

Materialising Irish/Argentine diaspora spaces and transnational identities in William Bulfin's travel sketches for *The Southern Cross* newspaper (1891-1903)

Sinéad Wall¹

Abstract: William Bulfin (1864-1910) left Ireland in 1884 to work and travel within Argentina for over twenty years, the majority of which he spent writing articles for the Irish-owned newspaper *The Southern Cross*. This paper considers how Bulfin's series of travel sketches constitute the relationship between mobility, materiality and the expression of a transnational Irish/Argentine identity. It also examines how Bulfin imaginatively constructs 'diaspora space' in his sketches or crónicas as well as how they bolster his attempts to extend the boundaries of Irishness and Irish national territory to incorporate the diaspora space of Argentina whilst simultaneously inscribing this space onto his travel sketches, 'In Eirinn', about his later journeys around Ireland. Drawing on a framework of Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space this paper analyses the confluence of narratives that Bulfin produces for *The Southern Cross* and how his migration experience and identity is translated from one geographical location to another in addition to becoming part of the material culture which underpins this very experience.

Keywords: William Bulfin; travel sketches; *The Southern Cross*.

¹ Sinéad Wall is currently a Senior Lecturer in Spanish and Latin American Studies in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Westminster. She recently completed her doctoral research at University College London in the Department of Spanish and Latin American Studies, which focussed on the construction of Irish cultural identity in migrant narratives in the diasporic space of Argentina. She has co-edited a special issue of the *Journal of Romance Studies* in 2009 on the subject of women's life narratives (*Aireando lo privado/Airing the private*). Other publications include an article on Brian Keenan's travel writing in Chile (*ABEI Journal*, June 2008), an article on Mary Morris's travels in Mexico (*JRS* 2009) and a chapter entitled "The Irish female migrant as a 'target of shame': Negotiating and transcending tainted identities in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and Kathleen Nevin's *You'll Never Go Back* (1946)" for an International Association for the Study of Irish Literature volume entitled *The Body in Pain in Irish Literature* (forthcoming 2016). She is a member of WISPS (Women in Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies), SLAS (Society of Latin American Studies) and SILAS (the Society for Irish Latin American Studies). As well as Irish travel writing in Latin America her research interests lie in an analysis of the image of the returnee in migration literature and film in addition to representations of Buenos Aires in Irish and Argentine publications in the early twentieth century.

On a recent research trip to the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin the painting below, entitled *Emigrants at Cork* (1840) caught my eye as within its frame it captures the dual perspective and conflicting emotions inherent to nineteenth-century movement out of Ireland: that of voluntary departure versus forced exile.² On the one hand is a woman's smiling face possibly indicating a voluntary departure contrasted with that of a woman covering her head in a shawl. She may be forced to leave and hides her head as she finds it too difficult to look upon the landscape around her. The latter construction of departure from Ireland as exilic in nature resonates throughout nineteenth and twentieth century Irish discourse and becomes the master narrative of travel out of Ireland, erasing many accounts of voluntary and willing travellers. Exile as a signifier of difference became a crucial component of nationalist rhetoric as the nineteenth century progressed. Famine survivors worldwide were encouraged to view themselves as victims of English misrule. This narrative serves a dual purpose as it "absolves the emigrant of guilt and modernised traditional perceptions of emigration as exile [while it also] distinguished the Irish from other immigrant groups and reinforced the sense of themselves as banished exiles" (Ward 2002: 119). An interesting parallel to this painting is John Watson Nicol's 1880 painting depicting Scottish migration entitled *Lochaber no more* (the title from a traditional lament by departing emigrants and song which relates nostalgia for a lost homeland – Figure 2).



