

Horses and Horseracing An Irish passion in Nineteenth-Century Río de la Plata

By Edmundo Murray



A horse race
(Emeric Essex Vidal, 1820)

*Basta de carreras, se acabó la timba,
un final reñido yo no vuelvo a ver,
pero si algún pingo llega a ser fija el domingo,
yo me juego entero, qué le voy a hacer. [1]*

‘Por una cabeza’, tango (Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Le Pera, 1935)

‘For the sportsman in the true sense, who cares for horses, dogs and living things, who joys in the open air and wide plains, it [Argentina] is the best life in the world’

(John Macnie, 1925)

Up to the 1980s, historians repeatedly remarked that the major attractions for the Irish to emigrate to Latin America were the Roman Catholic religion and freedom from English rule. However, the land-hungry Irish who emigrated to Mexican Texas in the 1820s were fascinated less by religion or political liberties than by the huge pasture plains and the availability of relatively inexpensive land in the Refugio and San Patricio colonies (Davis 2002: 8). In South America, most of the officers and soldiers who embarked in Cork and Dublin to join the independence armies in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and other South American countries were enticed by the influence of Romanticism in early nineteenth-century Britain, the affirmation of masculinities and the cult of the adventurer (Brown 2006: 26). Furthermore, their fellow countrymen who chose Argentina as their destination were attracted by the possibility of becoming landlords and the freedom to practise their adventure-seeking lives. Significant among the characteristics of those lives was the tradition of horseracing, associated from early times with nobility, landownership and masculine behaviours. This article describes some of the horseracing activities in Argentina before and after the arrival of the Irish and British immigrants.

Work and Play on Horseback

‘Cattle and horses have feelings like ourselves; but the horse is by far the cleverest. [...] When a horse sees, himself, the necessity of using his intelligence, he is surprising’ (Bulfin 1997: 73). When William Bulfin published his *Tales of the Pampas* in 1900, he could not resist appealing to the one subject that was so close to the

hearts of both Argentines and Irish: horses. The Irish shepherds and the gauchos - the cowboys of the Pampas - were united in their worshiping of horses, although their manners and reasons differed. [2]

For the gaucho, the horse was the most common feature of their daily life. Work, travel and entertainment could not be conceived of

without horses and, at least in a rural habitat, everyone become a skilled rider from an early age. Up to the second half of the nineteenth century, thousands of wild horses populated the Pampas, and most were free to be seized without any other effort than driving and taming them. In contrast, most of the Irish farmers thought of horses as a valuable tool for draught work in farms or for transportation. In contemporary Ireland, riding a good horse was generally perceived to be a privilege of the landed classes and only a small number of tenant farmers and labourers were trained in the skills of horsemanship.

During the times of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, Andalusian horses were successfully introduced in the South American plains. Many were abandoned and the species freely developed in an ideal context with regard to food, health, climate and topography. Centuries later, what is known in Argentina and Uruguay as the criollo breed [3] represents the descendants of the original horses brought to the Americas by the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors, with the gradual addition of British, French and other European breeds.

The indigenous people of the Argentine Pampas became skilled riders and improvised breeders. The horse was their means of transport, a crucial resource for war and hunting, and their companion during the long journeys through the lonely plains. The gauchos, associated with the mixed ethnicities of Europeans and Amerindians and their descendants, adopted the horse as their most important friend. Later in the nineteenth century, European immigrants would perceive in their own relation with horses a symbol of their integration into the local culture.

