

Interpreting history in Eduardo Cormick's *Entre gringos y criollos*

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The Argentine writer Eduardo Cormick was born in Junín (province of Buenos Aires) in 1956. His family roots go back to a long line of Irish migrants, mainly from Co. Westmeath and Longford, who emigrated to Argentina throughout the nineteenth-century. He has received various awards for his novels and short stories, most of which explore the subject of the Irish diaspora in Argentina. In this article I will discuss the short story *El Padre Victor da batalla* – which belongs to the collection *Entre Gringos y Criollos* (2006) – taking into account the historical, cultural, and linguistic background in which the story is set, and paying particular attention to the social customs of the Irish diaspora. For example I will focus around themes such as the linguistic peculiarities of River Plate Spanish; farm labour (mainly on *estancias*) in the Buenos Aires; cultural aspects related to food and drink; and the interface between the Irish diaspora and the Argentine gaucho. The term transculturation will remain central to my discussion.

El Padre Victor da batalla narrates the series of events that take place during the visit of an Irish priest to a family of Irish migrants who live in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The social and religious role of Irish Roman Catholic priests consisted of regular visits to the 'estancias' or 'chacras' to attend their parishioners scattered throughout inland Argentina.

In the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (3), the word *gringo* is defined as: 'Extranjero, especialmente de habla inglesa, y en general hablante de una lengua que no sea la española./Persona rubia y de tez blanca; (Foreigner, especially one who speaks English, and generally a speaker of a language that is not Spanish/ · a fair-haired person with a white complexion). The term *criollo* is defined as: 'Dicho de una persona nacida en un país hispanoamericano, para resaltar que posee las

cualidades estimadas como características de aquel país./Auctóctono, propio, distintivo de un país hispanoamericano./Peculiar, propio de Hispanoamérica'; (Person born in a Hispano-American country, someone who possesses the qualities considered as characteristics of that country/ Indigenous, typical, distinctive of a Hispano-American country/ Peculiar to or typical of Hispano-America).

Cormick uses the title of his book *Entre Gringos y Criollos* with a double meaning. On the one hand it reflects the definitions of the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* in that Cormick writes stories where the protagonists are either gringos (of Irish descent) or criollos (native people). On the other hand, his title also conveys a mixture of both terms thus bringing into mind the concept of transculturation. For Cormick, Irish immigrants maintained their own traditions and public image (religion, food, family conventions and physical appearance), which identified them as gringos, but at the same time they adopted traditions and customs of the country where they lived, mainly those of the gauchos (such as dress, horse riding, the ability to work a type of terrain that was different to those of their native land), which in a way certainly converted them into criollos. As Mary Louise Pratt writes, 'in a way unimaginable in Europe, the arbiters of culture in the emergent Argentine metropolis seized on gaucho culture as the source of authenticity' (Pratt 1992: p. 187). In this light, there is even the possibility that the title *Entre gringos y criollos*, could have been changed to two different titles depending on the two possible options.

1. *Stories of gringos and criollos that live in Argentina.*
2. *Stories of Argentineans who are part gringo and part criollo.*

In the prologue of the book *Entre gringos y criollos*, Cormick writes:

'The family stories combine with the general story of the cities, they grow, they get distorted and when they are told, they are still not the general story, nor the truth, but they are versions of the truth' (4) (Cormick 2006: p. 7) (5)

El padre Victor de batalla is Cormick's own version of a story that is repeatedly told in different places, with slight changes depending on the storyteller. This narrative shows the role and the importance of the Irish priests in various situations, including the situations of confrontation between good and evil, such as this case with Father Victor O Carrollan.

The priests constituted a strong religious institution for all the Irish immigrants dotted along the countryside, in villages or small cities, on farms both large and small, all across the Pampas. These priests travelled to help their parish, celebrate Sunday mass, give the sacrament of the Holy Communion, baptise, marry, and bless land-holdings (6). Generally these celebrations occurred at periods when work with livestock was lighter. On a few occasions they had to carry out another type of duty, as it happened in this story, where Father Víctor had to perform an exorcism.

Patrick McKenna writes that: "The first to organize the Irish were the merchants. They were joined by the middle of the century by the wealthy migrants. These groups exercised strict control over the poorer migrants to ensure an adequate supply of reliable labour. The Irish Catholic Church was to play a central role in the process [...] the Irish were allowed to retain their own chaplain [...] in the beginning the chaplain remained in the city and confined his work to spiritual duties" (McKenna 1997: 188-9). McKenna continues showing us the importance that the Irish priests had in the Irish diaspora:

When Fr Anthony Fahy arrived in Argentina as chaplain to the Irish emigrants [...] he set about organizing the community in such a way that they were to remain a separate Irish colony, isolated socially and culturally from the rest of the population [...] Fahy saw his duty as "protecting" his congregation from the influence of the "natives", whose way of life did not conform to the Irish

Catholic ethos of the nineteenth century. To maintain this isolation [...] the cultural and ethnic difference was emphasized to the point of racism. The maintenance of English [...] was a central element in preventing assimilation [...] the majority of the migrants, by mid-century, learned little if any Spanish, and they certainly could not read it' (7) (McKenna 1997: p. 188-9).