Fig. 1

² NFC 'Emigrants at Cork'. George Mounsey Wheatley Atkinson (1806-1884), attributed, c. 1840

In their introduction to the 2008 Special Issue of the journal *Mobilities*, “Material Worlds, Migrant Cultures”, Paul Basu and Simon Coleman analyse this painting and encourage reflection on what is “carried over by migrants as they form their new/old world in novel territories and contexts” (328). After discussing the suitcase and sheep dog, they turn to the “materiality of the unlooked-upon homeland that recedes from the departing ship: the mist-covered hills of home, thatched cottages by the shore, the stuff of romantic Highlandist iconography” – and they question how “in the absence of photographs, such once-familiar landscapes were remembered or recreated in exile” (317). With regards to Irish travel to Argentina one response to how not only the material contours and landscapes of the homeland are recreated and remembered but also how a non-material sense of identity is constructed within the new landscape is that they are “materialised” and given new form in diasporic narrative space, in this case within the pages of the Irish-owned newspaper, *The Southern Cross (TSX)* and in particular, William Bulfin’s articles within this newspaper. Rather than the material objects that the traveller/migrant takes with them then, this paper analyses an artefact engendered from within the host community or diaspora space itself, *TSX*, which materialises national imaginings, allegiances and landscapes.³ Benedict Anderson (1991) has famously argued that the newspaper, along with the novel provides the technical means for “re-presenting” the kind of imagined community that is the nation – and that the reader of that paper is constantly reassured that the “imagined world” is visibly rooted in everyday life through its consumption by neighbours, being read on trams, in bars etc. In this article, the community imagined is a diasporic one and the newspaper under study serves as a narrative space to “bring into being” not only this community’s sense of self but also a “nation”/community of Irish diasporans.

Brah argues that a diasporic community’s identity “is constituted within the crucible of the *materiality of everyday life*; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively”. (1996: 183). This materiality and the stories within *TSX* are consumed within the diaspora space itself and later re-consumed beyond this space in other households, in Ireland, the United States, the United Kingdom, India and South Africa for instance. *TSX* then exists as a mobile world in and of itself, “materialising” and bringing the diaspora space of Argentina to a worldwide diaspora community. This paper explores the material effect of migration in the form of print culture and *TSX* newspaper, and in particular considers how William Bulfin’s travels and experiences are written into the material culture of Irish emigrant life in Argentina through his article or “sketches”

³ Avtar Brah defines diaspora as “the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes” (1996: 188).

for this newspaper. In order to contextualise his writing, I will first provide background to *TSX*, its readership and its circulation. I then turn to William Bulfin and how he constructs and materialises a transnational Irish-Argentine identity in his sketches for the newspaper. This article



Fig. 2

examines Bulfin's encounters with the various others he meets on his travels around Buenos Aires, in particular the figure of the *gaucho*. His sketches reveal an accommodation and empathy for *gaucho* culture, affinity for the Spanish language while at the same time offer signs of resistance to the host culture and society. I then go on to analyse Bulfin's return journey to Ireland and how Argentina and the figure of the gaucho are inscribed upon the national territory, "materialised" in his mediation of the Irish landscape and feed into his articulation of a distinct transnational Irish identity, that of the Irish-Argentine.