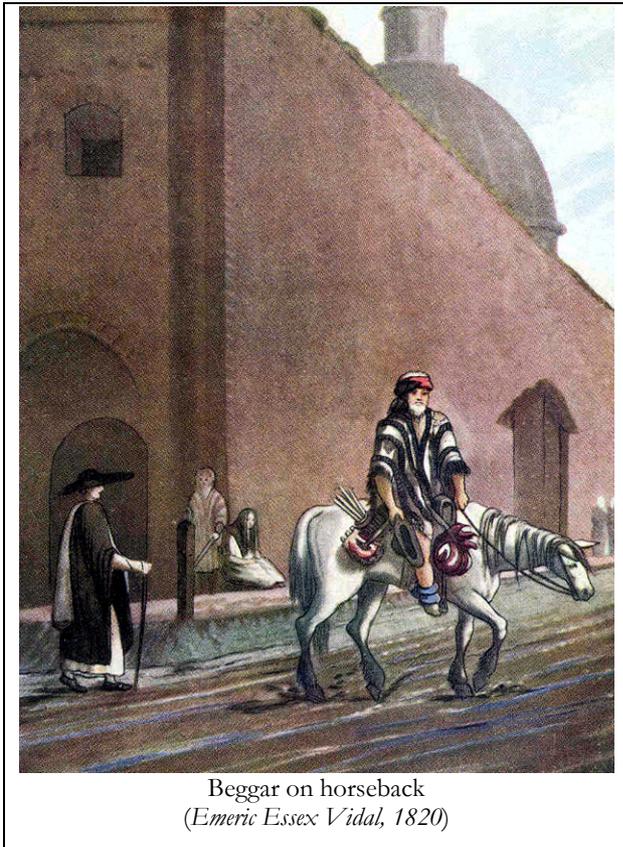
In the early 1820s, a visitor to Argentina chronicled: 'The Buenos Ayrian is continually on horseback: the nets in the river are drawn from the saddle, and the Gaucho bathes from the horse, and swims around it.' [...] Another visitor observed in 1853 that 'the natives, without a horse [...] simply assert that they are "without feet"; whatever work is to be done, either in collecting, marking, driving, or taming cattle, must be done on horseback' (William

MacCann in: Slatta, 1992: 25). Dismounted, a gaucho 'waddles in his walk; his hands feel for the reins; his toes turn inwards like a duck's' (Hudson 1922: 350). The failure of the English invasions of Buenos Aires in 1806-1807 prompted Sir Walter Scott to pour scorn on the Argentines as 'a sort of Christian savage called guachos [*sic*], whose principal furniture is the skulls [*sic*] of dead horses, whose only food is raw beef and water, whose sole employment is to catch wild cattle, [...] and whose chief amusement is to ride horses to death' (cited by Jones 1949: 78).

Regardless of social origin or class, work, recreation and travel were undertaken on horseback, or at least on a saddle. The enormous extension of uninhabited plains, the great quantity of wild horses, and the lack of a system of control that would prevent them from making these lands their own property without further formalities, gave the gauchos a liberty and opportunities which were not available to immigrants from Britain and Ireland in their home countries.

This aspect of the life in the Pampas levelled the whole population, rendering them a uniform horse-riding people, a fact that was amazing in the eyes of English and Irish visitors, accustomed to the familiar figure of landlords - and sometimes large farmers, but rarely peasants or labourers - on horseback. Moreover, in Buenos Aires 'the mounted beggar stands at the corner of the street, and asks charity; his horse is no more proof of his being undeserving of alms than the trowsers [*sic*] of the English mendicant' (Caldcleugh 1825: I, 172). '[H]is manner is essentially different from that of the real object of charity. He accosts you with assurance and a roguish smile; jokes on the leanness of his horse, which, he says, is too old to walk; hopes for your compassion, and wishes you may live a thousand years (Essex Vidal 1820: 52). Rather than social scandal, these views excited the imaginations of the Irish immigrants and, particularly, of their fellow countrymen and women at home. If anyone (even beggars) in the Pampas could own a horse, by analogy the dream of land ownership could be realised, and

upward social mobility - becoming a landowner - could become a reality for the industrious young tenant farmers of Ireland.



Beggar on horseback
(Emeric Essex Vidal, 1820)

Pato, maroma, and cuadreras

From the early seventeenth century, following the fashion of other Spanish and Portuguese colonies, bullfighting was the most important social amusement among the people of Buenos Aires, Montevideo and other locations in the Río de la Plata region. Local versions of the corridas, in which the torero kills a bull assisted by lancers on horseback and flagmen, were developed. Wild bulls and cows were mounted by expert riders (toreo a la americana), and complementary fights between teams of smart horse-riders armed with canes were organised (juegos de cañas). The latter game was eventually replaced by pato ('duck'), in which two, three or four teams of several accomplished riders struggled for the possession of a rawhide bag containing a live duck, and to carry it to the big house of their own estancia. Among other popular pastimes among gauchos on horseback were pechadas, during which the players would violently shove

each other until the winner would be the only one still on the mount, and maroma, which consisted of jumping from a high gate or tree on to the back of a horse galloping at full speed. [4]

