

Henry Sheridan and the beginnings of Argentine art

By Mariano Galazzi (1)

A son of Peter Sheridan, educated in England, has left the finest landscapes of S. America by any artist born in this continent' (Mulhall 1878: p. 420).

Abstract

Irish immigration contributed to Argentine development. It is well known that its members from all social classes helped in the economic progress of this new country through their role in agricultural and commercial undertakings. But references to their part in the cultural field are usually limited to initiatives in school education. In this context, it is important to point out also other aspects, like the place of Henry Sheridan (1833-1860) in the history of local fine arts.

Sheridan was an artist who died when he was still very young; he had a rich personal story and a promising career. The son of a prosperous Irish immigrant, he lived in England since he was a child, and it was in that country that he received his artistic education. His return to the River Plate was due to legal and economic problems, but thanks to this he became an important reference in the history of fine arts in Argentina.(2)

The aim of this article is to contribute to the well-deserved studies on his life and artistic work, which have not always been analysed in depth, perhaps because of his short life and his limited production.

Early years

Henry Sheridan (3) was born on 13 September 1833 in the house his family had in Ranchos, in the province of Buenos Aires. Two months later, on 12 November, he was baptised in St Andrew's Presbyterian City Church, together with his sister Elizabeth, four years older.

His father, Peter Sheridan, was born in Dublin in 1793. After his arrival in Buenos Aires in 1817, he worked as a textile merchant in partnership with his brother James (1787?-1823). In 1820 he went to England to marry Mary Butterworth. Although he had planned to run his part of the business from there, he returned in 1823, after his brother's death.

At least four sons and daughters were born and baptised in Buenos Aires: Mary (1826), Alfred (1827-1834), Elizabeth (1829) and Henry (4). Soon after his return, in 1826, Peter and his partners, John Harratt and Thomas Whitfield, bought the *estancia* that was later called *Los galpones*, in Ranchos. Sheridan was very fortunate in a subsequent division of lands. With another estate he bought later on, the new *estancia* came to be known as *Los sajones*. Apart

from his successful cattle-raising undertaking and ground-breaking innovations in sheep-rearing, Peter Sheridan was an active member in the British community in Buenos Aires.



Landscape - Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Neuquén

In 1835, Mary and four sons and daughters moved to Liverpool so that the children could be educated in England. However, Mary died soon after their arrival, and the children were left with a Mrs Postlethwaite and a Mrs Cartwright (5).

In 1838, Peter brought his nephews, James Peter (1808?-1860) and Hugh Thomas (1810?-1866), from Britain to help him to run his estates. When Peter died on 6 (or on 8) January 1844, the British consulate appointed the two brothers guardians of the property of the two heirs, Elizabeth and Henry, who still lived in England; Hugh resigned in 1847.

It is very likely that Henry had inherited his father's interest in culture. His select library in *Los sajones*, which his brother James might have started, was certainly well-known (6). Also, it was said (although it is not certain) that Peter was related to the Irish playwright and Whig politician, Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816). In this family context (and although there is no evidence that his father had seen Henry again after his departure, when he was two years old), Peter must have seen to it that his son received a good education.

It is not surprising, then, that this young man ended up with artistic inclinations. It is possible that, after his father's death, he did not feel very interested in coming back to a distant land, of which he did not keep any memories, and even less to work in the *camp*, of which he had no experience. Likely, the money his cousin regularly sent was enough for him and Elizabeth to live in comfort, as well as enabling him to make some trips to the continent.

On the 1851 census, a seventeen-year old male called 'H. Sheridan' is listed as living as a 'pupil' in the household of Thomas Banner, a curate in Lancashire (7). It seems that before coming back to the River Plate he must have taken his first steps in the local art circles: in 1857, while he lived in Whitehaven, in Cumberland, he exhibited a painting called *The Fall of the Aar, at the Handek* at the Royal Academy of Arts. The title also indicates that he might have travelled on the continent when he was young.