The first Irish newspaper in Argentina, *The Standard*, was established in 1861 (closed in 1959) by the Dublin born Mulhall brothers, Michael George and Edward Thomas. It was a four-page weekly, later a daily, originally published in English and French. It was perceived as an urban based, British-biased newspaper and Oliver Marshall notes that “the Mulhall brothers usually referred to themselves as English, championing the interests of the British community”. By 1875 they claimed they were shipping 20,000 copies of *The Weekly Standard* (1996: 15). *The Standard* became quite influential and “during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was one of the most quoted authorities on Argentina’s national and international affairs chiefly because of its perceived editorial neutrality, as it was published by Irishmen” (Marshall 1996: 15). The newspaper that established itself as a rival to *The Standard* and seemed to carry most weight with rural-based Irish immigrants was *The Southern Cross*. Set up by the Reverend Patrick Dillon in 1875, it was a Catholic and later, an Irish nationalist organ and Rev Dillon, addressed “26,000 Irish souls” in the newspaper’s first editorial on January 16, 1875. It published articles and stories about life on the grasslands (pampas) and in the city. It was only in 1964 that *The Southern Cross* assimilated the Spanish language and finally started to publish in Spanish, reflecting the eventual linguistic integration of the descendants of Irish settlers into Argentine society. The polarisation of the Irish community into broadly pro- or anti-British lines is reflected in the readership of both papers. *The Standard* contained extensive advertising for bank and shipping companies as well as employment pages for clerks and shop assistants, indicating it was directed at an urban readership, while the *TSX* advertised ploughs, medicines for cattle and horses as you can see from the hand-out. The motto of *TSX* affirms Irish commitment to Argentine society, though this commitment comes after religion and nationality. It states “we are, in the first place, Catholics, then Irish, and lovers and admirers of our new adopted country. We are liberal in politics, conservative in religion, respectful of the opinion of others and well-disposed toward all”. The newspaper’s founder, PJ Dillon, and subsequent editors wanted to declare their allegiance to their adopted country but only as a distinct Irish community. This would change under the editorial control of William Bulfin and move towards depicting an Irish-Argentine identity instead.

That *TSX* served a site for connecting with the worldwide diasporic community is attested to in correspondence between diasporans in Argentina, South Africa and the UK for example. There is evidence that *TSX* had a readership in Ireland among the communities of Westmeath and Longford, which were the source of the majority of Irish emigration to Argentina, though likely very small in number. Helen Kelly, for instance, notes that the newspaper was a source of information for distant family and friends and cites a letter from the Rattigan family who mention reading about a wedding in Buenos Aires in *The Southern Cross* (2009: 175).

The Bulfin family itself serves a microcosm for that readership. William's brother Robert was a member of the diaspora community in Birmingham and in a letter to his brother dated September 26, 1907 he writes "I get the *Southern Cross* every week and before time to properly digest it, some of the Irish are waiting for it, particularly the Sinn Féiners. But, I do not expect you will have many orders for it, the Birmingham Irish are notedly skinney". His brother Jack served in the army reserves, first in India and then in Cape Colony, South Africa and in a letter to William in February, 1898 he writes "I feel lost sometimes for a read of *TSX*. I got so used to its news and reading it in India and at home that I miss it more than you would believe. You will send it to me an odd time if you can". In Ireland, his brother Joe writes his thanks for receiving news from Argentina and the pages of *TSX*.⁴ This artefact then, crosses multiple borders and even engenders nostalgia for its pages and news in the readers from outside the Argentine diaspora space. Part of this nostalgia and the attraction for many of its readers who have travelled beyond the national territory may lie in its depiction of the Irish community as unfailingly nationalist and exilic in nature, that sense of the "banished exile" encapsulated in *Emigrants at Cork* for example. William Bulfin's sketches and editorials for *TSX* played a major role in constructing the Irish community as such and it is to his writing that I now turn.

William Bulfin arrived in Argentina in 1884 and his years working and travelling around Buenos Aires province provided him with ample material to write his sketches about characters who are mostly unmarried Irish sheep and cattle herders or *gauchos*, living lives of isolation on the Argentine pampas. His sketches chronicle daily life on the pampas and in *porteño* society, recording their polymorphic qualities and are populated by a multitude of characters, from beggars and coachmen to accountants and bankers. Bulfin bears witness to life in the capital city and offers his readers advice about local customs and how to navigate the dangers and pitfalls.⁵ His "Camp sketches" reveal an empathy with *gaucho* culture and, Irish assimilation of certain elements of that culture. Bulfin also links the nativist subject position to the Irish one, a position which is resisted at times by both Irish and *gaucho* inhabitants of the diaspora space. That Bulfin respected and admired the *gaucho* way of life is clear from his sketches, but that admiration is tempered by an ambivalence in both his narrative voice and subject position. There is a contradictory perception

⁴From the William Bulfin Papers held in the National Library of Ireland. MS 13811(3).

