

Reviews

**Mícheál de Barra's *Gaeil i dTír na nGauchos*
(*Irish People in the Land of the Gauchos*)**

By Eoghan Mac Aogáin (1)



Dublin: Coiscéim. 2009
419 pages, €12.50

In the preface to his book *Gaeil i dTír na nGauchos*, Mícheál de Barra, a retired school principal from Kilfenora in County Clare, tells us that when he returned to Ireland in 1975, having lived for some years in Argentina, he found that there was little interest in the historic links between the two countries. This is all changed now, he says, due to two events. The first consisted of two series of television programmes made by Raidió Teilifís Éireann (the Irish national broadcaster) on the topic, the first dating from 1987 and the second from 2004; and the second was the founding of the *Society for Irish Latin American Studies*. He thinks that there is now a certain momentum behind the Irish-Argentine enterprise and predicts that another major scholarly work on the topic will appear – in either English or Spanish – in the next 10 years. In the meantime, he offers this book as an interim solution for readers of Irish.

I found de Barra's book of great interest, and indeed quite absorbing at times. For a start, almost all of the information in it was entirely new to me, and in many instances, not at all

what I expected. In addition, de Barra has done a lot of research – including archive work and face-to-face interviews with some of the people he writes about – and he has a strong attachment to Argentina and its Irish population, past and present. Although he calls it a little book, it has over 400 pages. Its 24 chapters deal with a variety of themes (both Irish and Argentinean), periods, and different aspects of the Irish-Argentinean encounter, taking us from Magellan's Irish altar boys of 1516 down to the present time. The chapters are in broadly chronological order, although some of them require flashbacks to earlier times. Thus Chapter 18, on the involvement of the Irish in education in Argentina, takes us all the way back to the beginning, and on to the end. The book has some of the characteristics of a collection of essays, therefore, but can still be read straight through as a history of the Irish in Argentina. It also has a good collection of pictures, mostly photographs.

Its most striking feature is the steady stream of biographies it contains, some very brief, less

than a page, others much larger, and a few taking up a whole chapter – a very large chapter (40 pages) in the case of the Fr Anthony Fahy, O.P (1805–1872). Because the chapters vary greatly in length, approximately half of the book is contained in six of them, the contents of which I indicate here by the persons they deal most with: Chapters 7 (Admiral William Brown), 10 (John Brabazon and other diarists), 11 (Anthony Fahy), 12 (Thomas Armstrong, the Mulhalls, Dean Dillon, William Bulfin, Eduardo Casey), 16 (The Arts: the Bulfins, the Nevins, Barney Finn) and Chapter 24 – another 40-page chapter – which might be considered as a geographic overview of the entire story. It lists the principal locations in Argentina (over 40 of them) that had a significant Irish settlement, and gives their histories and the principal Irish surnames associated with them – and, as always, the odd biography. The other chapters cover topics such as the gaucho on the cover of the book, and in its title, the Pampas, the colonial period and the war of independence from Spain, British incursions, Juan Manuel de Rosas and the story of Camila O’Gorman, the big influx of Irish in the nineteenth century, the appalling fate of the Irish brought over on the *City of Dresden*, the history of hurling and the Gaelic League in Argentina, the Perón years, the dirty war and ‘the disappeared’ (1976-83), and the Malvinas/Falklands war. On the latter two topics, de Barra has a remarkable amount of anecdotal information.

The book was written for readers of Irish who know little or nothing about Argentina or its Irish population, and I can personally vouch for its suitability for its intended readership. It is a fine introduction to this extraordinary story from the Spanish part of the southern hemisphere for the complete newcomer. It is beautifully written, in professional, journalistic Irish, some of the events are almost unbelievable and a lot of them quite moving and frequently disturbing, and the book leaves a trail of issues for further reading in its wake. Personally, I would have preferred references in the body of the text, and an index, and perhaps a glossary of constantly recurring terms such as *criollo*, *barrio*, *reducción*, and similar words that

which will throw the reader who is skimming or dipping in. On the other hand, I have to admit that on-the-spot references for everything would have conflicted with the author's wish ‘to tell the story of the Irish in Argentina in a simple way’ (Preface). He does however provide a bibliography and some footnotes.