Return to Argentina

In that year, 1857, Henry and Elizabeth decided to return to the River Plate. Their cousin James, manager at *Los sajones*, had convinced them that they had to sell the *estancia* due to financial problems. Strangely, the buyer turned out to be

Richard B. Hughes, brother-in-law of James, who in turn bought it in 1855.

His cousins decided to return to Argentina to fight for their inheritance. Henry and his sister Elizabeth arrived in Buenos Aires on the steam packet *Camilla* on 20 October 1857.

The legal action against their cousin only ended in 1864, after the death of James and Henry. However, the latter's return to the River Plate for economic reasons had a significant effect on his artistic career.

Although it is not known how he and his sister supported themselves, it is possible that Henry continued painting, to while away his time and to try to earn some income. In any case, he could not have been very hopeful.



Belgrano Racecourse (Museo Histórico Nacional, Buenos Aires, inv. 5134.)

The Buenos Aires artistic scene

Nowhere is it easy to earn a living from art, and Buenos Aires in the middle of the nineteenth century was no exception to this rule. After almost half a century of independence, Argentina was still beset by internal conflicts and divisions. Buenos Aires, in control of customs revenues, was independent from the Argentine Confederation. National union would only be achieved after the Battle of Cepeda (1859) and, especially, after the Battle of Pavón (1861).

Nevertheless, in spite of this political instability, there was an increasing number of collectors who invested money in buying paintings or

sculptures. For this reason, it is natural that there were more artists: 'We have here a collection of good and bad artists enough to provide to the needs of the cities of London and Paris together' (8).



Landscape with hills (Private collection. Published in: Cavanagh, Cecilia Rosemary, Bloqueos al Río de la Plata en tiempos de Juan Manuel de Rosas. Buenos Aires: Educa, 2008, page 16)

Despite the abundance of artists, there was little possibility of a good artistic education or even a deeply rooted local tradition. Between the Battle of Caseros (1852) and Sheridan's arrival (1857), there is evidence only of drawing lessons at the university; lessons given by a foreign painter passing through Buenos Aires, like Monvoisin; or architecture-orientated lessons. The authorities requested a report from the vice-chancellor of the university on the creation of an artistic education academy, but it never materialised. In those years, a national exhibition was also planned, for which a committee was even appointed; but the political situation led to the project being indefinitely postponed.

In this context, Sheridan is a special case, because he was one of the first to arrive in Buenos Aires with a European artistic education. Prilidiano Pueyrredón (1823-1870) had studied in Paris and Rio de Janeiro; but that was unusual among the River Plate artists. The first students who were able to study art in Europe (with a grant awarded by the Argentine government) were Bernabé Demaría, Martín L. Boneo (1857-1863), Claudio Lastra (1858-1866) and Mariano Agrelo (1858), all of them after Sheridan's arrival, which, for this reason, was a novelty in the local arts scene.

It must be borne in mind, on the other hand, that the short painting tradition in Argentina was centred on portraits and on religious and historic scenes (the latter, especially after the Battle of Pavón). The painting of local customs and manners was on a second level, more-or-less important, but, in general, dealt with by foreign painters with a special perception for exoticism (9). Landscapes, Sheridan's forte, were still an unusual subject matter, perhaps because of the monotonous environment of the pampas.

There was no museum of fine arts (it opened in 1895), and the art galleries were, in fact, stores of varied products where paintings were offered for sale. The best known one was that of the Fusoni brothers, established by Fernando (1821-1892) and his brothers in 1855, located on Cangallo Street. Customers could buy there, among other things, naval products and ironmongery, geodesy instruments and chemical products, mirrors and wallpaper. In one of the rooms, the Fusonis displayed some items of local art. Pueyrredón, Pallière, Manzoni, Blanes, Boneo and Montero showed their work there. Almost every week the artists brought new paintings to Fusoni's.

Sheridan's artistic activity in Buenos Aires

Henry Sheridan also exhibited his works at Fusoni's. In the newspapers, there is news of an oil-painting in June 1858, a picture in September, a landscape in November, another five in December, and an indeterminate number of 'new pictures' in March of the following year. The newspaper reports usually refer to European landscapes; this might imply that Sheridan brought part of his output from Europe, or at least some sketches with which to carry on with his work.

