

# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish Emigration to Argentina

*Prof. David Barnwell*

**Department of Spanish & Portuguese**

**Columbia University New York**

*(This is the text of a lecture given some years ago at the Columbia University Irish Studies seminar, New York City)*

## Antecedents

Ireland had had some relationship with Argentina from quite an early period. As early as 1535 we read of two Irish brothers participating in the expedition of Pedro de Mendoza to the River Plate. These were Juan and Tomas Farrel, and they are believed to be the first Irishmen to set foot in what is now Argentina. Not surprisingly, we have little information on the Farrel brothers. But we do have substantial knowledge, including a published biography, of one of the most important early missionaries to go to the La Plata region, the Irishman Fr Thomas Field (Fehilly). This man was born in Limerick about 1547, the son of a doctor. He joined the Jesuit Order and studied in France for several years. In 1580 he was instructed to join the Jesuit mission to Brazil. It is said that he walked from Rome to Lisbon, supporting himself by begging all the way. On the passage to Brazil his ship was captured by English pirates and he was subjected to a number of indignities. He finally reached South America and stayed in Brazil until he was transferred to the La Plata region in 1587. He served for many years in what is now Argentina and Paraguay, and died ministering to the Guaraní Indians of Paraguay in 1625.

Subsequent to this, there was sporadic Irish immigration during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. We notice names such as Murphy, Cullen, O'Hara and O'Donnell appearing in Argentina during this period, as members of either the colonial administration or of religious orders. These actually represent a branch of an even older Irish migratory trend, that is to say the tradition, begun as early as the Flight of the Earls, of Irishmen seeking their fortunes in Spain.

We have some details about several figures of interest at this time. For example, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Chief Physician to the Viceroy of Buenos Aires and founder of the Buenos Aires Escuela de Medicina was Dr Michael O'Gorman. He was born in Ennis in 1749 and studied in France and Spain before going to Argentina. He was very prominent in medical circles in Buenos Aires, dying in 1819. Incidentally, with O Gorman we can detect the beginning of a strong tradition of Irish medical men in Buenos Aires. An important family of merchants in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the Lynches, and indeed the famous Che Guevara was descended from this family, his full name being Ernesto Guevara Lynch.

In 1798 a Mayoman, Thomas Craig, was shipwrecked off the Patagonian coast. Settling in Buenos Aires, he came to some prominence at the time of the Argentinian struggle for independence, and subsequently had a long and distinguished career in the Argentine navy. Worth recalling too is the Jesuit Thomas Falkner, who though not Irish was son of an Irishman. He was one of the most respected authorities of his time on the flora and fauna of Patagonia, and had several books on the subject published in London around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Or George Sarsfield, who appears to have been some relative of the Earl of Lucan, and whose grandson, Velez Sarsfield, was one of the great legal experts of nineteenth century Argentina.

Another source of Irish colonists consisted of Irishmen who were members of the British Army. In 1762, during one of the perennial demarcation disputes between Spain and Portugal, a British expedition under a Captain Macnamara attacked the town of Colonia, opposite Buenos Aires in the River Plate, and now part of modern Uruguay. The British force was defeated and subsequently shipwrecked off the La Plata coast. The fleet was quite large, numbering several thousands. A percentage of the sailors appear to have been Irish, and some stayed on in the country and inter-married. In the early years of the nineteenth century we see something of a repetition of the events surrounding the Macnamara expedition. Irishmen took part in the British anti-Spanish expeditions under Beresford (1806) and Whitelocke (1807). Ironically, Beresford himself was Irish, being one of the prominent Waterford Anglo-Irish family. One of the regiments to participate in Whitelocke's invasion was the

Connaught Rangers, (subsequently immortalized by their mutiny in India in 1920) and they suffered quite a few casualties when Buenos Aires resisted the British advance. Whether for this or for reasons of nationality their loyalty was less than total; at one stage the regiment had to be confined to barracks to prevent desertions. In fact several of them did desert, and one, Michael Skennon, was captured fighting for the Argentinians and executed. The British force eventually surrendered to the La Platans, and its members were interned in the countryside around the city. Not all the prisoners of war were repatriated when peace terms were made, many remaining on thereafter as free citizens. Two notable Irishmen among this group were Peter Campbell and Patrick Island (Isla) who had long and dangerous subsequent careers in military service in the region. Campbell is now considered as the father of the Urugayan navy; Island was unlucky enough to choose the wrong side in one of the Argentinian civil wars, and was executed.

