

## **Santiago FitzSimon: Promoting Technical Education in Argentina**

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### **Abstract**

*The influx of migrants from Ireland into the Argentine Confederation began in the 1840s as Ireland was experiencing a considerable agricultural crisis. The Great Famine led its rural population to migrate to towns and cities and abroad. According to Juan Carlos Korol and Hilda Sabato, this migration had all of the characteristics of a massive exodus. The Irish settlers were driven as much by hunger and poverty as by their yearning to make their fortunes in the Southern Cone. For them, Argentina was a land of promise, albeit a faraway one. A large proportion of the Irish immigrants gravitated toward rural agricultural production as farm workers and many later became part of the expanding Argentine rural bourgeoisie (Korol and Sabato 1981). Although the majority of Irish immigrants dedicated themselves to the agricultural field, an important group chose instead to work in education. Some founded scholarly institutions while others took up jobs in the emerging Argentine State sector - this article examines the latter group. Santiago FitzSimon worked in the Argentine public educational sector. He approached his work with a pioneering spirit in several educational fields. He is responsible for the inclusion of technical, commercial and physical education in national schoolbooks. What follows is a review of Santiago FitzSimon's working life and his contributions to the ontology of the Argentine education system.*

### **Santiago FitzSimon and Technical Education**

The educator Santiago (born James) FitzSimon was born in Ennis, in County Clare, Ireland, on 15 April 1849. His father, who also worked in the educational sector, was the lawyer Patrick FitzSimon. The latter arrived in Buenos Aires on 12 October 1862, and settled in the town of Lobos (province of Buenos Aires) with his wife Bidelia Kelly and their children.

In the district of Lobos, his father founded the Irish College (where Santiago himself studied). In 1867, Santiago began his teaching studies, first at the Paraná School and later at the National School of Corrientes. In the latter school President Domingo F. Sarmiento, appointed Patrick FitzSimon as rector. Besides this, Patrick FitzSimon was also professor of history and of mathematics. Santiago's first forays into the teaching world followed in his father's footsteps, who had also had a distinguished career in Argentine education. As such, when Patrick FitzSimon died of yellow fever in 1871, his son was appointed rector in the same school to replace him. It was in this first position that Santiago FitzSimon began to excel in his educational pursuits, developing a

reputation as a virtuous, simple and austere man.

From the earliest phases in Argentine nation-building, the construction of the educational system was much debated. In dispute was the direction that the nation should take in developing public education. A large debate developed over the relative roles of moral and scientific education, the subject of much discourse among Argentine intellectuals at the time. One of the main proponents of a technical-practical orientation was Juan Bautista Alberdi (1), who considered that this strategy would present a unique opportunity to counter the country's underdevelopment. Alberdi argued for an educational system based on the arts and on the sciences supporting industry. By basing the system on these pillars he hoped that the knowledge thus disseminated could offer immediate and concrete benefits.

Although the activities of Santiago FitzSimon post-date Alberdi's writings, his activities in the educational sector closely parallel this jurist's writings. Under the Presidency of José Evaristo Uriburu (1895-1898) the Minister of Justice and Public Instruction Antonio Bermejo entrusted to FitzSimon the direction of the Industrial

School of the Nation, later better known as the Otto Krause School.

Before founding that industrial educational establishment, FitzSimon was part of the group commissioned to set out their ideas on technical education, by evaluating the relative benefits offered by this form of education. Furthermore they were asked to formulate a programme by which this form of education could be incorporated into the school system. The advantages of incorporating manual labour skills were such that the commission presided over by FitzSimon considered the possibility of beginning this educational activity at the primary level. According to FitzSimon, labour-orientated education should be adapted to the requirements of educating all subjects.

The Irish educator claimed that children showed a natural tendency towards manual labour. This inclination, demonstrated by their love of games, was for FitzSimon an indication of the advantages that could be gained by the adoption of a rational plan for labour-orientated education. As a result of this report presented by FitzSimon and his fellow commissioners, the President of the Republic decreed on 2 May 1895, in the capital Buenos Aires that a workshop be created in manual education. This new establishment would have as its aim the preparation of teachers in the skills of manual education. Again FitzSimon was commissioned to develop this new institution for which he resigned his position of director of the National School of Commerce. One of his responsibilities was the search for a suitable building in which to carry out these activities and the preparation of the budget for the necessary equipment for its launch.

The curriculum for the Normal School of Teachers of the Capital was to be based mainly on the Swedish system *Slojd* (meaning manual labour or small industry). According to feedback from the teachers who had applied that system, it was the best among the proven systems (FitzSimon and Pizzurno 1896). Undoubtedly Santiago FitzSimon believed that the best way to educate children was manually. With such a methodology it was specifically hoped that the child's ability for manual labour

would be developed. By building up the muscular tone of the bodies of the children it was assumed that the child would be convinced that order and exactitude were essential requirements for a future in which they would excel and prosper. The aspirations for education in manual work were such that it was postulated that it might awaken in the pupil the praxis and even love for manual labour, and that it would promote spontaneity and originality. Manual education was much more than the mere preparation of the child for the workforce; it also entailed aspects which were designed to awaken a taste for the aesthetic and to stimulate the imagination, without leading the child astray.