It was in those months that Sheridan met Jean León Pallière (1823-1887). Ten years older than the artist, Pallière had been born in Rio de Janeiro and had studied in France. He visited Buenos Aires in 1848, but settled in the city only in 1855, after travelling around Italy, France, Spain and Morocco. Between March and October 1858, he visited Chile and Bolivia, passing through Cuyo and central and

northwest Argentina. After his return, he showed the fruits of his journey, some exhibited in the window of his house, and the rest he took it to Fusoni's after February 1859.

It seems that the two artists got on well. Perhaps Pallière's age and experience had some influence on the young artist. Sheridan, however, was also in an almost unknown element; he was, in fact, almost a foreigner, and probably did not speak the local language fluently. Possibly, Pallière also felt a foreigner.

In any case, they agreed to organise a joint exhibition in June, apparently the first one of its kind in Buenos Aires. Pallière and Sheridan showed, in all, sixty oil-paintings and watercolours, a huge number for what was usual in those times, and which also speaks about their productiveness.

'Messrs Pallière and Sheridan let the public know that they have opened an exhibition of oil-paintings and watercolours, San Martín Street, 126, next door to the Roma Hotel.

Open every day from 10 a. m. to 4 p. m.

On Sundays from 1 to 4 p. m.

Admission 10 pesos' (10).

The exhibition was well received by the public, and the newspapers praised it:

'In a modest room on San Martín street, next door to the Roma Hotel, sixty pictures by the two artists can be seen, paying ten pesos at the entrance. Among these sixty pictures, there are landscapes representing the sunset in the Alps, Lake Lamond [sic] in Scotland, pictures of customs and costumes, like the *porteños* in Santo Domingo, the *gaucho* in his ranch, and portraits which similarity with people of our society excuses us from mentioning their names.

'The sunset in the Alps, by Sheridan, is full of that deep and melancholic poetry exuding from all this young man's output. For us who know this nature he suffers from, and that suffering spirit, fighting with the former and with other troubles of this world, his painting is not but the portrait of his thought, when, tired out by present-day suffering, he allows his soul to

wander in the world he creates for himself, shaping nature according to his will (...).

'For those who live immersed in the material things of life, whose rushing has not completely destroyed the taste for art, a visit to the room on San Martín street is a sweet, restful moment, when another air can be breathed, when other impressions can be enjoyed and one can have a good time for half an hour' (11).



*Two men on horseback with a herd of three mules in a valley
(Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes - Buenos Aires)*

The success of the exhibition motivated Sheridan to offer painting and drawing lessons:

'With the aim of stimulating the taste for the Fine Arts in Buenos Aires, Mr Enrique [sic] Sheridan intends to establish a school of painting, if he can bring together a big enough number of amateurs, devoting one day to the fair sex. Lessons of oil-painting, watercolour and all kind of pencil drawing will be given in the said school.

Ladies and gentlemen willing to favour this undertaking may speak to Mr Sheridan, who shall give them details, and shall present the inscription list at the exhibition hall, San Martín street, 126' (12).

The following year, after his death, in a note in *La Tribuna*, a 'friend and disciple', commented indirectly on the classes the young artist gave: 'Enrique [sic] Sheridan has been for us more than a teacher; he has been the unselfish, sincere friend who has given to our soul some of the love for art that animated his; many times we have heard his intimate confidences about his artistic ambition and have received

from him treasures of knowledge that we feel unable to exploit' (13).

Sheridan's last year

The next news on the artist was in August of the following year. It is possible that during that long period of silence Sheridan had been travelling.

A trip to Montevideo with Pallière is very likely. We know about several of Pallière's trips around South America, and it would not be strange that his young colleague had gone with him. In the Museo Histórico Municipal of the *Cabildo* of Montevideo there is an oil-painting, *A View of Montevideo from Vilardebó*, attributed to both artists (14).