1809 brings the arrival of perhaps the most famous Irish immigrant of all, William Brown of Foxford, Co Mayo. Brown was born in 1777, and went to the U.S while still quite young. He spent some years as a cabin boy and subsequently as mate and captain on British and American ships on the North Atlantic routes. He was captured and imprisoned twice by the French during the Napoleonic wars. In 1811 we find him shipwrecked off Montevideo. He apparently was able to salvage most of his merchandise, bought a ship from the proceeds, and worked the La Plata coast for several years, establishing the first regular ferry service between Montevideo and Buenos Aires. In 1814 his ship was commandeered by the Spaniards. In retaliation, Brown took a small party to Colonia, boarded and sequestered a Spanish ship, and brought it back to Buenos Aires. This coup brought him to the attention of the Buenos Aires government, and they engaged him to head their nascent fleet in the continuing revolutionary war with Spain. He performed so capably in this task that he was soon Chief Admiral of the Navy and became one of the most respected men in Argentina. Some years later he was drawn out of retirement to take command in the war against Brazil and almost single-handedly, if we are to believe the hagiography, defeated the Brazilians. Indeed for a while he was not only a military but also a civil leader, since he was for a short time Governor of La Plata province, effectively ruler of Buenos Aires and its surroundings. Brown is without doubt the most prominent Irishman in the history of Argentina. He never

lost touch with his birthplace, and indeed visited Ireland in 1847. Unfortunately, his biographers have nothing to offer on what Brown's reaction may have been to the conditions he saw in Ireland during that famine year.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century we find a small but thriving Irish community. It is worth remembering that, in the years immediately following independence in 1811, anti-Spanish feeling was strong, and immigration from Spain was forbidden. So the Irish and other non-Hispanic nationalities assumed great importance, and occupied positions of influence in the community. The Irish population of this early period, the 1810s and 1820s, is based almost entirely on the city of Buenos Aires. Generally they were members of the shopkeeping, artisan or professional classes. We can read in advertisements in a contemporary newspaper *La Gaceta* of 1822 that Mr Keen had a hotel, Edward O'Neill ran a school, James Coyle had a tailoring business.

It is very hard to get a figure as to how many Irish there were in the La Plata region at this time. Most contemporary references used the word "inglés" for all those who came from the then United Kingdom, so it is hard to differentiate. Almost all the Irish were Catholic Irish; Protestants were proportionally under-represented in emigration to Argentina. One interesting exception was a prominent Irish businessmen of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Armstrong, a Protestant. He ran a *saladero* (meat-salting business) in Buenos Aires. He was said to be a son or nephew of the John Armstrong of County Offaly who betrayed the Sheares brothers prior to the 1798 Rebellion. Armstrong was very influential in the rise of the banking system in Buenos Aires, and he gained the reputation of being a reliable source of cheap credit to any Irish who needed it.

In 1824 the British consul made the first census of his country's subjects in the area and arrived at a figure of 1355. This figure, he thought, would probably reach 2000 if he were to include those who were not registered in the census. Murray and Ussher calculate a figure of around 500 Irish in this year. There was no organized system of recruitment at this stage - it seems the Irish came on an individual basis, setting out from ports in Ireland or Britain, or re-emigrating from North America. There was as early as 1828 a proposal for a systematic introduction of Irish labourers. Despite the fact that the scheme was developed by John Thomond O'Brien, a very important figure in the struggle for Argentine

independence, nothing ever really came of this. O'Brien blamed lack of cooperation from the British authorities.

