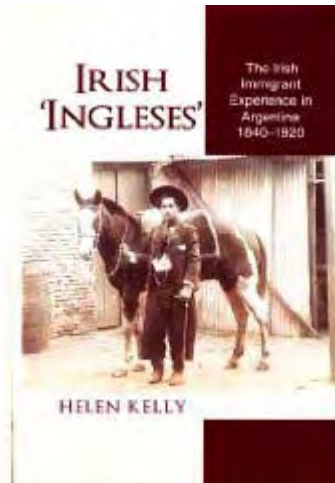


Reviews

**Helen Kelly's *Irish 'Ingleses'*
*The Irish Immigrant Experience in Argentina 1840-1920***

By Claire Healy (1)



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Why did Irish immigrants, on migrating from Ireland to Buenos Aires in the nineteenth century, become 'ingleses' (English) for the local residents, and indeed often in identifying themselves? This crucial question is the central concern of the first major publication by the Dublin-based scholar Helen Kelly. The book *Irish Ingleses': The Irish Immigrant Experience in Argentina, 1840-1920* is based on the author's doctoral dissertation on that subject. She clearly states that the 'separation of Irish from *Inglés*' is [...] the central aim of this study' (xviii). Throughout the book, she charts her difficult task of examining the experience of Irish immigrants who were classified within a broader group of 'English' immigrants in Buenos Aires. This overlooks the necessity to pinpoint differences in identity *within* the Irish community in Buenos Aires, who were Catholic and Anglican, rural and urban, merchant and farmer, men and women (xv-xvi; xviii-xix). Yet the question itself is fascinating, and Kelly's book does justice to the significance of the issue, teasing out its implications in full.

The Introduction provides a useful literature review on nineteenth and early twentieth-century Argentine history, focusing on immigration, and on Irish emigration historiography, pointing up the regionalism of Irish history. A review is also provided of the – albeit scant – literature in existence on Irish immigrants in Argentina. The author rightly points out that work in this area has been too often character-driven and not focused on the community as a whole. The Introduction focuses on the pitfalls and difficulties of the use of the term 'inglés' and the need for 'ethnic' distinctions in the historiography.

In the first chapter, Kelly provides an analysis of Irish nineteenth-century demography, focusing on counties Westmeath, Longford and Wexford, and showing the disparities between them. Kelly stresses the difference between the impoverished Western seaboard counties and the three Leinster counties that sent most emigrants to Argentina. It is commendable that the regional nature of migration chains from three Leinster counties is highlighted, and the

general history of the famine and mass emigration is not used as the paradigm within which to analyse migration to Argentina, as is too often the case in the literature on the Irish in Argentina (1). Economic and psychological models of international migration are examined, showing that population pressure, as a traditional 'push' factor, worked in tandem with other significant factors in precipitating the emigration decision, such as levels of emotional attachment to a community and culture. Emigration is also portrayed as a family rather than an individual decision and a comparison is made between the somewhat hackneyed perception of "emigration as exile" and a perception of "emigration as opportunity" (13). The chapter then analyses the attraction of Argentina as a migration destination, balancing out the lure of South America in general to people from the British Isles as an 'El Dorado', with the distance and strangeness of the location. The letters and accounts analysed here do not provide evidence for "emigration as exile" in the case of the Irish in Argentina.

The second chapter deals with European immigration to Argentina in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, providing a backdrop for the more specific chapters that follow. This chapter also looks at the 'inglese' and more specifically the Irish as component groups of European immigration during different periods of Argentine history. British informal imperialism in Argentina is highlighted as a relevant factor for Irish immigration and the principal political and economic developments in nineteenth-century Argentina are outlined. Curiously, though perhaps reflecting trends in mainstream Argentine historiography, there is no mention whatsoever in the book of the indigenous history of Argentina, even when referring to Julio A. Roca who engaged in the genocidal 'campaña al desierto' against the indigenous people in 1879, apart from a brief mention of the "final offensive against the native Indian population, led by General Julio A. Roca in 1879–80, [which] crucially secured territorial expansion on which the success of an agricultural economy was based." Regrettably, the book slips into using the contemporary vernacular of referring to indigenous-settler

conflicts as the "Indian assault" (67); "the Indian threat" (70); and "defeat of the Indian" (74). Kelly further refers to the 'campaña al desierto' as "Roca's successful Indian campaign" (69).