References to joint works by both artists are certainly frequent. Authors usually mention that Sheridan was Pallière's disciple, but they also mention that in the paintings made in collaboration, they used to divide up the work: Pallière did the figures and Sheridan the landscape, his forte. One example would be the big oil-painting *Line of Carts in the Pampa*, that might have been exhibited in June, which would be the model for the homonymous lithograph.

Some days before Sheridan's death, a reporter from *El Nacional* said that, after a long time during which his works had not been seen, a lithograph was being shown, a 'small, two-colour drawing, representing the English races, that can be seen in the window of Ure and Vignal, which is his first work of this type. Very good composition; the groups skilfully apart from one another, in spite of the confusing character the scene has in itself; easy lines; the horses well drawn; its figures full of movement; all this well deserves to attract attention' (15).

In the twentieth century, Schiaffino commented: 'Its natural composition, the sensation of a crowd the artist has achieved, and the truth and accuracy of the entertainment, they all reveal a master in that young artist who was only twenty-five years old [sic], as this drawing was made in the last year of his very short existence' (Schiaffino 1933: p. 201) (16).



View of Buenos Aires from the South (Complejo Museográfico Provincial "Enrique Udaondo" of Luján, accountable to the Instituto Cultural de la Provincia de Buenos Aires)

Apart from *Races in Belgrano*, there is another lithograph by Sheridan: *View of Buenos Aires from the South*. The statement that a few days before he died the *Races* was 'his first work of this type' makes it hard to say whether the *View* was about to be printed, or if it already existed but was not known.

'It is the rural city, described by Mármol in *Amalia*, so more picturesque than the present one! Only ten years before, under the tyranny, those ravines and the solitary coast, where the darkness of the night used to help the escape of a unitary who escaped to Montevideo, were stained with blood by the Mazorca lying in wait. In the distance, the towers and domes of Santo Domingo and San Francisco' (Schiaffino 1933: p. 200) (17).

Sheridan's death

Death caught him immersed in all this intense activity. He died as a result of a bleeding ulcer, probably on 27 August 1860. Two days later, on 29 August, Rev. John Chubb Ford officiated at his burial at the Victoria Cemetery. Years later his remains were transferred to the British Cemetery at Chacarita.

Pallière had left for the coast and the Northeast in May, and was back by August. He was probably in Buenos Aires when his colleague died. He returned to France in 1866; he died there in 1887.

Soon after Henry's death, on 1 December, his cousin James died at *Los sajones*. Two years later,

on 2 August 1862, Elizabeth married William Whateley Welchman, an Englishman from Warwickshire, at St John's Anglican Church, Buenos Aires. After his death, much of Henry Sheridan's work was sold and taken abroad, and disappeared without trace.

Conclusion

The quality of Sheridan's work has always been acknowledged. 'His truncated work shows he was estimable. He had everything: a sense of form and colour, and a wide view and good taste in the arrangement of the picture' (Pagano 1937: p. 284) (18).

In spite of his small surviving output, he is usually mentioned as one of the references for the first steps of what could be considered as an Argentine artistic school. Apart from some influence of the few classes he might have given, he was one of those who paved the way for other young artists who would return from Europe with artistic knowledge that would enable Argentine fine arts to commence a steady path.

It is, perhaps, difficult to consider Sheridan an *Argentine* painter: although he was born in the

province of Buenos Aires, he lived abroad from when he was two until he was twenty-four and died less than three years after his return. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that he received his education in England, he cannot be classified as a *European* or *English* painter passing through South America: although some of his works are inspired by places in Europe, most of them draw on the American landscape he knew. Henry Sheridan is, then, an example of the variety of facets of the Irish immigrants and their descendants in Argentina. With Irish family roots, his life had a strong British influence in social, cultural and economic aspects, which, in turn, resulted in his contribution to the land where he developed his brilliant, though brief, artistic career.

Going back to Baudelaire's statement that art is about memory, continuation and losses, which poetry is more likely to last? Whose transfiguration of history, whose translation of history will answer the postmodern crises of representation? Maybe the answer is still to be found.