It may surprise us today that there should have been any link between Ireland and faraway Latin America in the early nineteenth century. Yet in fact the ties were quite strong, and yielded many fascinating episodes. Apart from well-known figures such as Brown in Argentina and O'Higgins in Chile, there were many interesting, even mysterious, Irishmen active in South America at this time. For instance, in the 1820s John Devereaux arrived in Dublin to recruit an Irish regiment to go to present-day Venezuela and Colombia and fight in Simon Bolivar's revolutionary army. This came to comprise quite a significant force, perhaps 2000 men, one of whom was Morgan O'Connell, Daniel's son. The experience was less than a happy one for most concerned, but the intervention is still remembered in Venezuela, and the Irish regiment is listed first on the memorial in Caracas to those foreigners who assisted in the struggle for Venezuelan independence. One of Bolivar's most prominent lieutenants was a Corkman, Daniel Florence O'Leary, who was subsequently the Liberator's chief biographer. In 1826 the Irish-American William Duane published a long narrative of his travels through present-day Colombia and Venezuela under the title "*A Visit to Colombia in the Years 1822 & 1823*". He mentions a number of Irishmen whom he met while in South America, several of them hold-outs from Devereaux's contingent. Another unfortunate Irish intervention in Latin American affairs came in the form of Colonel Cotter's expedition to Brazil in 1828, to take part in the Brazil-Argentine war of the time. As in the case of Devereaux's regiment, the numbers involved were substantial, as many as 2,500 men, women and children. They appear to have been mostly drawn from the Cork area. Their sojourn in Latin America was even more disastrous than that of Devereaux's regiment. The force was decimated by disease and desertion, and never participated in any of the military engagements of the war. The latter fact was perhaps just as well, since it might have presented the tragicomic spectacle of pro-Brazilian Irishmen fighting against pro-Argentinian Irishmen. Though there was some Irish emigration to Brazil in the 1820s and 30s (indeed there had been an Irish presence there as early as the seventeenth century), no settled Irish colony ever evolved in that country. Hence quite a large number of Irish who initially landed in Brazil eventually made their way to Montevideo or Buenos Aires.

## Mass Immigration

In this environment of Irish links with South America we should not be surprised that there was what Mulhall calls "a remarkable influx of settlers from Ireland between 1825-30". Murray calculates a figure of 2,500 Irish for 1832. This may be an overestimate, since the British consul's estimate for that year was of a total of 5,000 'ingleses'. On the other hand, McCann, writing a decade or so later, states that fully two-thirds of the British subjects are Irish, so if this proportion were to any degree in effect in 1832 Murray's guess would not appear too wild.

These early Irish settlers were urban, inhabitants of Buenos Aires, and had little to do with rural life. In this regard they are atypical of the main tradition of the Irish in nineteenth-century Argentina. The real story of the Irish community in Argentina takes place in the countryside, and is inextricably linked to the growth of the Argentine wool industry. Irish participation in this industry began around the mid 1820s, when the Buenos Aires government started to import European sheep to mix with the native flock. In 1824 one Peter Sheridan, a native of Co. Cavan, bought 100 merino sheep to improve his herd of the local semi-wild stock, and he is generally seen as the first Irishman in the sheeprearing business in Argentina.

Most immigrants did not make an immediate entry into sheep-rearing, but rather accumulated the necessary capital by working as labourers, either in the meat processing plants in Buenos Aires or out in the countryside as farm labourers. McCann speaks of ditch-diggers earning

from five to seven shillings a day, together with a good supply of beef and mutton. Even the least energetic among the newly arrived are in a position to save, with the slightest effort, as much as twenty shillings a month.

Fr Fahey writing to Ireland during the Famine years says

For the past five years I have

been in this province, I have never met a man who could not find employment, unless during a portion of the blockade. In fact there is such a scarcity of laborers that wages have often risen from five shillings to seven and sixpence per day. I have often known poor men to make one hundred pounds a year each, in making ditches alone.

In the early days the Irish were not in an economic position to own the land, preferring instead to rent it. This rental arrangement, often with La Platan and in some cases British landowners, took the form of a kind of partnership, where work became the investment on one side, land, stock and tools the investment on the other. In the case of shepherds, one man might take charge of a flock of perhaps two thousand sheep. In just a couple of years that flock would have duplicated itself. Typical economic arrangements were agreements to share the 'clip' or sheared wool, or to share whatever number of lambs that might be born each season. It was fairly easy to make large profits in the business, since the native "portenos" did not like sheeprearing, and there was always a shortage of labour. In addition native La Platans were subject to compulsory military service, perhaps better to call it press ganging, for the various military factions that ran the province in those years after independence. Foreigners were not, making them a more dependable supply of labour. Initial investment could be low, since sheep were very cheap, and returns started coming in with the first lambs and first wool. It was soon quite easy, financially speaking, for a shepherd to amass some capital and buy his own flock, either alone or in partnership.

