

## **The Irish Struggle for Freedom as Seen from the Pampas The formation of the Irish Free State and the Perception of the Irish-Argentine Community (1916-1922)**

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*- A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.  
- By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation  
for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.  
So of course everyone had the laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:  
- Or also living in different places.*

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

On 28 July 2005, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) publicly announced its official abandonment of the armed method of providing a solution to the conflicts of Northern Ireland. From that moment on, the struggle was confined to the political sphere and both the IRA and Sinn Féin placed the quest for their objectives in the hands of diplomacy.

With this historic event, the sword was laid down in order to define the destiny of a nation with the pen. Almost nine decades earlier, a group of republican nationalists raised the sword in order to attempt to liberate the Irish nation from the English yoke. The fire set at Easter 1916 burned for five years, years marked by violence and political struggle. In 1921 the flames seemed to be extinguished by the Anglo-Irish Treaty. On that occasion, the pen sought to put an end to a conflict that had been going on for centuries. However, the treaty did not result in a definitive solution for the Irish nation, and many more sons of the island had to give their lives in search of a definitive peace.

They were not only united by the political connections, which for centuries had been associated with the subjection of Ireland to British power, but also since 1801 the two islands had been united under the same crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. There was also a very strong link in terms of identity as a consequence of this political union. Although it is true that many

Irish people rejected their belonging to the British Kingdom and had a nationalist vision that longed for the liberty and independence of the 'Emerald Isle', there were also a certain number of people born on that island who did not see a contradiction between British and Irish identity. A proof of this is the large number of Irish people, British citizens, who enlisted in the army or had professional and academic careers on English soil.

Therefore, as Kee argues in the second chapter of *The Green Flag*, 'Contradictions of Irish nationality', some arguments put forward by Irish nationalists tend to reinforce the idea of the existence of two totally antagonistic nations, that one of them was historically oppressed by the other and as a consequence of this all Irish problems were the result of English tyranny. This idea is perhaps far removed from a more objective view. Irish dependence on England obviously cannot be disconnected from the colonialist and imperialist condition of the British power, but neither can it be denied that in any type of political domination by one State over another nation, a series of relationships of imposition-acceptance come into play. This applies to the section of the oppressed society who obtain advantages by virtue of the characteristics of the political arena.

For the period 1916-1921, during which the confrontation between the Irish faction and the British forces was open and hostile, there were

also contradictions at the heart of Irish 'nationality', if by that we understand people born within the borders of the island. They are visible in the course of the conflicts, whether they were armed combats or the political-electoral struggle. Although the nationalist republican faction enjoyed a great consensus among the population, there were also people who saw their action with reticence.

The internal divisions within the Irish revolutionary group, inevitably resulting from its ideological heterogeneity, came to light in the year 1923 during the civil war. During this war the factions who disagreed on what had been agreed in the Anglo-Irish Treaty came into conflict. At this opportunity, the scant returns that politics sometimes provides were the motive for the bloodshed that stained the same soil that had given life to all of those who fell in that battle.

Therefore the contradictions that result from the crossing of distinct concrete interests, whether they are political or economic, become more confused when the question of identity comes into play. We have seen how the very firm assumption of Irish nationality among one sector of that country did not prevent it being more diffuse among another societal group. And it was even possible for someone to feel a very strong love for their native land but at the same time not see any contradiction in belonging to the British Crown.

Consequently, if it was possible for these contradictions to occur on the same island of Ireland, it is not surprising that they took place overseas. It should be taken into account that as a consequence of the massive Irish emigration to various parts of the planet, there were communities of Irish people and their descendents in various places. They conserved many characteristics particular to their country of origin, such as the survival of their traditions (folklore, sport, religious festivals, and so on), language, and also the political ideals of the land that they left behind. However, it should be clarified that as much as the community of residents of the same origin were endogamous and as strong as the ties that united the Irish immigrants were, they were never homogenous groups. One could find individuals from

different social strata, diverse political ideas and even markedly different identities.