Mariano Galazzi

Notes

1. Mariano Galazzi is a historian and translator. He published the translation and notes of Marion Mulhall's *Los Irlandeses en Sudamérica* (Buenos Aires: Elaleph.com, 2009). He is thankful to the following persons and institutions for their help in the research on Henry Sheridan's life and work: Robert Baxter (Cumbria Record Office and Local Studies Library), Cecilia Cavanagh (Pabellón de las Bellas Artes, Universidad Católica Argentina, Buenos Aires), Raul Chagas (Museo Histórico Municipal, Montevideo), Elizabeth King (Royal Academy Library), Eleonora Waldmann (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires), and Paula Zingoni (Museo Histórico Nacional, Buenos Aires).
2. "Fine arts" are those visual arts that involve the use of materials that can be moulded or modified in some way, such as clay, paint and plaster.
3. In the sources and bibliography, his name appears either as Henry, Enrique or Henrique.
4. A fifth son is sometimes mentioned, but I have found no specific information about him. There is a Sheridan child in the register of the Socorro Protestant cemetery for the year 1832.
5. Apart from Elizabeth, we have found no further references to the other siblings of Henry's that had travelled with him; it is possible that they died soon after their mother.
6. As he left Argentina when he was two years old, it is very unlikely that Henry used these books. Nevertheless, their existence reflects the cultural environment of his family.
7. The birthplace is given as 'Buenos Aires, South America, British subject' (10 107/2260, folio 490, page 20). The census took place on 30 March 1851.

8. 'Hay aquí una reunión de artistas malos y buenos capaz de proveer a las necesidades de la ciudad de Londres y París reunidas'. Letter of Juan Manuel Blanes to Mauricio Blanes, 21 November 1857, AGN (Montevideo), Mauricio Blanes archive. Quoted in Amigo, Roberto, 'Prilidiano Pueyrredón y la formación de una cultura visual en Buenos Aires', in Luna, Félix, et al., *Prilidiano Pueyrredón*. Buenos Aires, Banco Velox, 1999, p. 49.

9. Pictures like *El rodeo* or *Un alto en el camino*, by Pueyrredón, were painted in 1861, one year after Sheridan's death.

10. 'Los Sres. Pallière y Sheridan hacen saber al público que han abierto una exposición de pinturas al óleo y acuarelas, calle San Martín núm. 126 al lado del Hotel de Roma.

Abierta todos los días desde las 10 de la mañana hasta las 4 de la tarde.

Los domingos desde la 1 hasta las 4 de la tarde.

Entrada 10 pesos' ('Exposición de pinturas', in *El Nacional*, 7 June 1859; it appears again several times during the following days).

11. 'En un modesto salón de la calle San Martín, al lado del Hotel de Roma, se pueden visitar sesenta cuadros de los dos autores nombrados, pagando diez pesos a la entrada. Entre esos sesenta cuadros, se encuentran paisajes representando la caída del sol en los Alpes, el Lago de Lamond en Escocia, cuadros de costumbres y trajes, como los porteños en Santo Domingo, el gaucho en el rancho, y retratos cuya semejanza con personas de nuestra sociedad, nos excusa pronunciar sus nombres.

La caída del Sol en los Alpes, obra de Sheridan está impregnada de aquella profunda y melancólica poesía que respiran todas las producciones de este joven. Para nosotros que conocemos esa naturaleza que padece, y ese espíritu que sufre, luchando con aquella y con otros sinsabores de este mundo, su cuadro no es sino el retrato de su pensamiento, cuando fatigado del sufrimiento actual, deja que su alma vague en el mundo que él se crea, formando a su gusto la naturaleza en que quería vivir (...).

Para los que viven envueltos en las cosas materiales de la vida, cuyo trote no ha destruido del todo el gusto por el arte, una visita al salón de la calle San Martín, es un dulce momento, un reposo donde se respira otro aire, donde se gozan otras impresiones y donde se pasa bien, una media hora' ('Exposición de pinturas. Sheridan y Pallière', in *La Tribuna*, 11 June 1859, p. 3).