In trying to cope with the mass of new material, my own strategy was to contrast the Irish experience in Argentina, as best I could imagine it from de Barra's account, with the experience of the Irish in Québec (Harvey, 1997), where I lived for a time, and the experience of the Irish in North America generally, well-known to me from family connections and from reading. I got a rude awakening. Irish emigration to Argentina was not at all like the mass emigration of Catholics from the south in famine times and later, but was far more similar to earlier and mostly Protestant emigration from the North of Ireland to the US. The Irish who went to Argentina – mostly in the nineteenth century – were generally from urban environments, many of them were professionals or tradesmen, they were leaving voluntarily and with definite ambitions, some of them must have had a significant amount of money, and their surnames suggest that many of them were of English stock. In addition, they came from very specific parts of Ireland, an incredible two-thirds from Longford and Westmeath (Barnwell, 1988). The reason for this seems to be that those who were successful in Argentina often brought over relatives and people from their own areas to work for them.

Reading on, I encountered more surprises. The Irish in Argentina, in the early nineteenth century at any rate, appeared to set up English-speaking communities wherever they could and, as far as I could gather, resisted assimilation into Spanish-speaking Argentina. This is in sharp contrast to the Irish who arrived in Québec in large numbers about the same time. While this was also a mix of two languages and one religion, the Irish in Québec, unlike their counterparts in the southern hemisphere, became indistinguishable from the French-speaking population – except for the surnames – in a very short time, two or at most

three generations at most. Although it is easy to list off the differences between the two groups of emigrants and the radically different situations they arrived into, that would explain the different outcomes, in the end I found it difficult to know whether the life the Irish created for themselves in their new homeland was determined principally by demographic factors, such as geographic isolation, or attitudinal factors, arising from the tight cultural and linguistic identity of the emigrants, much tighter than the term 'Irish' in some general sense would convey.

For example, de Barra has an excellent chapter on Irish educators in Argentina, and several sections detailing the efforts of the Irish in Argentina in the nineteenth century to bring over priests and nuns from Ireland to run their churches and schools. He is quite at home with this material, reflecting no doubt his own experience as an educationalist. But while the account is excellent, he leaves us on our own when it comes to the big question: What exactly was going on? Were these efforts prompted solely by pastoral concerns for a scattered flock? Or were there strong linguistic, cultural, and ideological objectives also, namely to buttress an English-speaking colonial elite against the outside world? Why were the Mercy nuns sent packing? De Barra wryly comments on their plight, docked in Liverpool on what must have been a dreadful journey from Argentina to Australia, with no chance of a quick trip home. The suggestion is that the Argentinean Irish thought they could have done better, but it is only a suggestion. De Barra tells us also of the appearance in Buenos Aires of the remarkable Passionist priest, Fr Fidelis Kent-Stone, former US soldier and diplomat, in Buenos Aires at this time. He appears to have outflanked Fr. Fahy and his supporters rather easily, thus laying the foundations – including blocks of stone – for the Irish Catholic presence in Argentina that survives to the present:

He got the better of the leaders of the Irish community by placing his faith in the poorest classes, in particular the Irish servant girls working in the big houses in Buenos Aires. It was the

subscriptions from these servant girls that funded the building of the Church of the Holy Cross in Buenos Aires and the Passionist Monastery attached to it. (p. 252, my translation)

Religion is not a simple matter, and it would be strange if religious initiatives such as these did not also have linguistic and cultural agendas. Even so, one thing I missed in de Barra's book was some information on which language was being spoken, English or Spanish, by whom, and in which contexts at different points in the book. More generally: what forms of English-Spanish bilingualism developed in the Irish communities, and how did these change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? My guess is that the Irish in Argentina have finally become like the Québec Irish, but only in very recent times, and with great reluctance.

These are things that have to be inferred from de Barra's account. I wondered what more could be done, bearing in mind that many a good book forces us to read a few more to complete the picture. For example, de Barra provides an excellent series of maps of Argentina at the beginning of the book, which I found essential all the way through the book. Is there something that could be done, even in a piecemeal fashion throughout the book, to show us the cultural and linguistic landscape that the Irish were operating in? This would give us some idea of the amount of Spanish that Fr. Fahy spoke in his day's work, about the linguistic 'space' that the Irish arrived into, and how it changed over time. How much Spanish did Fr Fahy speak in the course of a day, compared, say, with Fr Field in earlier times, or Fr Pat Rice in our own time? And if they all had both Spanish and English, on what occasions would they typically switch from one language to the other? Books on minorities tend to draw the reader into a false world. I must confess to watching some street tangos from Buenos Aires on *Youtube* at one point when I was reading de Barra's book – as if I needed to remind myself that we were still all talking about the same place.