As can be imagined, once a few Irish had started in the business it became self-perpetuating; those who arrived from Ireland looking for work could find it from their compatriots. Much

of the wool produced was exported to the United States, though of course some went to countries such as Britain and France. The sheep industry, initially to the south of Buenos Aires, spread north and west as the frontier was extended, and the Irish became a rural rather than an urban community.

There is abundant testimony to success stories among the immigrants. One for example, Michael Murray, of Westmeath arrived penniless in 1835. When he died in 1868 he left in his will 30,000 sheep, 50 cattle and 150 horses. Other wills around this time attest to similar accumulations of property. One early settler by the name of Hanly came to own territories so extensive that he earned the nickname "the Duke of Leinster". Another, one Michael Duggan, claimed to be not just the richest Irishman in Argentina, but the richest Irishman in the world. We might also cite the case of John Murphy of Wexford, arrived in 1844 with, if the folk tradition is to be believed, just one pound in his pocket. By the time he died in the 1870s he had given his name to the town of Murphy in Buenos Aires province. Fr Fahey writes in the 1840s

Would to God that Irish emigrants would come to this country instead of the United States. Here they would feel at home; they would have plenty employment and experience a sympathy from the natives very different from what now drives too many of them from the States back to Ireland. There is not a finer country in the world for a poor man to come to, especially with a family.

Now it is clear that for every success story such as these there must have been cases of tragedy and disappointment. Indeed, just a few years after writing the optimistic letters I have cited, we find Fr Fahey dissuading young men from coming to Argentina. Care of the destitute became an issue of increasing concern to Irish



charitable institutes as the century wore on. And the incipient class tension between rich and poor Irish was a factor in some of the splits and schisms which bedevilled the Irish community in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

However, there remains no doubt that many Irish did very well in Argentina. Mulhall, writing in 1878, says that the Irish own

an aggregate value of lands and stock that cannot fall short of 2 millions sterling. Some of these men have from 50,000 to 200,000 sheep, and run immense tracts of land which average 1000 pounds per square mile at present prices. Men who arrived in this country twenty or thirty years ago without a shilling are today in receipt of incomes from 2,000 to 10,000 pounds per year. In no other part of the world have Irishmen been more prosperous, and nowhere do they constitute a more orderly and industrious community than in Buenos Aires.

For some reason, which still remains to be analyzed in detail, Irish emigrants to Argentina tended to come from a very restricted area in Ireland. Foremost of these were the midland counties, especially Longford and Westmeath. An analysis of the genealogies drawn by Eduardo Coghlan in his monumental study of Irish families in Argentina shows that about one-third of the settlers came from Westmeath, with another one-third from Longford. If we add to these the numbers descended from immigrants from Wexford, we account for well over 80% of the entire Hiberno-Argentine community. There are handfuls of emigrants from most of the other counties, except for the Protestant counties of the north.

This pattern, of emigration from particular restricted localities, can be discerned in other migrations, be they the

arrival of Spaniards in the New World or the coming of the Normans to Ireland. Nevertheless, there is material for an interesting study here; were there any cultural or socioeconomic forces which created this pattern in the Argentinian case, of an emigration based upon just a handful of counties? Did Longford/Westmeath and Wexford have something in common, not shared by even nearby counties? Or was it just chance, a mere result of the handful of early settlers writing back to tell their neighbours and relatives that opportunities existed under the southern skies?

In any case, the emigrants were obviously composed of the poorer rural classes of Ireland, though not by any means the poorest, since they clearly must have had access to some money in order to pay the passage. McCann, who set up an agency to encourage immigration in the late 1840s, advertised a charge for the passage of 10 pounds cash if paid in Ireland, or 15 if paid in Buenos Aires, plus 7 pounds to be paid later when the immigrant had made some money. Eduardo Coghlan has published passenger lists of those arriving on ships to Buenos Aires for a large part of the nineteenth century, and these reveal that the most common port of embarkation was listed as Liverpool. Belfast and Dublin are also mentioned. As was the case with the North Atlantic passage, it was common for Irish emigrants to have to journey first to Liverpool in order to take ship for America. The journey, as can be imagined, was arduous, taking a minimum of a couple of months, and sometimes as many as five.