⁵A few examples of the concerns of the community, according to Bulfin, can be seen in the following articles: "The *Cobrador* and his work" about debt collectors and the nature of the elite in Buenos Aires (1 Jan 1892); "Mr Larcher's cure – a medical and non-medical story of Buenos Aires" about the state of medical care (11 March 1898); "How police news is written" an excoriating account of how the native press reports crimes, in which he criticises the use of foreign words in their articles, making them long-winded and obtuse (15 April 1898).

of the *gaucho* in evidence throughout his stories. They are part of a racialised discourse where “attention is shifted to the forms in which class, gender, sexuality or religion, for instance, might figure within these racisms, and to the specific signifier(s) – colour, physiognomy, religion, culture etc – around which these differing racisms are constituted” (Brah 1996: 185). Bulfin’s sketches veer between establishing solidarity with the host country on the one hand, and upholding Irish difference from other nationalities on the pampas on the other. Examples of this contradictory attitude come through in three related stories, “Castro Telleth of Tavalonghi’s Horse”, “The Defeat of Barragán” and “Campeando”. The common thread is the search for some missing cattle.⁶ In “Castro Telleth of Tavalonghi’s Horse” the Castro in question is a man who Bulfin shadows in the hope of learning something of his world. Castro was *capataz*, Bulfin’s immediate superior, and Bulfin describes him as “typical of his class – gaucho from head to heel and in every part of his body [...] a good-looking fellow despite his swarthy skin” (98). Castro’s skin colour is of note and establishes his difference to Bulfin. Establishing difference is not the only agenda in “Castro Telleth”. In this story Castro recounts how an Argentine horse made its way back from Italy to Argentina, which speaks to the ideology of return which informs the story. This return can be filtered through either the Irish or *gaucho* subject position. In keeping with his exilic discourse, Bulfin wants to remind the Irish on the pampas that the desire to return can be fulfilled. However, from the *gaucho* perspective, the return of the immigrant would mean the reduction of the threat to their way of life. Castro says of the horse: “How could he combat his desire to come back?! Impossible for him to stay away” (107). In the story, Castro elaborates upon the concept of *querencia*, which is “home, the home of the horse and the cow, just as one’s native land is home, just the same” (101).⁷ By having Castro utter these words Bulfin demonstrates how closely *gaucho* philosophy reflects his exilic desire. Thus through this story, we see the desire for home compete with the possibility of belonging in Argentina and the borders of Irishness momentarily shrink back to those of national territory.

In “The Defeat of Barragán”, Bulfin again shifts emphasis and in this tale he depicts *gaucho* practices as something which might not be fully understood by an outsider. Barragán is an *alcalde*, a mayor who has abused his authority and the local people. Castro defeats him in a horse race and then proceeds to challenge him to a knife fight. When Bulfin enquires as to why Castro needs to fight, Castro replies that it is part of *gaucho* custom to repay insults but that “you don’t understand these things yet, or you

⁶ All of Bulfin’s sketches were first published in *TSX* but a selection were published as *Tales of the Pampas* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1900).

⁷The Spanish *aquerenciar* means to get accustomed to something and *querencia* a place cattle are used to.

