesses in this book. Personally, I would have liked to see more entries on the *inglés borracho* (drunken Englishman) type, who is frequently mentioned in emigrant letters cited in other books. [4] Addiction to alcohol was not the exception among many British in Argentina. They were over-represented in crime statistics of intoxication, as well as in cases of insanity and scandal. Perhaps the omission of this type of biographical entry is a consequence of the contribution discourse which this book occasionally falls within. In the contribution discourse, the immigrants - and often also their historians - need to demonstrate that they are worthy of their new country and able to contribute to the larger society. From the first lines of the introduction - citing Guillermo Furlong, who cited Bartolomé Mitre - the author remarks that 'in every significant episode of the [Argentine] patriot epic there always was present a British resident as actor or witness' (7). Even in recognising that her book includes thousands of 'anonymous British immigrants', Hanon praises all of them as *intelligent* and *industrious* (7). In isolation, this fact is not disqualifying of her book. However it may have led the research to disregard disreputable British individuals who evidently had nothing positive to contribute to the receiving

society. A good balance between the *good* and the *evil* here and there could have painted a picture of this social group that would have been closer to the realities of human beings.

The other element lacking is assistance normally obtained from experienced editors and established publishers, especially in the tricky area of reference works. Repeatedly, the entries include the same ship description, captain, date of arrival and other data, as well as the details of the colonisation scheme in which the described person was involved. On a more typographic note, in this *Diccionario* running headlines - those single lines that top the pages and are used to help the reader find his or her way around in a book - are an uninformative repetition of the title, author and chapter, instead of the customary first and last entry in every page that we can find in other reference books. Recognisably, these are but minor issues and are relatively easy to amend in future editions.

I hope that Maxine Hanon's next book fulfils the hidden promise in the subtitle, that is, *Primera Época* (First Period). The logical second period could be between 1853 and perhaps 1929, the first year of the Great Depression, when thousands of British and Irish immigrants left Argentina and South America and returned to Britain and Ireland or re-emigrated to North America and other destinations. Furthermore, any kind of electronic media that could be appended to the book - for instance, a database included in a DVD or access to a website - would greatly ease its reading and the finding of individuals or places. Certainly, additional volumes including the other parts of Argentina, and possibly Uruguay and Paraguay, could greatly enhance the value of this work.

Maxine Hanon is to be congratulated for an outstanding and painstaking piece of research, which is already a basic reference for students of British and Irish migration to nineteenth-century Argentina up to the 1850s. I once read that in the personal library of the writer Jorge Luis Borges, books were not arranged by language or subject, but according to the possible affinity between their respective authors. In my own library (of course not as splendid as Borges's!) I had no hesitation in placing Hanon's *Diccionario* beside Eduardo Coghlan's *Los Irlandeses en Argentina*. Both books are stout in weight and format, and share thousands of persons, places and events, as well as their authors' sound research. Aside from discussing British or Irish identities, I indulge myself in imagining that Coghlan and Hanon - both lawyers by training - would have great conversations about documents and archives, as well as their common passion for historical research.

Edmundo Murray

Notes

[1] Except where expressly stated, in this review I use the term 'British' to refer to any person born in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which existed from 1801 to 1921.

[2] I did not count the entries. The number of entries was included in a message from the author to the South American List, dated 26 July 2005.

[3] With the possible exception of Deborah Jakubs (1986), who used the Register's entries after 1860.

[4] Although they are from a later period, the following extracts from contemporary letters are clear regarding alcohol addiction among British immigrants. 'I don't know the reason but it is a fact that a great number of young men coming from Europe get lost here, they turn to drink and it is not from the natives they learn it, for it is scarcely ever seen in the respectable classes, amongst the poor "gauchos", yes, but "Ingles borracho" which means drunken Englishmen is a common saying here' (Sally Moore to John James Pettit, 25 November 1867, in Murray 2006: 101). 'I really think if someone else does not do it I shall write a letter myself to one of the English papers and try to do something to prevent young fellows without money coming out here, and going body and soul to the devil, it is wretched to see so many of them drink, drink, drink caña from morning to night...' (George Reid to his father, 16 May 1868, in Boyle 1999: 113).