Certainly the most popular entertainment in the Pampas was horseracing. The local form, cuadreras, was performed during holidays or on the day after a successful round-up of wild cattle. The differences with British races were observed and accounted for by Essex Vidal:

Horse-racing is a favourite diversion of the people of Buenos Ayres, but it is so managed as to afford little sport to an Englishman. There are no horses trained for racing, nor is attention paid to the breed with a view to that object. No match is ever made for more than half a mile; but the ordinary distance is two quadras, or three hundred yards, and the race is decided in a single heat. To make amends for this, however, they will start more than twenty times, and after running a few yards, return, until the riders can agree that the start is equal (Essex Vidal 1820: 113).

There were never more than two horses in the same race, and the winner's advantage must always be con luz between the horses, that is, upon arrival there should always be a distance between the first's back and the second's nose. It was not allowed for racers to jostle the adversaries off the course, but they could throw 'one another out of their seat, which is allowed, if it can be accomplished; but with such expert riders it is extremely difficult, and therefore seldom attempted' (113). In 'The Defeat of Barragan', William Bulfin tells of the intense conclusion of a race between the hero Castro and the villain Barragan, who

closes in and tries to jostle as they race. Castro, holding the top of his head against the whistling wind, turns his face sideways and, looking into the face of his adversary, while he raises his right hand, shouts, "I defy you to do it." The other, flogging with all his might, edges in. It is an old dodge! He has done it scores of times before; but to-day he has met his master. As the breast of his horse touches Castro's right leg, my companion [Castro] lifts his whip, which in the meantime he has gripped by the tail. Two swift strong cuts and he is free, [...]

amidst the cheers of his hundreds of backers leaves the bayo nowhere. Barragan [...] is entirely beaten. Castro has the rest of the running to himself, and crosses the line twenty yards ahead of his rival (Bulfin 1997: 94).

In *cuadras*, no consideration was given to the horses' weight or age or to the riders' weight or height. They 'ride without saddle, whip, or spur, having only a bridle without a bit; and thus the spirit and speed of the animals have fair play' (Essex Vidal 1820: 113). Frequently, the *cancha* (course) was a common plain or road, and only three or four races were performed in an entire afternoon, 'which tire the patience of any person accustomed to English racing' (113).

Inextricably associated with gambling in Britain and in Argentina, 'great sums of money [were] often staked on these matches' (113). Essex Vidal adds that spectators were numerous, including friars who were 'remarked as great betters'. These and other persons from all walks of life were constant spectators at *cuadras*. However women were not allowed to attend this exclusively male entertainment. In Buenos Aires, there were frequent races at the Beach Road (the present-day motorway to La Plata), Calle Larga (Montes de Oca Avenue), and the low grounds of Recoleta and Retiro.

Horse Racing a la inglesa

In 1826, the Buenos Ayres Race Club was founded by a group of British and Irish merchants of that city. On 6 November 1826, the first races *a la inglesa* (English-style, that is, on a circular course), were held in Barracas. The winner was Thomas Whitfield's *Shamrock*, who won by many lengths, followed by *Baron* and *Teazle* in the first race, and *St George* and *Integrity* in the second one. Later, in 1835, races were organised with fifteen or more horses and betting was considerable: 'the first [race] will be for 100 dollar Stakes, and the second for 50' (*The British Packet*, 3 January 1835 cited in: Hanon, 2005: 52). Another novelty of the English-style races was that women were present among the audience, some of them in carriages and others on horseback. Races were also very popular in Recoleta.