The use of English as we can read in McKenna's transcription was used to maintain the separation of the Irish community from other groups of immigrants or natives, to keep them marginalised and in a certain way, controlled. The majority of the Irish Immigrants and their descendents in the middle of the nineteenth-century knew very little or no Castilian (8), and they certainly could not read it. For Tim Pat Coogan, father Fahy created ghettos of the mind, "[I] thought they were on the pampas, their mind-set was that of a ghetto, they tended not to have their children taught Spanish, but strove to maintain their Irish identity" (Coogan 2000: p. 630).

We can see examples of this in the story *El Padre Victor da batalla*, when we read that Father Víctor 'greeted the family with "God bless all!" in English' (Cormick 2006: p. 15) (9): and also when the family members are mentioned, they all bear English Christian names: Pat, Maggie, Mary, Ruth, Micky and Bilyln (10).

Here it is worth mentioning the difference in the way the priest addresses himself to the foreman Manuel Costa, 'in Castilian, with a *criollo* accent' (Cormick 2006: p. 15) (11), and also the confirmation that 'everyone spoke English, except Manuel Costa' (Cormick 2006: p. 19) (12).

Another reflection of both cultures is found when the drinks that are consumed are mentioned in this story. (13) Throughout the story, we see that the drink that is most consumed at home is tea in this case reflecting the gringo culture, but Cormick mentions the consumption of various other drinks such as *mate* or *caña* (14). In this way, a certain type of transculturation occurs when the Irish immigrants or their descendents begin to drink or eat produce typical of the land where they

now live, such as *mate*, *caña* or *asados*, products mainly consumed by the *gauchos*. This type of hybrid behaviour which amalgamates both *gringo* and *criollo* cultural habits takes us back to Ortiz's definition of transculturation. According to Spitta:

Ortiz created the neologism "transculturation" to undermine the homogenizing impact implicit in the term "acculturation" [...]. Instead, Ortiz insisted on understanding intercultural dynamics as a two-way toma y daca (give and take) [...] Ortiz defined transculturation in Cuba as a three-fold process: the partial loss of culture by each immigrant group [...], the concomitant assimilation of elements from other cultures (European, African and Asian), and finally, the creation of a new Cuban culture [...] As Ortiz explains, the child always inherits something from both parents, but is also always different from each one of them (Spitta 2006, p. 4).

At this point I would like to make a reference to the way in which some of the Irish immigrants adapted to a new way of cattle rising, and to the work carried out in these types of ranches called "estancias". For Piaras MacEinri the Irish who emigrated to Argentina were 'a group of midlands farmers and skilled and semi-skilled trades people' (McKenna 2000: 7).

In the story of 'El Padre de batalla' we read that 'It's the third time that Father Víctor has come to the house. The first [...] was to accompany Pat, who was kept busy as a shepherd in that corner of the estancia' (Cormick 2006: .16) (15). An *estancia* (16) is something similar to an American ranch, with sufficient land for cultivation and also for the livestock to graze, while a *chacra* (17), a word of Quechuan origin, denotes a much more modest farm.

The typical model of a shepherd on an *estancia* is explained by Patrick Mc Kenna (18), who argues that shepherds were helping the *estancia* owners in two ways, they 'could provide a buffer between the indigenous population and the Creole-owned *estancias*, as well as supplying those goods which the *estancieros* were unwilling to become directly involved in themselves' (McKenna 2000: 198-9). McKenna

writes that 'in fact the *estancieros* promoted such settlements to the extent that they were willing to finance the stock purchase necessary to graze the new "camps" while allowing the settler to earn equity in the stock by contributing his labour' (McKenna 2000: 198-9). This is wonderfully illustrated in the following example:

An estanciero would provide a flock of about 2,000 sheep, while the immigrant was responsible for looking after the sheep, including the provision of grazing (over a period of four to five years). At the end of the contract the shepherd and the owner would divide the flock, the owner getting back his original 2,000 sheep plus the agreed percentage of the increase (usually 50%) as well as his share of the price for the wool clip for the contract period (McKenna 2000: 198-9).