As might be expected, in the early years most emigration was of men. In fact, in some of the records for the earlier years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we find no reference whatever to the arrival of Irishwomen. As the century wore on there were increasing numbers of women, though this never reached more than about one-third of the entire total. By the 1850s a steady stream of women was arriving. They tended to be servants, cooks, maids or governesses. It seems fair to say that the majority of these women did not wish to remain in these jobs, but rather aspired to

marrying a fellow-countryman and moving out into the country. There was always an imbalance between the numbers of Irish men and women. This meant that it was easy for an Irishwoman to find a husband, since the Irish by preference intermarried. But it also left a large number of surplus Irish men, some of whom intermarried with non-Irish.

What kind of a life did these people have ? As can be imagined it was a lonely and difficult existence, in which one farm might be a day's ride from another. For many years, up till the 1860s and 70s, the Irish in the countryside had no churches, no schools and of course no hospitals. They had little in the way of entertainment, apart from sheep-shearing time, when they gathered in the style of the old meitheall (traditional Irish communal work-party) or the occasional marriage or wake. They had very little social or cultural organization, except that provided by the priests. They cannot have had much contact with their homeland, since communication was obviously difficult. They were people of the frontier, and in the early days had to endure the threat of Indian attack.

Indeed their relationship with what they called the "natives", be they the Indians or gauchos (half-Indian population) were not good. As early as 1852 a deputation of "natives" delivered a petition to the government in Buenos Aires in which they claimed that

we (natives) are despised, for this  
stranger is preferred before us; many sons  
of the soil who yesterday were rich are  
today's proletarians, while many Irish,  
but yesterday in rags-and-tatters, are  
today's property owners.

Apart from such economic rivalries, there was a high rate of crime on the frontier, ranging from horse-stealing to murder. This became particularly bad after the fall of the dictator, Rosas,

in the early 1850s. At one stage, in the 1860s, we read of the Irish appealing to Buenos Aires for some law and order. Murray lists a long catalogue of gruesome murders of Irish on the frontier. Life was hard, and life expectancy for those who went to Argentina was significantly lower than for their brothers and sisters who stayed at home. Apart from the risk of personal violence, one factor in this may have been the diet, based as it was upon a great excess of animal fats, and a shortage of fruit and vegetables. In addition, of course, the Irish were vulnerable to the common diseases of the time, such as yellow fever, cholera and typhoid.

It appears that the Irish had a strangely disparaging attitude to the indigenous population for the first generation. One reads that many families discouraged their children from learning the Spanish language, or from mixing with the "native" children. As I have said, the Irish were commonly identified as "ingleses", and obviously had many linguistic and cultural ties with others who spoke the language. On the other hand, they kept fairly separate as a community--one cannot say that they were absorbed into the British population in Argentina. Indeed, for most of the century, until the great expansion of the railway industry, the Irish were the biggest single immigrant group from what was then the United Kingdom. The tension between pro- and anti-British elements in the community caused many problems in the organization of Irish societies towards the end of the century, largely focusing on the degree to which the Irish separate identity should be maintained, or submerged with that of other English-speaking countries.

In line with their Irish origins, and in view of their rural lifestyles, it is not surprising that horse racing was a principal sport and social activity. For instance, at the race meeting of Capilla del Señor in 1867, a meeting which, it was claimed, was as good as "the best ever seen in Mullingar", the main race was won by a horse called Chieftain, second was Fenian Boy and third was Shamrock. Racing continued for a while, and indeed the Jockey

Clubs or Racing Clubs are nowadays prestigious social institutions in Argentina which owe their origins to this period, but racing as a recreation of the common man died out as a result of the problems of law and order associated with large gatherings of men, often armed, in circumstances where gambling and alcohol were likely to produce heated disputes. As early as the 1840s we read in McCann that drunkenness was a problem. However, unlike their counterparts in the northern hemisphere, the Irish in Argentina never went into the *pulpería* (bar) trade. Towards the end of the century hurling became popular, and survived until the middle of the present century before giving way to field hockey and rugby. One of the reasons given for the decline of hurling, whether valid or not, is the lack of adequate woods to make the *camáin*.