Years later, having implemented courses for manual labour in Argentine schools, FitzSimon was sent to the United States of America and to Europe to acquire new study materials and to contract teachers to give classes in Argentine schools. This intention was never realised, as FitzSimon considered that Argentina already had an adequate supply of educated teachers to develop this education. As part of this study trip, FitzSimon visited the city of London so as to inform his Government as to the characteristics of their local educational systems. Having visited numerous primary, secondary, normal, technical and commercial schools in London, FitzSimon emphasised and applauded the industrial tendency of the London colleges, and also the excellent organisation demonstrated in the city's education system. He lamented the fact that the Argentine schools did not follow this same path (FitzSimon 1903-1904).

As to the Argentine system, FitzSimon drew attention to the lack of certain subjects in the curricula such as the lack of physics and chemistry. Although the state of national labour education presented challenges, he approved of the fact that the new curriculum of the Minister Juan Fernández allocated six hours to sciences and hoped that those hours would indeed be used in that manner. However, for FitzSimon the fact that students received sufficient hours of laboratory and workshop experience was the exclusive responsibility of the principals of the

schools, because both teachers and students in Argentina demonstrated a great capacity to bring this to fruition.

### **Other Spheres of Activity**

Santiago FitzSimon held positions in public service, spanning several Government administrations. Besides being responsible for the foundation of labour education in Argentine schools under the second Presidency of Julio A. Roca (1898-1904), the educator was responsible for reorganising young men's correctional establishments. His work influenced the foundation in 1904 of Marcos Paz, a model institution for abandoned children (Albornoz u/d).

FitzSimon's demonstrable competence in the field won him the confidence of several Ministers of Education who called on him for various tasks. During the administration of José Figueroa Alcorta (1906-1910) FitzSimon performed the functions of Chief Inspector for Secondary Education while continuing in the role of Director of the School of Commerce (2).

FitzSimon conducted several reforms to modernise the School of Commerce. He changed the curricula and educational methodologies. Besides technical education, the Irish educator was a great promoter of commercial education. Towards end of the nineteenth century, and even more so in the early years of the twentieth century, industrial production in Argentina experienced considerable growth. FitzSimon hoped that the education imparted in these institutions would further the needs of industry. Technical and commercial schools were redirected to the preparation of children and teenagers for the working world. With signs of economic growth and material progress, numerous commercial schools were opened throughout Argentina. FitzSimon was tasked with their foundation and their organisation. One of the more important and prestigious commercial schools, the above-mentioned School of Commerce was put under the direction of FitzSimon.

Apart from technical and commercial education, Santiago FitzSimon was also an innovator in physical education. At the Corrientes National School, which he directed from the death of his father, he contracted Professor Thomas C. T. Reeve in 1888 to give classes in physical exercise. This teacher had undertaken his studies at the University of Cambridge, England. In the Corrientes National School, under the auspices of FitzSimon, Reeve practised the first outdoor games with his students in much the same way as in English schools at the time.

The introduction of physical education (started by FitzSimon when he was principal of the Corrientes National School) was repeated when he held the position of Chief Inspector of Public Instruction, with the support of Minister of Education Juan Balestra. Physical exercise, especially in athletics and soccer, was incorporated into the curricula of all national schools.

It is interesting to note that besides his public functions, FitzSimon developed various activities in different aspects of national culture: he was a member of the National Committee of Boy Scouts in Argentina, and was for many years the head of the English Literary Society. He organised the Library of the Corrientes National School, and in addition founded the Buenos Aires Popular Library.

The figure of Santiago FitzSimon was a favourite among the national political leadership, especially those connected with education, as is evident in the speeches of various civil servants on the occasion of his death on 22 August 1925. During his funeral, the Argentine jurist José Leon Suárez delivered a speech emphasising his austerity, simplicity and virtues (Cutolo 1985).

Like many Irish founders of Argentine schools, Santiago FitzSimon contributed to improving the education service and he also engaged in public service. His reports on labour-orientated education led directly to the development of technical education in Argentina, rapidly developing throughout the twentieth century. His contributions to the Argentine education

system in the fields of technical, commercial, and physical instruction bear witness to the modernising spirit of the Irish educator. He developed a remarkable career in public service, starting as the rector of the Corrientes National School and reaching its peak in his highest

position: General Inspector for Secondary Education.

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## Notes

1 Juan Bautista Alberdi was an Argentine intellectual, who with his best-known work *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina* provided inspiration for the Argentine Constitution of 1853.

2 Translator's note: Escuela Superior de Comercio, a secondary level school now administered by the University of Buenos Aires and known as Escuela Superior de Comercio Carlos Pellegrini. Website: <http://www.cpel.uba.ar/> (accessed 13 March 2009).

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