cannot see them as we see them” (141). There is evidence however, of slippage here, as Castro states that “you don’t understand *yet*”. I believe Bulfin is hinting at a possible shared understanding or at least a hope of one, which is at odds with his nationalist sentiment. Bulfin’s interaction with the native inhabitants of the shared diaspora space is seen to subtly destabilise his notion of identity as fixed and unchanging. Indeed, identity is adaptable and can take on foreign elements and characteristics without compromising a sense of Irishness. We see this illustrated in the last section of the tripartite story, “Campeando”, when Bulfin and Castro are still on the journey to find the missing cattle. In this story, Bulfin is rebuked by fellow Irishman Mike Lowrie, for spending too much time in *gaucho* company and becoming *gaucho* in his ways. Mike tells him “you’re getting too much of the country into you [...] galaventing round the seven parishes sucking mate and colloquering (mixing) with the *gauchos* [...] you’ll get a bad name for yourself” (164). Mike reiterates nationalist sentiment that no good can possibly come of assimilation and if Bulfin is not careful he could become corrupted by foreign ways and so risks being unwelcome or even unable to return to Ireland. Bulfin does not conform to this view however, and a clear indication of the transformation being wrought by his relationship and affinity with the *gauchos* is contained in his response to Mike’s criticism: “Mike was as good as gold, and meant well by me. But he failed to convince me” (164). Here Bulfin contests Mike’s restrictive perspective about the dangers and potential corruption brought about by interaction with the indigenous inhabitants of the shared diaspora space. Although Bulfin’s depiction of the *gaucho* contains ambivalences and contradictions, more often than not he links them to the Irish and represents the Irish choosing their company over other nationalities on the pampas.

In the summer of 1902 Bulfin returns to Ireland to settle his family at his ancestral home in Derrinalough, Co. Offaly. While in Ireland, he cycles around the country and writes about his return and travels for the readers of *The Southern Cross*.⁸ Bulfin’s sketches of Ireland draw on many themes ranging from tourism and the deforestation of the land to the economy and the state of education. Throughout his sketches, his nationalist agenda and criticism of colonialism are foregrounded. However, sewn into his “combative anti-British nationalism” (Ryle 1999: 5) is his contestation of Ireland as the primary referent for identity construction and *Rambles* reveals a subject who closely identifies with the diaspora space and its inhabitants. Bulfin’s sketches serve as a link between the diaspora space of

⁸The first sketch entitled “At sea” was published June 21, 1902 and subsequent sketches entitled “In Eirinn” were published over the following seven months. Due to popular demand his articles were then reprinted in nationalist Irish newspapers such as Griffith’s *The United Irishman* and the *New York Daily News*. The popularity of the sketches lead to its publication in 1907 as *Rambles in Eirinn*. I will hereafter refer to the narrative as *Rambles*.

Argentina and the Irish-Argentine community there and the bounded territory of the homeland. By writing Argentina into his travel sketches of Ireland, Bulfin attempts to construct a transnational Irish community and identity and extend the boundaries of Irishness to include this space. Ryle, in fact, argues that *Rambles* was integral in the construction of this identity and “was part of the cultural work which sought to bring [this] community into being” (1999: 115). The “imagined community” that Bulfin is addressing is the worldwide Irish diasporic community referred to at the beginning of the paper. Bulfin is at pains to reassure these diasporans that they have not been forgotten and would, in fact, be welcomed back to Ireland.

Rambles opens with the returned exile on the deck of a ship awaiting the first sight of “home”, setting the tone for the fulfilment of the fantasy of the “glorious” return and warm welcome that awaits all potential returnees. However, the paradigm of exile which encompasses this fantasy return is threatened by the very act of fulfilment, as the fantasy, “the operative engine of actively maintained exile, must remain unrealised [...] the exile must roam and pant to return but never actually achieve it” (Naficy 1991: 288). Thus Bulfin is in danger of undermining the exile status he has appropriated. To this end, Bulfin takes care to present himself and the diaspora community as exiles. In fact, in his preface to *Rambles* he fuses the Irish-Argentine community to an exilic status. He informs his readers that he wrote the sketches “more or less hurriedly, as opportunity offered, here and there on the road [...] with the sole object of sharing the writer’s thoughts and feelings with certain Irish exiles on the other side of the world”. In an inversion of the Oisín myth of journeying from Ireland to the magical land of eternal youth, Bulfin positions Ireland as the fantasy land: “it was going to be like a visit to fairy-land, before we reached Dublin at all; for like most returning exiles, we were up long before sunrise, watching...for the first glimpse of Ireland” (2). The dual nature of the voluntary/forced departure evinced in the painting *Emigrants at Cork* is carefully manipulated by Bulfin to depict a community which has retained its connection to the homeland and a continued desire to look upon that space.