Indeed, the central role played by Irish migrants in the Argentine woollen industry is highlighted by Coogan: 'Irish ranchers were responsible for almost half of Argentina's wool exports in the 1870's' (Coogan 2000: 627). Consequently, many of the Irish immigrants came from the same region in Ireland (Longford and Westmeath) and the shepherd usually was successful in contacting relatives, neighbours or acquaintances from his Irish locality and persuaded them to emigrate to Argentina.

Tim Pat Coogan (19) writes that the Irish immigrants mainly arrived to Argentina in three different forms: as soldiers from Spain or England, as missionaries, or simply emigrants in search of work and a new life.

In Cormick's story, we see examples of the latter two cases in Father Víctor and the family that receives him, the first is a religious missionary and as Cormick mentions: 'Father Víctor was there for the second time[...] in his evangelistic mission' (Cormick 2006: 16) (20).

From this third category (emigrants), Laura Izarra writes that the 'Irish migrants were received in Buenos Aires by friends or Irish immigrants who introduced them to their community and hosted them in Irish homes and boarding houses till they found a job on various *estancias* and sheep-farms in the pampas which were owned by the Irish who had come

in the early 1840's' (Izarra 2002: 5). This way of getting jobs is reflected when Cormick writes about Manuel Costa [...] 'recommended to Father Víctor by the administrator of the farm, Irish like themselves' (Cormick 2006: 16) (21).

It is necessary to mention that not all of the Irish immigrants went to work in the countryside, such as Eduardo Cormick mentions (22), this way of thinking overlooks the existence of those thousands of Irish people who failed as priests, and had to work as servants or in other jobs, such as accountants, on the railway (like his own family) or in the coal mines. Piaras Mac Einrí mentions that for McKenna 'the Argentinean case represents an alternative model to the individualist "Anglo-American" migration experience, with a strong community based ethos driving the process of migration and a consciously separatist culture maintaining, for better or worse, a sense of diasporic identity' (McKenna 2000: 7). In this sense, it is important to return to James Clifford's definition of the term *diaspora*:

Expatriate minority communities, dispersed from an original centre to a peripheral position, maintaining a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland, that see ancestral home as a place of eventual return, whose consciousness and solidarity as a group are importantly defined by continuing their relationship with homeland, and whose collective identity is defined by this relationship (Clifford 1997: 247).

Many of these characteristics are typical of the Irish community in Argentina as I will now explain. The Irish in Argentina maintained elements of their original culture during generations, such as their food and eating habits, traditional Irish music, storytelling, Gaelic sports such as hurling, parties and accents from their regions of origin. We can see a reflection of Clifford's statement in the following examples:

Expatriate minority communities: The Irish in Argentina were a "minority community" when compared to other groups of immigrants such as the Spanish or the Italians, and they were also a minority when compared to other groups of Irish emigrants that went to other countries (for example in comparison to

the quantity of Irish who went to the United States, to England or to Australia).

Dispersed from an original centre to a peripheral position: This situation of periphery gives as much with respect to the normal routes of emigration (living far away from Ireland, and far from English speaking countries) also with respect to the act of being dispersed outside the city of Buenos Aires (23).

Maintaining a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland: we can see an example of the maintenance of memories, visions or myths of the homeland when we read that, 'on the wall of the gallery there are two pictures: St. Patrick, the patron of the house, with his bishop's investiture, banished the snakes from Ireland; McZweeny (sic), the Lord Mayor of Cork looks the world in the face before being martyred by the English' (Cormick 2006: 18-19) (24).

In the previous text we can read of the Lord Mayor of Cork, McZweeny (sic) who in reality is Terence MacSwiney. As Cormick clarified (25):

MacSwiney was elected Lord Mayor of Cork after the assassination of his predecessor, on the 20th March 1920. On 12th August, MacSwiney was arrested and commenced a hunger strike until his death, on 5th October that same year. This event affected the Irish community in Argentina enormously. Up until a few years ago, there was a picture with his photograph in the headquarters of the Irish Thoroughbred Society in Junín. MacSwiney's hunger strike was a direct antecedent to that led by Bob (sic) Sands and his group from March of 1981 during the English Government of Mrs Thatcher.

By means of writers such as Eduardo Cormick we can rediscover the way of life of the Irish Diaspora in Argentina, mainly in his version of the 'truth', the way in which they actually lived, what they did, and where they worked. In other works, Cormick has developed a form of literature based on real-life people, such as his grandmother 'mamagrande', his father, and other members of the Irish community. Cormick's complex interpretation of the Irish diapora in Argentina offers a unique insight into the history, culture, and language of a Spanish American country.