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Author's Reply

I am grateful to Edmundo Murray for his insightful and generous review of my dictionary. I am also grateful for the honour of being placed in his library beside Coghlan. One of the many motives for this work is related to Coghlan. Many years ago, when I had not yet thought of dedicating myself to historical research, I remarked at the house of a few friends that I had an Irish ancestor and the Irish owner of the house immediately took out a book and told me: here they all are. My disappointment was great when I did not find my distant grandfather Thomas Whitfield, an Irishman, born in Kilkenny, who arrived in 1819. I subsequently found out that Coghlan had included very few Irish Protestants.

In 1994, I found Whitfield's will by chance in the National Archive and since then I have been trawling through hundreds of documents to find out all the details of this multitalented Irishman's life in Buenos Aires. I knew, through family lore, that he was a pharmacist and I discovered that he was the first 'inspector of pharmacies' of this city; I knew that he had constructed St. John's Anglican Church and I discovered that he had also constructed St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church; I knew that he had been a pioneer, together with his partners Peter Sheridan and John Harratt, in the breeding of merino sheep, and I was researching his lands, one by one; I knew that he had lived in a house in Recoleta, and I began to discover the secrets of that house. In my enthusiasm for knowing more, I searched for information on his friends and I wanted to know the histories, not only of this property but of all of the neighbouring ones, from the time that Garay founded Buenos Aires until the *belle époque*.

My secret tribute to this Irish grandfather that Coghlan had omitted was my book *Buenos Ayres desde las Quintas de Retiro a Recoleta* (Buenos Aires from the Houses of Retiro to Recoleta). The quantity of information that I was amassing on his 'British' friends, was the origin of the *Diccionario de Británicos en Buenos Ayres*. I have, among others, Irish, Scottish and English roots and here, in that first period, all of these people were, for the Creole people, simply 'inglés (English).'

In relation to the review, I would like to offer some clarifications. I regret my ignorance, but I am not familiar with the work of Deborah Jakubs and Patrick McKenna, and therefore these authors had no 'indirect influence.' The estimate that around 1830 there were approximately 7,000 English speakers includes North Americans, of whom there were many - many more in fact than is assumed. There are 4,250 entries in the dictionary, plus spouses, etc. Although many more people arrived than I included, I did not have sufficient information on them; some are in the references to families of the same surname. With respect to those that I did include, I know that many items of information are missing (particularly information from foreign sources): research is inexhaustible, but, after six years, I was frankly exhausted and had to bring it to an end.

I never intended that 'First Period' would mean 'First Part.' A second volume would be very arduous and would definitely require, in that case, a team of researchers, and funding. With regard to the problem of alcoholism among the immigrants, I certainly accept its validity, but I do not believe that it was a general problem. There are many more cases of industrious British people than down-and-out drunks. I do not know if you read my description in *Instituciones* of the Buenos Ayres Temperance Society, founded in 1833. It is a hugely interesting topic that produced an enormous amount of polemic in the Buenos Aires

newspapers. In *British Hospital*, I describe how in the year 1848, Dr. Mackenna 'drew attention to the depravity and drunkenness in the very depths of which a large portion of the labouring class of the British population in this city is sunk', and highlighted the fact that seven in ten people who died in the hospital were alcoholics. The topic of alcoholism, which is of course related to the dislocation and lack of protection that the immigrants suffered in this young and troubled country, merits deeper study.

In 1834, a British correspondent who wrote a series of articles in the *British Packet* on the education of foreign children in Buenos Aires, presents a shameful view, symbolised by dirty and ragged foreign children, aged between twelve and fourteen years, wandering the streets swelling the ranks of the street children. Among the reasons for this deplorable situation, he mentions the particular situation of the immigrants, 'the heterogeneous elements that form our foreign community. [...] Men of opposing principles and views, from all the corners of the world, mingle in a chaotic mass. Family ties, the local neighbourhood, the instinctive influence of habits and customs, respect for public opinion and all of the elements that operate in an ordered and long-established society do not exist. All of these benign influences,' he comments, 'are destroyed in the simple act of transplantation and the secret but powerful values of virtue, order and patriotism disappear forever. Freed from social restrictions, the Emigrant, in too many cases, becomes an adventurer, who only relates to those on whom he depends for his daily labours, completely indifferent to any consideration of character or reputation.' The correspondent concludes by affirming that in such circumstances, it is likely that some will neglect their social and familial responsibilities, and others will have recourse to drink and squander their lives. Obviously the topic could not be delved into more deeply in a dictionary of characteristics like mine.

Thank you again for your review.

Maxine Hanon

Translated by Claire Healy