By the mid-1840s, there were races *a la inglesa* organised in Barracas, Recoleta and Belgrano. On 31 October 1844, a 'picnic party' on James White's property in Belgrano attracted prominent spectators as well as 'respectable criollo and foreign families' (*The British Packet*, 31 October 1844 cited in: Hanon, 2005: 53). The afternoon races included for the first time several gentlemen sporting the jockey attire. In 1849 White opened a new course 'stretching along the base of a semi-circular inclined plane' (53). It was twenty-six metres wide and covered fifteen *cuadras*, with a straight of 150 metres before the starting line. The following year, the Foreign Amateurs Racing Society was established, and its members organised races in springtime and autumn. They met in the rooms of the Strangers Club of Buenos Aires, and supported the importation of thoroughbred horses.

In 1853, local mares began to be bred with imported stallions, like the bay *Azrael*, and James White's *Belgrano*. Their contemporary *Tam O'Shanter* was the great favourite in all races. The Racing Society, dominated by the British and Irish merchants of Buenos Aires, organised races until 1855, when local meetings in Capilla del Señor, Carmen de Areco, Pergamino and other towns of Buenos Aires province attracted the attention of the English-speaking and local public resident in the *camp*.

Irish on Horseback

Having been tenant farmers in Ireland, the Irish dreamt of becoming landlords in the Río de la Plata. Their use of horses as farming devices at home developed into a major interest in races and breeding as external symbols of landownership in the Pampas.

Early nineteenth-century races in Ireland were predominantly organised and attended by landlords or their associates, and followed the patterns of English racing. In County Westmeath, the famous Kilbeggan races were held for the first time in 1840. A group of landlords, professionals and administrators launched a Challenge Cup valued at forty guineas, with ten pounds added by the stewards. Racing was held in several locations

around Kilbeggan, including the present site at Loughnagore (*Kilbeggan Races*).

When the Irish went to Argentina and Uruguay, they largely settled in rural areas and were partially responsible for the cultural transfer that converted the local *cuadreras* into English-style races. Most of them learnt or perfected their basic riding skills brought from Ireland upon their arrival to Buenos Aires. In a few years they would be able riders and expert horse breeders.

In 1847, the *Revista del Plata* reported a discovery by an Irish settler in Monte of a new method of castrating horses. ‘The method in question was rather an introduction than a discovery, for according to the description of the performance of the operation it was nothing more or less than the form of castration in common practice in Ireland in such cases’ (Murray 1919: 214). Other stories were told of the ability of certain Irish immigrants to ‘set’ the bones of both horses and humans.

A story in Monte illustrates the accentuated learning curve in horse-riding experienced by some of the new Irish immigrants:

A native attacked an old Englishman, named Davy, trying to ride him down. Davy struck the native’s horse with his stick, the rider jumped off and stabbed the old man several times. A young Irishman named John Gilligan, attracted by the shouts of the old man, rode up to the scene and dashed between the native and his victim; the native at once turned on him; Gilligan rode his horse against him, knocking him down and then jumped off to assist the old man who was dying; while thus engaged, and entirely unarmed, the native got to his feet, ran at Gilligan and stabbed him in the stomach [sic], causing almost immediate death (Murray 1919: 215).

In 1864, sheep-farm owner John Murphy of Salto wrote to his brother in Wexford. ‘All the men are now taking care of the flocks on foot, though having sixteen horses. Yet there are only some one or two that would be safe to saddle as they can with difficulty support their own weight. I am getting ten or more young asses tamed in, and I shall then have a good

supply so long as they are left with me’ (Murphy to Murphy, July 1864). In that year, when two more Irish labourers arrived from Ireland to work at Murphy’s establishment, he sent them from Buenos Aires to his ranch on the railway to Luján and then on the post coach to Salto because they could not find docile horses for them. Just two years later, one of these workers came second in the races in Salto.