#### The Church

The story of the Irish in nineteenth-century Argentina is inextricably linked with the story of their priests. Initially, the Catholics among them had one Irish priest looking after them, a Dominican, Fr Edmund Burke. We know very little about him, whether he was sent by his superiors or came independently. A contemporary English account describes him as a man "of more enlightened opinions than were customary in those of his calling". After his death in 1826 the Archbishop of Dublin sent a succession of priests, none of whom survived for very long. Perhaps here is the place to note that the pastoral care of the Irish community in Argentina was for long an obligation of the diocese of Dublin. The Catholic Church of the Argentine Irish was little integrated with the local hierarchy, and was more or less independent. Eventually, in January 1844 arrived the father of the Irish Church in Argentina, and indeed the father of the Irish community, the Dominican Anthony Fahy. Fahy was born in Loughrea Co. Galway. He spent some years in Rome and in Ohio before accepting the mission to Argentina. His arrival in Argentina coincides with the increase in the numbers of Irish, and also with their geographical spread. Indeed in his early days, when he ministered alone, his parish was greater in area than the whole of Ireland. Though based in

Buenos Aires, he spent much of his time in the country, the camp, ministering to the far-flung members of his flock. He had enormous influence on the Irish community, serving in many different roles. Many sources speak of his care for the newly-arrived, and his efforts to see that they found work, or if necessary, received loans from the more prosperous of their fellow-countrymen. Even today, Irish Argentinians often speak of Fahey's efforts to promote marriage among his people, and humorous stories are still told of his matchmaking. Fahey exercised quasi-political power among the Irish. In fact at one stage he engaged in a long-distance controversy with John O'Connell in Dublin, through the medium of the Dublin Review, about the merits or otherwise of the dictator Rosas. In 1847 he organized a Famine Relief Appeal, and 441 pounds was sent to Dublin. In 1848 he established an Irish Infirmary, as a response to the arrival in that Famine year of large numbers of sickly immigrants from Ireland.

In 1852 Fahey applied for a more permanent supply of priests to All Hallows in Drumcondra, and the Irish Hierarchy began to prepare young men specifically for service in Argentina. In all about 25 priests, some of them products of All Hallows and others more independent, arrived in Argentina in the 1850s & 60s. As I have mentioned, the Irish clergy in Buenos Aires operated with great autonomy from their Hispanic colleagues. Indeed it was said that Fr Fahey was more powerful than the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. The Irish priests were not limited to the parishes into which the indigenous church was divided but rather were divided into capellanías. In fact, the indigenous Argentinian church was never too influential, and there was a strong current of anti-clericalism in Argentina in the middle of the last century. Thus

the Irish Church was perhaps the most dynamic element of nineteenth-century Catholicism in Argentina.

This common Hispanic tradition of anti-clericalism, or "Free Masonry" as its enemies liked to call it, caused problems in connection with the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy in 1856. The sisters were forbidden from establishing themselves as a religious community. They were on the point of leaving and returning home when an epidemic of yellow fever gave them the opportunity to win public admiration for their efforts to help the afflicted, and subsequent permission to stay.

The 1860s was the era of consolidation of the community, and several churches such as St Brigid's, St Patrick's, and St Mel's were founded. In addition, this was a period of expansion in education, with the setting up of a number of Irish schools, St. Patrick's, St. Brigid's. An Irish Hospital was also set up around this time, as well as an Irish Orphanage.

Relationships between the Church and people were complicated towards the close of the century by the tortuous problems of the Passionist Order. Fr Martin Byrne, from Dublin, arrived in 1879 looking for money for his order. He was promised generous contributions, on condition that the Passionists establish a House in Buenos Aires, explicitly to minister to the Irish colectividad. A house was eventually set up, but it was dominated by Italians, and was administered as part of the North American province of the Order. Many people felt that the agreement had been broken, and the case went as far as the Vatican. It became a benchmark in the tensions between Irish nationalists and pro-British elements of the

Irish population. It was not resolved until 1914.

There were always some Irish resident on Las Malvinas, and they for a long time had no contact at all with the clergy in Benos Aires. In 1857 Lawrence Kirwan, one of Fahy's lieutenants spent six months on the islands ministering to the Catholics. Subsequently, a Catholic Church, Stella Maris, was built on the islands. I do not know whether it survived the events of a few years ago. One event which tainted some of the Irish clergy with controversy was the celebrated famous Camila O'Gorman case. Camila was sister to Fr Patrick O'Gorman, and they were members of the very influential Irish-Argentine O'Gorman family. O'Gorman had a curate by the name of Fr Gutierrez. He fell in love with Camila and they eloped. At this time the famous dictator Rosas was engaged in a campaign to clear up public morals. The Camila O'Gorman elopement became a cause celebre, and was used by Rosas' opponents as an object of ridicule. This apparently caused great offense to Rosas. After some time the pair were found, betrayed, it has been said, by another Irish priest, a Fr Gannon. They were brought back to Buenos Aires. On August 18 1848 the two were publicly shot. Camila was eight months pregnant at the time. I can find no record of any of the Irish clergy interceding for them. This is a little surprising, since Fr Fahey is said to have had great influence with Rosas. Perhaps events moved so quickly towards the end that time ran out.