12. 'Con el objeto de estimular el gusto por las Bellas Artes en Buenos Aires, D. Enrique Sheridan se propone establecer una academia de pintura, si consigue reunir un número bastante de aficionados, destinando un día de la semana para el bello sexo. En dicha academia se darán lecciones de pintura al óleo, acuarela y todo género de dibujo a lápiz.

Los caballeros y señoras que deseen favorecer esta empresa pueden dirigirse al Sr. Sheridan, quien dará los pormenores, y presentará la lista de inscripción en la sala de la exposición, calle San Martín número 126' ('Academia de Bellas Artes', in *El Nacional*, 28 June 1859; it appears again several times in the following days).

13. 'Enrique Sheridan ha sido para nosotros algo más que un maestro; ha sido el amigo desinteresado, sincero que ha dado a nuestra alma, algo del amor al arte que animaba la suya, haciéndonos asistir muchas veces a las confidencias íntimas de su ambición artística y regalándonos tesoros de conocimientos que nos sentimos débiles para explotar' (Gazano, Antonio, 'Enrique Sheridan', in *La Tribuna*, 29 August 1860, p. 3).

14. This work offers striking coincidences with two other paintings: *View of Montevideo*, by Sheridan, and *Landscape of Montevideo*, by Pallière, private collection and Colección Fortabat, respectively, both in Buenos Aires.

15. '...pequeño dibujo a dos colores, representando las carreras inglesas que se ve caído tras de los vidrios de Ure y Vignal, es su primera obra en este género. Su composición bien entendida, sus grupos hábilmente separados unos de otros, a pesar del carácter confuso que la escena tiene en sí misma, sus

líneas fáciles, sus caballos bien dibujados, sus figuras llenas de movimiento, todo esto merece muy bien llamar la atención' ('Sheridan', in *El Nacional*, 26 August 1860). The Race Circus (Circo de las Carreras) in Belgrano had opened in 1857; it was located in a plot of land delimited nowadays by the following streets: La Pampa, Cramer, Mendoza and Melián. It had an oval track 1,500 metres long that was used for English-style races.

16. 'La naturalidad de la composición, la sensación de muchedumbre obtenida por el artista, la verdad y la precisión del espectáculo, revelan un maestro en aquel joven artista que apenas tenía veinticinco [sic] años, dado que este dibujo haya sido ejecutado en el último de su cortísima existencia'.

17. 'Es la ciudad campestre, descrita por Mármol en *Amalia*, ¡cuánto más pintoresca que la actual! Apenas diez años antes, bajo la tiranía, esas barrancas y la costa solitaria, donde la lobreguez de la noche solía amparar la fuga de algún unitario, que embarcaba para Montevideo, eran ensangrentadas por la Mazorca en acecho. En lontananza, las torres y cúpula de Santo Domingo y de San Francisco'.

18. 'Su obra trunca nos lo muestra como un valor. Todo lo poseía: sentido de la forma, sensibilidad cromática, visión amplia del cuadro, gusto en el modo compositivo'.

References

- Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, *Historia general del arte en la Argentina*. (Buenos Aires: editor's edition, 1984). Vol. III.
- Coghlan, Eduardo A., *Los irlandeses en la Argentina: Su actuación y descendencia* (Buenos Aires: author's edition, 1987).
- *El Nacional* (issues from the years 1859-1860).
- Hanon, Maxine, *Diccionario de británicos en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: author's edition, 2005).
- Howat, Jeremy, *British Settlers in Argentina—studies in 19th and 20th century emigration website* (<http://www.argbrit.org>).
- *La Tribuna* (issues from the years 1858-1860).
- Mulhall, Michael G., *The English in South America* (Buenos Aires: Standard, 1878).
- Pagano, José León, *El arte de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: author's edition, 1937). Vol. I.
- Schiaffino, Eduardo, *La pintura y la escultura en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: author's edition, 1933).