In the case of Irish immigration to Argentina (Sabato and Korol, 1981), this took place mostly during the nineteenth century, with a very high proportion associated with the great famine in mid-century as a consequence of a crisis in the production of potatoes. The counties that provided the greatest number of migrants were Westmeath, Longford, Wexford and also residents of large cities such as Dublin or Cork. In the formation of the community of Irish-Argentines, the traditional model of migratory chains was followed, according to which an initial group of foreigners who settle in one place inspire and facilitate the arrival of new contingents of compatriots who tend to be relatives or connected through friendship.

For the period under study, the community of Irish people in Argentina and their descendents formed a great family of around 110,000 people. They were mostly settled in rural areas (some 80,000), as the main attraction was sheep-breeding as a consequence of the expansion of economic activity associated with wool. According to the authors mentioned above, the community went through a period of consolidation between the mid-nineteenth century and 1870, while the final quarter of the year saw the stabilisation of the Irish as a group. Therefore, during the years of the Irish independence struggle, the community in Argentina had already been consolidated for a number of decades and as a result it comprised people born in Ireland and their descendents of the second and third generation. It should also be highlighted that the group was no longer so strongly associated with rural areas, as, even though the bulk of the members lived in the countryside, a large number had migrated to the cities and had dedicated themselves to other tasks that were not related to sheep-breeding.

In relation to the integration of the community into the rest of Argentine society, it is clear that this was a slow process. Initially the immigrants from the island kept themselves practically isolated from native people and only maintained the few links with Argentines that were required for the wool industry. There were many differences - starting obviously with that of

language - in relation to the customs and traditions of people from Ireland and the local inhabitants. However, as the community began to open up, they began to integrate with the rest of society. Mobility towards the cities and exogamous marriages facilitated this process. The Irish race made numerous contributions to the receiving society, mainly related to the educational field.

Although we have seen that the Irish-Argentine community was formed by migratory chains and as a consequence of this there were strong links between its members, this does not mean that it was of a homogenous character. Despite the fact that they had numerous factors to suggest this, such as: the same language, generally the same religion, the fact that they shared identical traditions, in many cases coming from the same part of Ireland, undertaking similar professions and economic activity; it should also be pointed out that we cannot speak of a harmonious whole.

One of the most important factors to be highlighted as the cause for differentiation is the question of identity. As Edmundo Murray comments, the Irish arrived in Argentina as British citizens and entered into a circuit that connected Argentina to the United Kingdom as a nexus in the wool trade (Murray 2004). Therefore this is the moment at which it is most convenient to refer to the sectoral and even individual level within the community. This is because speaking of 'the Irish' can in many cases lead to ambiguity. As we have observed, in Ireland itself, if national identity was not completely defined and widespread, then in the faraway Argentine Pampas it would be difficult to find everything well-rooted. Although it is true that there were a considerable number of immigrants with a strong Irish national consciousness, there were people who had been born in Ireland and had arrived in Argentina who considered themselves to be, and felt, British. There were others who simply kept a memory of a land that had given birth to them but the vicissitudes of life had distanced them from it and they started to feel like Argentines. As Murray maintains, identities are not static but in continuous flux.

If, as we have observed, diversity and sometimes ambiguity in relation to identities lead to the necessity to talk about individual histories, it would be very difficult to reach general conclusions and one would be obliged to undertake biographical work on each immigrant in order to find out what was their true identity. Nevertheless, people who think and feel the same way tend to unite and form associations, to get together to celebrate and to debate and may even publish their ideas in journals or newsletters. As Hilda Sabato affirms, within the groups of immigrants, a common feature during the last third of the nineteenth century was to have media for spreading their ideas. A large quantity of newspapers and periodical publications of immigrant origin circulated in Argentina, vocalising the thinking of every group and their political ideas, whether these were about the country of origin or the Argentine reality (Sabato 1998).