The different approaches of the various Argentine administrations to European immigration, from Rivadavia and Rosas to Juárez Celman and Hipólito Yrigoyen, are examined in detail. The unprecedented impact of mass immigration to Argentina is highlighted, with a startling figure of 58% of the 1914 population of the country as first or second-generation immigrant, with 29.9% foreign-born (31; 33). Here the author again returns to the prickly issue of the classification of all British citizens as 'inglés'. (32; 43-45), and the need to extricate the Irish sub-group from this categorisation. The issue of quantifying the migration is grappled with throughout the book. It is stated that 32,501 'inglés' immigrants arrived in Buenos Aires during the period 1857-1897, but it is unclear as to how many of these were Irish. Contemporary sources point to the majority of the 'inglés' community as being composed of people from Ireland. Kelly relies heavily on Eduardo A. Coghlan's data, though many migrants were not included by Coghlan as they did not have recognisably Irish names.

Census data and analysis on people classified as 'inglés' are provided (34-35). This does not, however, provide the full picture of the Irish community, as my own research at a local level in San Antonio de Areco revealed that in that parish, all of those classified in the 1869 census as "Other Europeans", as well as some of those classified as "inglés", were in fact Irish-born. Therefore restricting the analysis to those classified as "inglés", and not including "Other Europeans" does not provide an accurate statistical representation of the Irish community. Kelly bases her research on statistics drawn only from within the "inglés" category.

An interesting comparative perspective is provided by an analysis of Italian and German immigration to Argentina during the same period. Some of the results of the statistical analysis presented here point to a high level of

return migration among the ‘inglés’ immigrants, though the level of returns among Irish immigrants cannot be satisfactorily established. Statistics on religious denominations of immigrants between 1880 and 1930 reveal increasing proportions of non-Catholic Irish immigrants, becoming the majority as the decades progressed (58).

An overview is provided of the development of the rural economy from the late colonial period to the early twentieth century, explaining the persistent hegemony of the landed elite and describing the difficulties for European farmers in breaking into this oligarchy, both economically and socially. As the century progressed, tenant farming increased, with few social or economic advantages. It would have been interesting to examine whether this contributed to the decline in Irish immigration post-1870s; as the land situation in Ireland gradually improved for tenant farmers, land ownership was becoming increasingly difficult in Argentina.

Kelly establishes that while the general ‘inglés’ population were concentrated in urban pursuits, the Irish immigrants were rurally based and engaged predominantly in sheep farming. Though the perception of a rapid ascent to wealth through sheep-farming by Irish immigrants is seen to be exaggerated, the proportion of landowners among the community did increase over time. The author reveals that among the larger landowners, Argentine practices of buying and selling land as a commercial interest were adopted, rather than the traditional portrayal of “land-hungry” emigrants holding on to their land, and therefore “transactions were driven by economics rather than ethnicity” (83-4).

Attention is drawn to the issue of Irish Catholicism in Argentina, comparing the relatively isolated condition of the River Plate region to the more centrally governed Peru and Mexico. The ideological divisions between Church and state and between *unitarios* and *federalistas* are analysed in this chapter. The anticlerical thrust of the early Argentine governments was at odds with the sentiments of the broader population, a factor which may

have contributed to support for the *caudillo* Juan Manuel de Rosas (92). The fortunes of the Argentine Catholic Church in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are also charted. The 1853 Constitution set out the basis for a liberal and pluralist society, essential if the dream of contemporary politicians of a European immigrant nation was to be realised.