We can find evidence in Buenos Aires of reflections of just about all the major political movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century



Ireland, from support of Catholic Emancipation through Famine Relief and Fenian Prisoner Funds right up to a Parnell Defence Committee and Land League support group. Coming into the twentieth-century, Sinn Fein cumainn were set up after 1916, and there was a massive mobilization of the community on the occasion of the death on hunger-strike of Terence McSweeney. Lawrence Ginnell, T.D from Co Westmeath, toured the Irish communities in 1921 as representative of the Dail. I can find no reference to the Irish language being spoken, though the Buenos Aires branch of the Gaelic League was founded as early as 1899, and was very active for several decades thereafter. But generally, as has been seen, the counties which produced the major immigration were by the mid-nineteenth century predominantly English-speaking, and this is reflected in the Irish community in Buenos Aires.

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to chronicle a little-known chapter in the experience of the Irish diaspora, and to sketch something of the personal lives of those Irish who sought their fortunes in a far-off land. Much research remains to be carried out before we get a full picture of nineteenth-century Irish emigration to Argentina. Regrettably, few resources exist for those who wish to introduce themselves to the subject, especially for those who do not read Spanish. The only full book in English on the topic *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* was written by Thomas Murray and published in 1919. A semi-fictional autobiography of an Irish female settler "*You'll Never Go Back*" by Kathleen Nevin, was published in 1946. Like Murray's book,

copies are now very rare, though both books can be found in the New York Public Library. In the present decade, two important studies in Spanish have been published in Buenos Aires. These are the book length treatment of the subject by Hilda Sabato and Juan Carlos Korol *"Como Fue La Inmigración Irlandesa en Argentina"* (1981) and Eduardo Coghlan's genealogy *Los Irlandeses en la Argentina: Su Actuación y Descendencia* (1987).

On the anthropological and sociological level many opportunities exist for the study of the Irish experience in Argentina, the only Irish emigration to take place to a non-English speaking country. For a long time little was done in Ireland in studying the Irish end of the migration, namely such questions as the geographical and social origins of the migrants, factors which pulled them towards Argentina rather than other countries, as well as what mechanisms were developed to facilitate the migration. We have already lost a vast store of folk-lore and personal recollection on the topic, both in Ireland and in Argentina. It is common for the researcher to be told by Irish-Argentines that he is a few decades too late, that much of the community's lore has disappeared with those who have passed away. And there is surprisingly little trace of the tradition in the folk memory of Counties Longford and Westmeath, what there is being restricted to the aged. Nevertheless, one occasionally uncovers evocative little reminders of a bygone era. I have heard elderly people in Longford tell of being given maté (a kind of Argentinian tea) to drink at the houses of returned emigrants fifty or sixty years ago. And another story, from

Westmeath, tells of a returned emigrant turned gunman who liked to hide his revolver under his poncho during the Irish War of Independence.

There is now an urgent need for financial backing for the maintenance of the Irish-Argentinian community's historical and cultural records. For instance, "The Southern Cross" founded in 1875, and consequently the oldest surviving publication of the Irish abroad, is in great need of funds to modernize its plant and preserve its rare archives. Indeed all the Irish cultural organizations in Argentina could benefit from even a moderate input of funds from well-wishers, or assistance in maintaining their heritage. The community is rapidly becoming assimilated into the general Argentine population, and may not exist as a distinct entity within a few decades. While this process is probably inevitable, it should cause us all a pang of regret. Though tiny in scale compared to its North American counterpart (perhaps a maximum of 20,000 in the entire nineteenth century), Irish emigration to Argentina represented a unique element in the Irish experience abroad, one which deserves greater recognition than it has received. Despite huge geographical and cultural distance, many Irish-Argentinians continue to identify with their ancestral home, a country which few have seen and most will never see. They are our cousins, our very distant cousins perhaps, but nonetheless a branch of the family that we ought not to forget.