The two most important newspapers of Irish origin published in Argentina during the period under study were *The Southern Cross* and *The Standard*. The first of these was created in 1875 and became the loyal and principal organ of the ideas of the Irish community. Its first director was Patrick Dillon and one of his successors, William Bulfin, was one of those charged with inculcating an Irish nationalist sentiment in the Irish-Argentines. During the period under study the director of the publication was Gerald Foley and it was a weekly.

The newspaper *The Standard* emerged in 1861. Its founder was Michael Mulhall, and Michael Duggan collaborated in the publication, an influential member of the Irish community. For the period under study, the director of the publication was John Mulhall. Because of this origin, the newspaper was directed at all English-speaking readers, so that the Irish did not consider it an organ of their community and the attitude of the publication was pro-British.

The ideology of each publication can be clearly understood in the pages dedicated to the specific events that we deal with in this article. If we begin with the Easter Rising of 1916, we can observe that it was a historical fact that for some authors contributed little to the struggle for Irish independence (Fitzpatrick 1992), while

it was understood by the readers of the *Southern Cross* as the defining milestone of Irish freedom. And in the case of the *Standard* the rising was condemned as undertaken by a group of fanatical 'rebels'.

However, we will begin by relating some details about the Easter Rising. From 1915, a rebellion was being organised by a military council of the 'Irish Republican Brotherhood' movement, in order to break ties with the English government and establish a republic, taking advantage of the fact that Great Britain's forces were concentrated on the Great War. The group had the support of other organisations such as the 'Irish Citizen Army' led by the socialist James Connolly. The combined movement was presided over by the writer Pádraic Pearse. The supply of weapons was provided by Roger Casement, who obtained them from the main enemy of the British at that moment, Germany. However, the ship that was transporting them to Ireland was detained by English forces. Casement was taken prisoner and months later tried, sentenced and executed for high treason.

The rising planned for Easter Sunday was postponed one day and took place on 24 April 1916. The revolutionary group occupied the General Post Office and other strategic locations in the Irish capital. There was also a limited level of support from the interior of the country - Wexford, Galway and Cork. They then raised the tricolour flag, the symbol of the republican group, and read a proclamation that established the creation of a republic.

There were a great number of victims including civilians, revolutionaries and British people. In the beginning the rising did not have the support of the population of Dublin, but as soon as martial law was declared and there were executions of the rebel group, popular sentiment was re-orientated towards repudiation of English repression. On 29 April, they surrendered unconditionally.

How did the Irish-Argentines perceive this event? The pages of the two newspapers provide us with different views. In the case of the *Southern Cross*, there was fervent support for the revolutionary group and very strong criticism of the English government. For its part, the

*Standard* considered the 'sinnfeiners' (the newspaper included in that movement the entire revolutionary group, although they were much more heterogeneous) as a group of rebels.

In the *Southern Cross*, very detailed information was provided to the members of the community, clarifying in many cases the misinformation that the rest of the press carried in respect of the events. Entire articles were included in the publication from North American publications which better evaded the censorship that the British government imposed upon information channels. From the editorials of the newspaper, there were criticisms of the local newspapers such as *La Prensa* and *La Nación*, which, due to their attitude and incorrect information filtered by English censorship, provided erroneous information.

Not only did the editorials of the *Southern Cross* contain commentary with support for the revolutionary group, but also a large number of readers' letters were published from members of the community who declared themselves in favour of the rebels. A clear example of these is the short letter cited here:

*'Irish from Argentina, men and women, Argentine born and Irish born, let us show whom it may concern, that we are proud of those brave men who gave up their lives for the old motherland although they had little chance of success. We are proud of them and of the cause for which they have fought and died, and for which our forefathers fought and died generation after generation. Ever yours. P M. Kelly.'*

Brief telegrams were also published, such as the following, from Junín:

*'Honour to the noble Irish who have died fighting the enemies and traitors of their race. J L Mackinson' (1).*