In Bulfin’s references to Argentine diaspora space and its inhabitants, he evinces and solidifies a transnational Irish-Argentine identity. He achieves this through correlations in the topography of the diaspora space and that of the national territory in addition to traditional features of rural Irish culture, in particular oral culture such as songs and story-telling and even nostalgia for the diaspora space. An example of this can be seen in Bulfin’s reminders to the reader of the diaspora community’s allegiance to their Irish identity. When discussing a love song he hears on his travels, he notes “I have heard it sung in two hemispheres – by the winter firesides of Leinster and under the *paraíso* trees around the homes of the pampas” (22).

Here we see that memories of place and songs are linear – that is, there is a shared oral cultural tradition and the Irish diaspora community maintains and cherishes these links. That the shared culture is an oral one may speak to Bulfin’s lauding of the rural over the urban, as demonstrated in his *Tales of the Pampas*. The diaspora community of the Pampas were largely from rural Irish society and Bulfin is keen to show that this community has not erased its past and their traditions live on abroad. Bulfin repeatedly draws attention to Argentine landscapes in his sketches, now remembering and recreating these spaces in his travels in Ireland. Upon sighting the Curragh (a flat open plain of almost 5,000 acres/20 km² of common land in County Kildare, Ireland, between Newbridge and Kildare) nostalgia for Argentina enters his narrative, suggesting stronger ties to the diaspora space than an exile might desire. Bulfin muses:

I never see the Curragh without being reminded of the Pampas. It is very like a slice of a camp taken out of Arcifes or San Pedro. The land rises and falls in long and gentle undulations. There are no hills or vales, no hedges or walls – nothing but the shallow depressions and the billowy ridges [...] I ran into a flock of sheep [...] sufficiently large to be suggestive of a corner of the wide sheep runs far away. (190)

Here we see the Curragh displaced by the Pampas and Bulfin is now seeing Ireland through Argentina. This mediation of the Irish landscape through an Argentine one strongly suggests that Argentina has become crucial to how he perceives his environment and identity. Moreover, by deliberately tying the topography of Ireland to a landscape thousands of miles away Bulfin is striving to unite the diaspora community with the homeland in one communal diaspora space and in doing so extend the boundaries of Irishness beyond the national territory. This is not the only evidence of nostalgia for Argentina and how it has become crucial to how Bulfin renders himself as subject, potentially even displacing Ireland as “home”. On his travels he is asked where he is from and instead of laying claim to his Irish roots in Derrinalough, Offaly, he twice responds “south, seven thousand miles” (199, 414), revealing how integral Argentina has become to his concept of home as well as his identity construction. He is proud of not only his status as a returnee but also, it seems, of his adopted country.

Ultimately, though fiercely nationalist, Bulfin romanticises both Ireland and Argentina in his travels and actively promotes a transnational sense of Irishness, drawing the diaspora space into the national territory. His sketches reveal a diaspora subject who empathises with the indigenous inhabitants and who challenges the potentially corrupting impact of those inhabitants and their shared space. Within these narratives the exilic subject reflects practices of resistance as well as essentialising tendencies

with regards to identity. Nonetheless, what becomes clear is that the diaspora space can accommodate multiple forms of cultural identity and Irishness is re-shaped because of this. Bulfin re-imagines Irish identity as that in which the national territory is neither anchor nor primary referent for identity construction, instead extending it outward to encompass the myriad diaspora communities worldwide. His return journey to Ireland encapsulates various elements of his re-imagining. Though *Rambles in Eirinn* is Bulfin's ode to Irish Ireland, his experiences in the diaspora space are not forgotten. Indeed, they are written into his travels and, similar to how Bulfin expands the national territory of Ireland to include the diaspora space, his narration of the Irish landscape "materialises" elements of that same space.

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