Kelly then moves on to describe the relatively autonomous development of an Irish Catholic Church infrastructure in the Argentine *camp*, and the establishment of the Irish chaplaincies. These were to wane in significance towards the close of the century, becoming subsumed into the mainstream Catholic Church (98). Compared to other Irish immigrant destinations, Buenos Aires did not represent an atmosphere of bigotry or religious intolerance, leading the Irish ‘ingléses’ to be easily accommodated within the composite Catholic and Anglican ‘inglés’ identity.

A fresh examination is provided of the renowned Irish chaplain Anthony Fahey and his “social and religious autocracy” in the face of a weak native Catholic infrastructure (101). He politicised the Irish Catholic “mission” in Buenos Aires (103), which rested heavily on an Irish Catholic education system that included teaching “native” (Argentine) pupils. An analysis of the relationship between Fahey and the dictator Rosas is also enlightening, based on novel use of unpublished correspondence between Fahey in Buenos Aires and his superiors in Dublin, and on an article critical of Rosas that was published in the *Dublin Review*. This is the result of the author’s excellent research of primary sources in the Dublin diocesan archives and All Hallows College. Kelly describes the Irish people as “the epitome of model immigrants” from the Argentine government’s perspective (110), a standing that benefited Fahey in his endeavours to promote the Irish Catholic community in Buenos Aires.

This represents an excellent analysis of the significance of Irish Catholic infrastructures and their interaction with the Argentine counterpart. Regrettably, however, this fails to address the fact that a significant proportion of Irish migrants to Argentina in the nineteenth

and early twentieth century were Anglican. This is evident in statements such as: “Within an ostensibly wholly Irish-Argentine context, therefore, an increasingly inward-looking ethnic group was formed” (120), which can only apply to the section of the Irish-Argentine community who explicitly identified themselves as Catholic and identified with their fellow Irish Catholics. Therefore the study would have been enriched by a complementary examination of developments in the Irish and British Anglican community.

An interesting choice is made in the focus of the fifth chapter which examines the “myth of Irish social deviancy” and provides a refreshing counterpoint to traditional analyses of the Irish community as homogeneously law-abiding and pious. Kelly sees deviancy as the opposite to integration and thus seeks to measure integration accordingly. This is an interesting methodology, as the main focus of the analysis of deviancy is on drunkenness, with reference to studies on public drinking among the Irish in other immigrant destinations. She thereby equates “the discussion of Irish immigrant alcoholism” with “the assessment of Irish assimilation” (131) and uses “the measurement of deviancy as an indicator of immigrant settlement and assimilation” (144). This approach seems decidedly facile in addressing the multifaceted issue of integration or assimilation. Furthermore, mental illness is also considered as an “indicator of Irish assimilation” (133).

This section provides interesting insights into the self-perception of the community through its newspapers, which emphasised a lack of crime perpetrated by the ‘ingleses’ in the *camp*, and even argued that when incarcerated, English-speakers made for better behaved prisoners! The Irish community are seen to lack solidarity in relation to defending fellow Irish people accused of crimes, who may or may not have been innocent (152). Irish immigrants in particular were considered susceptible to “alcohol related insanities” and “religious melancholy” (155). On the basis of lack of recorded incidents of drunkenness and disorderly behaviour among the Irish, Kelly

concludes that “rates of integration were largely higher than rates of deviancy” (156). In sum, therefore, this chapter provides a well-executed and well-written examination of deviancy among the Irish community in Buenos Aires and elsewhere, yet the central argument of the chapter – that this is a measure of integration – is somewhat difficult to digest. Again only the “inglés” category in the census is included in the statistics, while the category of “Other European”, which included the Irish to a certain extent, as explained above, was omitted. I therefore found it to be a weak chapter within an otherwise eloquent and well-argued study.

Irish ‘Ingleses’ also examines the shift that occurred in Irish immigrant identity in Buenos Aires towards the close of the nineteenth century, due to increasing Irish nationalism in the homeland, combined with an increase in Argentine nationalism, which led to a fracturing of the hitherto easy definition of the Irish as ‘ingleses’. This provides an insightful analysis of the impact of the native elite’s increasing discomfort with mass immigration, a theme that is pertinent both to the historical context and to contemporary responses to immigration in Europe and the Americas. Low levels of naturalisation among all immigrant groups are cited as reason for concern as to the allegiances of immigrants in Argentina (164), together with the prevalence of European languages other than Spanish, particularly in relation to Italian immigrants (167). An overview is provided of Italian, German and Spanish immigrant newspapers and mutual aid societies. ‘Ingleses’ associative activity was initially concentrated on sports clubs, and the first English-language newspaper, *The British Packet and Argentine News*.