In 1865 Murphy commented on the news in *The Standard* newspaper of Buenos Aires, which was customarily included in his letters to Ireland. ‘You see by this paper that we have horse racing here, as well as at home’ (Murphy to Murphy, 25 March 1865). And later that year, he added that he was

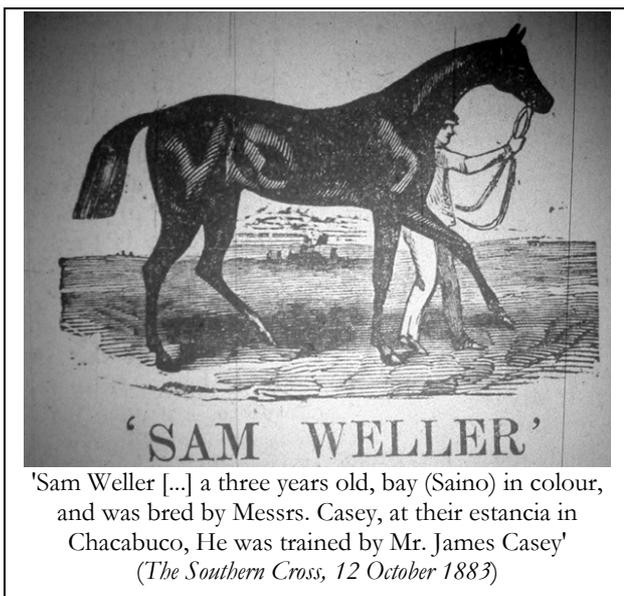
expecting some time ago to take a horse in to run in the English races, which you see advertised in the Standard for the 1st November, but owing to the shearing coming on I declined doing so. But I will have better time against the Autumn meeting, which generally takes place in March each year. I don’t recollect if I sent you a paper with some letters in it about our races last March, by which you may have seen that my horse beat at his ease some very crack-horses that was brought from far off to beat all before them (Murphy to Murphy, 25 September 1865).

For Murphy, it was important to let everybody know at home and among his friends and neighbours in Wexford that he owned racing horses. He mentioned this in several letters, and some years later he proudly announced the organisation of races on his own land, where ‘we are to hold some Races at the Estancia on next Monday. I take out the prizes with me, two saddles, bridle, whip & spurs. They are to be private Races for horses of the neighbourhood, for our own amusement, & to be followed by a dance that night’ (31 August 1873). Owning racing horses and organising private races were marks of social prestige among the Irish in Ireland and in Argentina.

Among the Irish residing in the rural areas of Buenos Aires, the races were the most important social event of the year. The horse-racing meeting of 1867 in Capilla del Señor

‘may be taken as the starting point in what was for a number of years the most important and successful Irish race-meeting in the country. The names of some of the race horses and their owners are worth preserving. First in the principal race, Matthew Dillon’s *Chieftain*; Second, John Shanaghan’s *Fenian Boy*; Third, Patrick Murray’s *Shamrock*; Fourth, George Bird’s *Clear-the-Way*, and last, Martin Fox’s *Volunteer*’ (Murray 1919: 224).

Vigilant Roman Catholic priests were present at the racing meetings to alert the people about the dangers associated with gambling, drinking and dancing, and to collect funds to support the building of rural chapels, schools, libraries and other works. In 1872, Fr. Patrick Dillon and Fr. Samuel O’Reilly opened St. Brigid’s chapel in La Choza, on John Brown’s land (district of Luján) (*The Southern Cross*, 1975: 33). ‘The day of its inauguration was one of great feasting in the district, with horse-racing, dances, etc., when the religious ceremony was over. Canon Dillon of Buenos Aires, who was a noted preacher, delivered the inaugural sermon which was said to be a very brilliant one. Mr. Browne was not alone forward in advancing religious and charitable institutions, he also took a leading part in promoting social pleasures and pastimes, and some of the first annual race-meetings in the camp were held on his estancia’ (Murray 1919: 219).



‘Sam Weller [...] a three years old, bay (Saino) in colour, and was bred by Messrs. Casey, at their estancia in Chacabuco, He was trained by Mr. James Casey’ (*The Southern Cross*, 12 October 1883)

The priests also sought the association and collaboration of the Irish in Argentina, who