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Notes

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3 See *Diccionario esencial de la lengua española*: Real Academia Española (Espasa Calpe: Madrid, 2006), pp.741-2; 428. All translations from the Spanish belong to Ita Dagger, Grace Marron, and Rachel Waters, unless otherwise stated.

4 ‘Las historias familiares se mezclan en la historia general de las ciudades, crecen, se distorsionan, y cuando se cuentan, ya no son la historia general, ni son verdad, pero son una versión de la verdad’ (Cormick, 2006, p.7).

5 The Spanish original goes thus: ‘Las historias familiares se mezclan en la historia general de las ciudades, crecen, se distorsionan, y cuando se cuentan, ya son la historia general, ni son verdad, pero son una versión de la verdad’.

6 Susana Taurozzi writes that ‘the religious missions in the estancias for the Irish immigrants were preferable in the time of the year when the sheep labour wasn’t at its peak [...] and were also an occasion for social activities’.

7 McKenna, Patrick, *The Irish World Wide*, Volume One, Irish Migration to Argentina, p. 77-79

8 When I refer to the Spanish Language, which is used in the English Language, I prefer to define it as Castillian, as do many Argentinians, in contrast to the word Spanish.

9 ‘saluda a los presentes con un ¡Dios los bendiga! dicho en inglés’.

10 In this story the pile of names in English are a reflection of the way in which the members of the family are treated in the home or community (although their official names in Argentina were in Castillian).

11 ‘en castellano, con acento criollo’.

12 ‘Hablan todos en inglés, excepto Manuel Costa’.

13 We can read that the priest goes to drink mate with Pat and Andy(p.18), that they finish the tea and bring the caña (p.19), that Mary is preparing the tea (p.21), or the priest accepts a cup of tea (p.21).

14 La caña is a typical alcoholic Argentinean drink (mainly during the xix and xx centuries) Various types of caña exist, dry (such as la caña Ombú) or sweet (such as la Legus o Mariposa). Mate is also a typical Argentinean drink.

15 ‘Es la tercera vez que el padre Victor llega a esta casa. La primera fue para acompañar a Pat, que iba para ocuparse como puestero en ese rincón de la estancia’.

16 ESTANCIA (D.R.A.E): f.Am. Mer y Hond, A piece of land dedicated to cultivation, and more specifically to raising livestock.

17 CHACRA (D.R.A.E) (From Quechua, previously chacra, modified to chajra). 1.f.Am. Mer, Farmhouse (a working house with agricultural properties) o farm.

18 Mc Kenna, Patrick, *The Irish Diaspora*, edited by Andy Bielenberg, Irish Emigration to Argentina: A Different Model, pages 198-199.

19 Coogan, Tim Pat, *wherever Green is Worn*, The Story of the Irish Diaspora, Arrow books, 2002, ISBN 0-09-995850-3: ‘It can be said with some certainty that the Irish came to Latin America principally in three ways: via the armed services of England and Spain [...], as missionaries or –mainly in the case of Argentina- as emigrants’ (p.602)

20 ‘El padre Víctor estuvo por acá una segunda vez [...] en su misión evangelizadora’, the second Irish emigrants’. We can read an example of the emigration of a soldier in the essay Cormick wrote about

the singer and poet Buenaventura Luna, who was of Irish ancestry, descendant from an Irish soldier John Dougherty. In this essay we read that; ‘one hundred years before he was born, at the time of the English invasion at the Plata river, the soldier John Dougherty arrived as part of a battallion. With the well known result, the English troops were exiled to different provinces of the viceroyalty [...] Almost three hundred of them were sent to San Juan, John Dougherty and his brother William among them, where they arrived by December 1806 [...] In the town of Huacom beside the old mill. Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti shared his childhood with the workmen and labourours who worked for his family, he understood their ambitions and difficulties, and he took it upon himself to give voice to these sentiments, and to fight so that everyone would have a more decent life. To express these ideals, Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti adopted the name of one of the farmhands from his parental home.

21 ‘Manuel Costa, recomendado al padre Víctor por el administrador de la estancia, irlandés como ellos’). The priest, Pat and the administrator were all Irish.

22 In an email that he sent me in the summer of 2008.

23 Cormick writes: ‘after keeping moving for an hour and a half up from the dog-cart (p.15) & ‘the householders enjoyed the latest news that Father Víctor told them, above all what was happening in Buenos Aires and in the towns furthest away’ (p.19), giving us an idea of the distances between the different estancias.

24 ‘en la pared de la galería hay dos cuadros: San Patricio, el patrón de la casa con su investidura de Obispo, echa a las serpientes de irlandó; McZweeny, el alcalde de Cork, mira de frente al mundo antes de ser martirizado por los ingleses’.

25 Information obtained from the email that Eduardo Cormick sent me on the 19th of January 2008.

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