There follows a discussion on the divergent standpoints of the Irish community offered by *The Standard* and *The Southern Cross*, soundly based on a content analysis of the two newspapers, particularly editorials and letters. *The Standard* represented the “Anglo-Celtic” community, and symbolised the unity that reigned among the ‘ingleses’ in the 1860s and 1870s. It is strange here that Kelly neglects to mention that the Mulhall brothers who founded and owned *The Standard* were

Anglican, as this is very relevant to the argument offered. (2) This unity was to be put in question with the establishment of a specifically Irish Catholic newspaper, *The Southern Cross*. In contrast to *The Standard*, which was targeted at an urban and wealthy audience (Kelly's analysis is based on the advertisements in the two papers), *The Southern Cross* had a decidedly urban readership (175). Kelly describes the increasing levels of posturing on the part of the two publications, concluding that "[b]oth newspapers ultimately and predictably failed in their original intent to adhere to a harmonious and inclusive editorial position."

In the pages of *The Southern Cross* it becomes evident that linguistic issues were a concern, both in relation to the use of the Spanish vernacular, and the use of English instead of Irish, by Irish immigrants (177-8). The nationalist thrust asserted itself most obviously under the editorship of William Bulfin from 1896 and an account of his editorial treatment of the Boer War is provided, bringing *The Southern Cross* directly into conflict with *The Standard* (180). The relative support for, and loyalty to, the two newspapers among the various members of the Irish community in Argentina is, Kelly admits, difficult to establish (184). However, it is clear from this chapter that some Irish and Irish Argentines did become more nationalist and distance themselves from the collective 'inglés' identity, while assuming a hybrid Irish-Argentine identity. Nevertheless, nationalist support remained superficial.

'Irish Ingleses' makes for an entertaining and highly informative read, while at the same time being based on robust statistics and empirical analysis, with frequent recourse to primary sources. The book regularly provides a comparative perspective with other immigrants in Buenos Aires, or with Irish immigrant

communities elsewhere in the world, in order to enrich our understanding of the Irish immigrant experience in Argentina. The work is accompanied by a broad-based bilingual bibliography, divided according to specific themes, which is of great use to the researcher. This goes some way towards bridging the divide between Spanish- and English-language interpretations of the phenomenon of Irish migration to Argentina. The title is somewhat misleading in referring to the experience "in Argentina", as the settlement of the migrants, and therefore the information analysed in the book, is concentrated on the province of Buenos Aires, rather than the whole country. While Kelly regionally defines the emigration as concentrated in three Leinster counties, the concentration of immigration within Buenos Aires Province, and to a lesser extent, neighbouring provinces, is not specified.

As an aside, and as is common in this field, the monograph would have benefited from further copy-editing by an Argentine to avoid a number of orthographical errors relating to Argentine personal names, place names and other Spanish words, but this does not detract from the overall high standard of editing of *'Irish Ingleses'*. The point about the Irish immigrants' 'inglés' identity is somewhat laboured. While it is a prominent feature of the Irish experience in Argentina, it did not apply at all times to all Irish people. However, 'Irish Ingleses' represents an excellent study of the Irish experience in Buenos Aires – the first English-language monograph on the topic in over ninety years -, and as such it is indispensable in the ever-growing historiography on the Irish diaspora, and on nineteenth-century international migration.

Claire Healy

Notes

1 Healy, Claire. "Migration from Ireland to Buenos Aires, 1776-1890." Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, NUI, Galway (November 2005), p226.

2 However, Edward Thomas Mulhall's Anglican family converted to Catholicism in San Antonio de Areco in 1859-61. Healy (2005), p. 227.