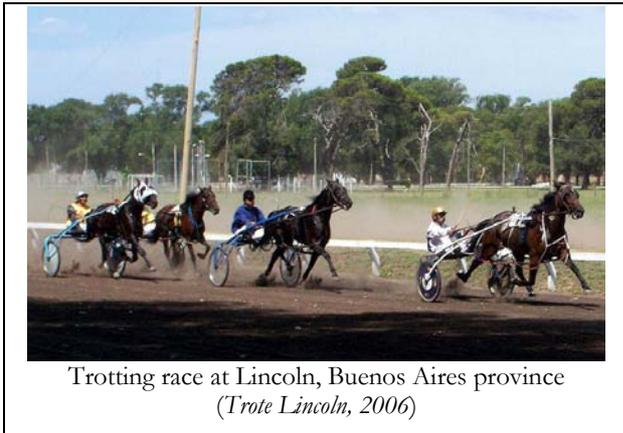
came from different counties and social origins. The traditional feuds between the immigrants from southeast Ireland and those of the Irish Midlands owed less to geographical reasons than to social standing. Many Wexford people had a manifest contempt towards the Westmeath, Offaly, Longford and other Irish immigrants, and perceived themselves as better educated and of a higher cultural and moral standing.

This aspect of social life was manifest in social meetings in which both groups came together, as in

our English races [that] passed off on the 25th last month. There were about two thousand foreigners and all the respectable natives of the surrounding partidos. Partido, or parish, is a district of country extending ten or twelve leagues in diameter each way, say a space of 100 square leagues. We whipped all before us. I won the Cup and brother William won the Plate with one of my horses. Wexford won all that was seen for our namesake Murphy. Tom won the saddle, which so much enraged the Ballinacarryas [5] (Westmeath people), that they collected in a ruffianly mob and so much disturbed the peace that the races had to be broken up. I could have won some hundreds of pounds had I been a gambler, mine being a young horse untrained and his antagonist a celebrated racer. Peter Cormack rode. The mob headed by the owner of beaten horses (I mean the horse that pushed mine as there were only one out of the six that run done any thing) got so ruffianly excited that they insulted the people of all nationality. Even the Clergy did not escape their bogardeism and I am glad to say that there were not a single individual of any other county mixed in. Our clergyman of both parishes has on these last two Sundays told them what they are, and the disgrace they have been to all Irishmen in this country (Murphy to Murphy, 20 October 1867).

As in Salto and other provincial towns, horseracing was frequently organised and led by Irish settlers and their families, who were keenly involved in breeding and other phases of the activity. In Lobos, Santiago Casey (1843-1899) became a distinguished *turfman* (breeder) and owner of one of the most important studs in his time. Other Irish families, like Duggan,

Dowling and Gaynor, were prominent in the organisation of races and in breeding.



In Venado Tuerto, a place with large Irish and British populations, Dublin-born *estanciero* John Macnie observed that 'riding amongst the peons has deteriorated, and much improved among the leisured classes in the Argentine. The first is due to the use of bretes and corrales for working cattle, smaller paddocks, improved methods in marking, etc., and tamer cattle in consequence. [...] As regards the leisured classes, [...] they are now bitten with polo and racing, and the time which the "joven distinguido" gave to Calle Florida is now often spent on training polo ponies and race-horses; and as the time passes on, there is little doubt that the better class Argentine will give himself wholeheartedly to polo, just as the less wealthy has given himself to football and tennis' (Macnie 1925: 142-144). For the first English races in Venado Tuerto only polo ponies were used. Among the first breeders to get a better class of horse for the races and train them were George O'Connell, F. Bridger, Pancho Thompson, and J. Hearne. Thanks to their pioneering work, some twenty years later the Coronation Cup was held to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902 (800 metres for any horse or mare, weight 75 kilos). Three horses belonging to one owner (Pancho Thompson) arrived first, second and third. At another race meet, riding in a steeplechase, [6]

Notes

[1] 'Enough of horseracing, no more gambling / a hard-contested ending I will not see again / but if on Sunday a pony looks like a sure pointer / I'll bet everything again, what can I do?'

Thompson 'broke a girth at the first jump and the other went at the second jump. Feeling the saddle slipping, he realized what had happened, and leaning forward he pulled the saddle from under him and put it over his right arm. He took the rest of the jumps barebacked, and although hampered by carrying the saddle, he manage to scrape home a winner' (Macnie 1925: 148).