As we have seen, the republican movement led by Pearse and the group of men who gave their lives for Ireland were supported and honoured from Argentina by the readers who were members of the community. Nevertheless, and the respect of the *Southern Cross* for freedom of the press should be highlighted, it also published opinions opposed to the ideology of the newspaper. Some members of the

community were opposed to the revolutionary movement and wrote maintaining that the rebels were traitors who had taken the city by force, interfering in the peace of the residents of Dublin. This type of commentary was closer to the first sentiment of the inhabitants of the Irish capital. However, as we have seen, popular sentiment shifted as a consequence of the severe British repression. In Argentina in relation to that bloody episode, the *Southern Cross* wrote:

*'A feeling of intense horror and indignation has been produced in the Irish Argentine community by the vengeful brutality of general Maxwell in dealing with the brave insurgents who have proved that patriotism and heroism are still alive in Ireland (...) we hold up our heads with pride for the martyrs of 1916 have shed the luster of new glory on their country and have vindicated their race.'*

Another way of expressing the support of a section of the Irish community for the republican movement was the holding of religious ceremonies in honour of the victims of the Easter Rising. As Kee has pointed out, masses in honour of those who had fallen in the struggle for independence were a form of public political demonstration in support of the republican ideals (Kee 1972: 587). In various locations in Argentina where the Irish presence was very strong, a great number of religious ceremonies were celebrated for those who gave their lives for their nation.

In the same way, also in the pages of the *Southern Cross* there were lists of the people who cooperated economically with the victims of the rising and their families. The collection was organised by the newspaper. There were many contributions by the members of the Irish community, ranging from considerable sums to the minimum that could be donated. Other forms of cooperation were through the organisation of events (festivals, tea parties, hurling matches) that were aimed at raising funds with the same purpose. Also support for the movement was manifested through poetry inspired by those who fought for Ireland with the title of: 'the dead who died for Ireland'.

A public demonstration of the adhesion of a section of the community to the republican movement was the appearance of tricolour flags

in the successive celebrations of Saint Patrick's Day or in the year 1920 in a demonstration on the streets of Buenos Aires by the Irish-Argentines.

Meanwhile, at the *Standard* the perception was the opposite. Proof of this is the first news items that appeared about the rising, which were interspersed with the majority of articles that were aimed at informing people about British participation in the First World War. On 25 April, the newspaper published a brief note with the title 'A stupid rumour':

*'There is great excitement here in Irish circles. A cipher message has been received in Wall street saying that a revolution has broken out in Ireland, financed with German and Irish-American money (...) Our readers will understand this to refer to the insignificant Sinn Féin movement described in other cables.'*

The newspaper considered the Sinnfeiners to be 'the parasites of the island' and insisted that Ireland was like an orphan that could not govern itself. On the support for Sinn Féin, it wrote:

*'the loyalty of the Irish nationalist volunteers proves that the Sinn Féin organization (...) has no backing in the country (...) It is therefore hoped that the movement will be rapidly extinguished'*

*'the anger of the loyal Irish against the rebels is much more marked than that of the English'*

*'The object of the National Council is the re-establishment of the independence of Ireland' and the newspaper stated 'That the policy of the Sinn Féin Party was a decidedly suicidal one and contrary to the best interests of Ireland, it is self evident, as the masses of the people stood aside and never sanctioned the insane object of the organization'.*

In reference to the repression and the executions the *Standard* said: 'rebels are being ground, general Maxwell has the situation well controlled' and on the execution of Casement: 'Roger Casement, all must admit, has deserved death.'

With these types of sentences the pro-British position of the newspaper can be clearly perceived; in contrast to the *Southern Cross*, it

refused to publish articles with opinions opposed to its own, such as a reader's letter entitled 'Ireland's Heroic Dead', which was censored for its nationalist content.

Other examples of the attitude of the *Standard* are the readers' letters that complain about the low level of Irish participation in the World War. In the case of the collections that were made by the newspaper's initiative, they were for the relatives of the British soldiers killed in the European battle.