Although I am thinking mostly of Spanish-speaking Argentina when I referred to the problem of the 'blurred backdrop' in studies of

minorities, the question of the native people also arises. With the exception of the reference to *La Guira*, in connection with the work of Fr Field (1547–1625) in northern Argentina and Paraguay, the blurring is complete in the case of the indigenous peoples: they appear in the consciousness of the settlers only as *indios* or *salvajes*, and attitudes seem to have hardened during the nineteenth century. This is how things were in North America also, although there were a few notable Irish who identified with the indigenous people (Mooney, 1896/1965). I wondered what a chapter on the Argentinean Irish and the *indios* would look like. De Barra notes that it was as a result of Fr. Field's work with *La Guira* that their language survived, Guaraní. It is now an official language of Paraguay, alongside Spanish. But I suspect that the story of the Irish and the indigenous peoples of Argentina goes downhill from there.

De Barra's book has been my introduction to Argentina and its Irish population. I am grateful to him, and it is a bonus that the book is in Irish, and thus an important contribution to the maintenance of our own indigenous language. We have had books like this before, Aodhán Ó hEadhra's *Na Gaeil i dTalamb an Éisc (The Irish in Newfoundland)* (Ó hEadhra, 1998), for

example. It is hard for writers and publishers of books in Irish to find topics that are not already well served in English, but the story of the Irish in Argentina is an excellent choice. I recall too that the Irish translation of Bulfin's *Rambles in Ireland*, undertaken by Eoghan Ó Neachtain and published in 1936 under the name *Cam-chuarta i n Éirinn* (Bulfin, 1936) was a big success, and is still often quoted by Irish scholars because of the quality of Ó Neachtain's Irish. This reminds me that Brabazon's diaries still languish in out-of-print editions from the nineteenth century.

I cannot say where de Barra's book fits into the growing literature on the Irish in Argentina, or how much of it consists of new material, but I doubt if there is a better book-length introduction to the topic. Since de Barra, in his Acknowledgment section, strongly urges those with an interest in the topic of Ireland and Argentina to join the *Society for Irish Latin American Studies*, perhaps the number of new subscriptions from people giving their names in Irish can be taken as a measure of the book's success.

Eoghan Mac Aogáin

Notes

1 Eoghan Mac Aogáin is a former Director of the Linguistics Institute of Ireland and currently lectures at the Institute

References

- Barnwell, David. 'Nineteenth century Irish emigration to Argentina'. Lecture. Columbia University Irish Studies Seminar, 25 April 1988. <http://www.irlandeses.org/argentina.pdf>
- Harvey, Fernand. (1997) *The Irish in Quebec. An introduction to the historiography*. (Québec City: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1997).
- Mooney, J. *The Ghost-Dance religion and the Sioux outbreak of 1890*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1896/1965).
- Ó hEadhra, Aodhán. *Na Gaeil i dTalamb an Éisc (The Irish in Newfoundland)* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1998).
- Bulfin, William. *Cam-chuarta i n Éirinn* (Translated by Eoghan Ó Neachtain). (Dublin: An Gúm, 1936).

Author's Reply

I fully accept the points made by Eoghan Mac Aogáin in his review of my book *Gaeil i dTír na nGauchos*. However, I am sure that a tsunami of facts in the book – a fault I have to admit to – sometimes

confuses the reviewer, as when he refers to Fr Fidelis Kent-Stone outflanking Fr Fahy and his supporters. Of course, Fr Fahy was a good many years in his grave by the time Fr Fidelis arrived in Buenos Aires.

Eoghan makes a number of valid suggestions and recommendations in his review which I hope will be taken into account when a definitive, scholarly, erudite book on the Irish in Argentina is written in Spanish or English. I propose that such a work be undertaken for publication by 2019 to celebrate the centenary of Thomas Murray's *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* (1919).

Mícheál de Barra