In the 1880s the activity was mature enough to be undertaken at a national level, which took place with the inauguration of the Stud Book in Argentina. Names like Duggan, Maguire, Murphy or Gaynor are intimately associated with the development of thoroughbred activities in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Eduardo Casey (1847-1906), himself an exceptional rider, was a passionate breeder and importer of famous stallions, as well as a key member of the committee that commissioned the construction of the La Plata race course in the capital of Buenos Aires province. [7]

Eduardo Coghlan observed that almost twenty of the one hundred founders of the exclusive Jockey Club of Buenos Aires in 1882 were Irish or descended from Irish immigrants (Coghlan 1987: xxv). This disproportionate figure illustrates the social and economic advancement of some of the former farming families who left Wexford and the Midlands in the first half of the nineteenth century to join the landed elites of the Río de la Plata. However, the vast majority of the Irish in Argentina remained landless peasants who could never hope to be anything other than labourers on an *estancia*. The dream of being landlords had to be abandoned, even if they succeeded in riding the beautiful horses of the Pampas.

Edmundo Murray

[2] The first time the word gaucho appeared in print was in *Noticias secretas de América* by Antonio de Ulloa and Jorge Juan y Santacilia (1743), to describe the rural inhabitants of the Chilean mountains. Furthermore, one of the most curious – and indeed Anglo-centred – of the many etymological interpretations is that of the English painter Emeric Essex Vidal (1820): ‘all countrymen are called by the inhabitants of Buenos Ayres gauchos, a term, no doubt, derived from the same root as our old English words gawk and gawkey, adopted to express the awkward, uncouth manners and appearance of those rustics’ (Essex Vidal 1820: 89).

[3] Crioulo in Brazil, costeño and morochuco in Peru, corralero in Chile, and llanero in Venezuela.

[4] Other games on horseback included the sortija, in which gauchos tried to stick a thin cane through a tiny ring while riding their mount at full speed, and tug-of-war between two or more riders.

[5] From Ballinacarrigy, a town on the Royal Canal in the parish of Kilbixy, County Westmeath. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young Irish farmers and labourers emigrated from Ballinacarrigy and its environs to Argentina in the mid-nineteenth century.

[6] Steeplechase is a horse race (originally with a steeple as the goal) across the countryside or on a racecourse with ditches, hedges, and other obstacles to jump.

[7] The race course at La Plata was inaugurated on 14 September 1884 with an attendance of 4,000 persons. Casey’s fillies won the two opening races ‘Premio Inauguración’ and ‘Gran Premio Ciudad de La Plata’. The current ‘Premio Eduardo Casey’ is an important clásico, celebrated every year at La Plata race course (1,400 metres, reserved for horses aged five or more years who have won at least three races).

References

- *Anastasia Joyce Collection*, letters by John Murphy of Salto. Society for Irish Latin American Studies, Manuscripts and Rare Books Collection, Universidad de San Andrés, Biblioteca Max von Buch. Website (<http://biblioteca.udes.edu.ar/colecciones/britanica/Joyce/index.htm>), cited 18 January 2008.
- Brown, Matthew, *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries, and the Birth of New Nations* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2006).
- Bulfin, William, *Tales of the Pampas* (Buenos Aires: L.O.L.A., 1997). First edition by Fisher Unwin (London, 1900).
- Caldcleugh, Alexander, *Travels in South America, during the years 1819 - 20 - 21: etc.* (London: John Murray, 1825). Two vols.
- Davis, Graham, *Land! Irish Pioneers in Mexican and Revolutionary Texas* (Texas A&M University Press, 2002).
- Essex Vidal, Emeric, *Picturesque Illustrations of Buenos Ayres and Montevideo consisting of twenty-four views, etc.* (London: R. Ackerman, 1820). Reprint (Buenos Aires: Mitchell’s English Bookstore, 1944).
- Hanon, Maxine, *Diccionario de Británicos en Buenos Aires (primera época)* (Buenos Aires: author’s edition, 2005).
- Hudson, William Henry, *The Naturalist in La Plata* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1922).
- Jones, Tom B., *South America Rediscovered* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1949).
- *Kilbeggan Races*, website (<http://www.kilbegganraces.com/>). Cited 12 December 2007.
- Macnie, J., *Work and Play in the Argentine* (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1925).
- Murray, Thomas. *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1919).
- Slatta, Richard W., *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier* (Lincoln NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1992).