Other commentaries that allow us to perceive the support by a section of the community for the Irish republican movement make reference to the political struggle. In this case, they were in relation to the general elections in December 1918 in which Sinn Féin obtained a very significant proportion of the votes. The *Southern Cross* wrote:

*'We foretold the victory of Sinn Fein, but we frankly admit that we did not anticipate such a sweeping triumph. Seventy-three seats won by the great men (...) who are defenders of liberty, democracy and the small nations. They stand for civilization, for self-determination, for the freedom of the world, especially, of course, for the freedom of Ireland.'*

One of the events that caused great happiness and was received with enthusiasm by the Irish community in Argentina was the declaration of independence and the Proclamation of the Republic. On this, the *Southern Cross* published:

*'January 21st, 1919 will be a memorable day in Irish history. On that day the representatives of the vast majority of the Irish people met in the Mansion House, Dublin, and in exercise of their inalienable rights, solemnly declared the independence of Ireland.'*

In 1921, Laurence Ginnell arrived in Argentina as a representative of the Republic of Ireland. The envoy of the Irish Government had the objective of collecting funds to sustain the new State and to finance the struggle against the British forces. The funds that he succeeded in collecting did not satisfy initial expectations.

In the town of Venado Tuerto, after the Irish community of that town had exclaimed: 'Long live the envoy of Ireland, long live Mrs. Ginnell,

long live the republic of Ireland!' (2), the diplomatic representative addressed them with the following words:

*'By your distance from Ireland, by England's complete command of all ocean cables, by her rigorous military censorship and by her power over the press, even in this country, you have been prevented from hearing how England trotted our declaration of independence, and consequently prevented you from strengthening the hands of your kindred in the motherland, or even realizing how much they needed strengthening.'*

Throughout the entire mission, in which he traversed numerous locations where there were Irish communities, Ginnell stressed the necessity to organise the community, to reinforce its love for the nation that gave birth to them and to deepen the knowledge of the community of what had occurred in Ireland. Ginnell undertook this work together with Eamon Bulfin, who had first been sent by the Government of Ireland and had participated in the Easter Rebellion. With the intention of organising the communities of Irish in Argentina, the first Congress of the Irish Race in South America took place.

While in the *Southern Cross* this mission was followed step by step, the *Standard* published one single note entitled 'A Curious Mission':

*'Great Britain is still Argentina's best client, as she is Ireland's best client. Argentina will not forfeit the friendship of England by recognizing an Irish envoy, although by doing so she will win the sympathy of a non-existing republic.'*

With these words the opposition of the newspaper to the creation of an Irish Republic independent of Great Britain is clear. There are no doubts about this when another article affirms: 'The Irish republic is an illusion unreachable'. In the first quote one can also observe what was one of the main motives for that opposition. Argentina was one of the most important trading partners of Great Britain, therefore it was not convenient to lose British sympathy because of support for the Irish cause.

The newspaper's disagreement with the republican movement had its origin in the

conception that that movement was not popular in Ireland. The newspaper maintained:

*'But the extremists are not the people of Ireland, the heart of Ireland recognized in the royal message something with which it could sympathize'.*

Therefore, for the *Standard* the republican cause was not just and the Anglo-Irish conflict was not seen as a war for the independence of a nation, but rather as sedition by a minority group that did not have the backing of the Irish people.

Two very distinct, antagonistic views - how is this possible? The only reason that explains this is the heterogeneity of the Irish community. If on the same island where the events were taking place there was no unanimity about the republican cause, in Argentina it could not be expected that there was total support for it. Although what Joyce has Bloom say is true, that

is that a nation is more than the people who are born in the same territory and can include people who are outside of it, this does not mean that all those who are born in the same geographical unit feel part of the same nation. As has been demonstrated in this article, there was a group of Irish-Argentines who had a very strong nationalist identity and who therefore supported the cause of independence. However, at the same time there were other people who originated from Ireland and settled in Argentina who perhaps never had that 'Irish' identity or lost it due to their new identity. They were indifferent as to what happened in Ireland or even saw what was happening in a negative light as it could affect their interests.

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### Notes

1 "Honor a los nobles irlandeses que acaban de morir combatiendo los enemigos y traidores de su raza."

2 "Viva el enviado de Irlanda, viva la señora de Ginnell, viva la república de Irlanda".

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