

Becoming Irlandés: Private Narratives of the Irish Emigration to Argentina (1844–1912)

Review Number:

607

Publish date:

Saturday, 30 June, 2007

Author:

Edmundo Murray

ISBN:

9789509725713

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

212pp.

Publisher:

LOLA: Literature of Latin America

Publisher url:

<http://www.lola-online.com/>

Place of Publication:

Buenos Aires

Reviewer:

David Fitzpatrick

It would be easy, but facile, to dismiss emigration from Ireland to Argentina as a minor aberration in the history of both countries. Fewer than 50,000 of Ireland's eight million emigrants between 1830 and 1930 made for Argentina, forming a tiny fraction of that country's small ingles (English-speaking) minority during an era of post-colonial wars, nation-building, and rapid economic development. This was the only non-Anglophone country to attract more than a trickle of Irish emigrants, though Argentina's exoticism was mitigated by its close political and economic ties with Britain. In contrast to the stereotypical emigrant experience in Britain or the United States, the Irish in Argentina quickly won a deserved reputation for success in the risky but potentially rewarding business of taming the pampas, and of buying and selling land and livestock on a scale unimaginable in rural Ireland. Unlike the mass of emigrants heading from the rural West and South to the industrial cities of Britain and the United States, the Irish in Argentina came predominantly from three relatively prosperous counties (Westmeath, Wexford, and Longford). Strong and enduring chains of migration developed from extended family networks clustered in a handful of parishes, as successful settlers induced relatives and neighbours to follow their example and often to join their business enterprises in Argentina. The settlers were sufficiently endogamous to foster a self-replicating and self-consciously Irish community, distinguishable within the broader English-speaking population by its adherence to an increasingly Irish version of Roman Catholicism (often at odds with the local hierarchy and aggressively fostered by the Irish missionary priest, Anthony Fahy). Yet the Irish were so closely aligned in politics and business with the Anglophone élite that few Argentinians or continental immigrants

distinguished between those of British and Irish nationality. The Irish in Argentina were therefore too few, too comfortable in their origins, too successful, too respectable, and too British in their culture to fit any conventional stereotype of the Irish emigrant. Until the 1970s, the predominance of reductive models of Irish emigration ensured that the Argentinian strand would be dismissed as an insignificant if diverting footnote to the master narrative of exile, poverty at home and abroad, discrimination, resistance, lingering resentment, and eventual triumph against the odds.

As in most fields, the effect of recent revisionist scholarship has been to dismantle such master narratives, to reject the routine application of stereotypes to individual emigrants, to affirm the multiplicity and complexity of emigrant experiences, and indeed to place particular emphasis on seemingly aberrant minorities and sub-groups. In their crusade against the reductionists, whose stereotypes were typically drawn from mid-nineteenth-century Boston or New York, Don Akenson and his motley band of acolytes and like-minds have made highly effective use of better-documented but smaller-scale movements to countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and even Montserrat. Once the pursuit of an illusory uniformity is abandoned, all variant strands carry equal significance when interpreting the consequences of migration for the individual. Such studies concentrate on the diverse consequences of different host environments rather than the general impediments to ethnic performance formerly attributed to 'cultural baggage'. The revisionist pioneers tended to picture emigrants as rational actors responding to different combinations of opportunities and obstacles, not as impotent victims of discrimination or ignorance. Their post-modernized successors (often the same people a few years on), wary of models based on economic calculations of rational action, have preferred to visualize migration as a process of 'negotiating identity' or simply of 'becoming' something different. In either case, the study of superficially exceptional movements, such as that from Ireland to Argentina, is no less useful in testing general economic or psychological models of migration than studies relating to Boston, or New Orleans, or Auckland, or rural Ontario.

One consequence of the disaggregation of migration studies has been enhanced interest in personal testimony, such as correspondence, diaries, and autobiographies. Most of the interesting questions about why people choose to move, how they organize their movements, how they respond to changing environments, and how their actions affect others, lie beyond the range of the major conventional sources for migration history (official enquiries and statistics, press reports, public debates, institutional records, and stereotypes expressed in political rhetoric, caricatures, or fiction). At first sight, hand-written letters or reminiscences by nineteenth-century emigrants promise immediate access to their uncensored motives, experiences, social networks, and personal loyalties. As every student of emigrant testimony soon discovers, however, private rhetoric is at least as difficult to unpick and interpret as public or political rhetoric. Emigrant letters were seldom unguarded confessions or mere factual reports, typically being instruments deployed to influence the thoughts and actions of their recipients. Since virtually no epistolary assertion, however circumstantial, can be taken at face value, the analyst is faced with formidable problems of contextualization and interpretation, exacerbated in most cases by the need to imagine the missing half of each dialogue. Furthermore, the self-evident absurdity of attributing 'representative' status to the tiny minority of letters that have survived, or even to the corpus of letters originally generated by more or less literate writers, has led some critics to dismiss the utility of collections of emigrant letters, however scrupulously handled. Despite these challenges, some of the most interesting recent work on international migration has exploited individual testimony to undermine specious generalizations and to document the breath-taking diversity and ingenuity of human responses to novel situations. Immersion in such sources has helped to liberate historians from self-imposed blinkers, and to reconnect aggregate analysis with contemporary constructions of personal experience.

Edmundo Murray's quirky but fascinating edition of 'private narratives', expanded from a Spanish version published in 2004, is a significant contribution to the documentation and also the analysis of Irish emigration to Argentina. The statistical foundation for this movement is notably shaky, since most official Argentinian enumerations failed to discriminate between those of British and Irish birth within the broad category of *ingles*, while very little information on those embarking for Argentina is available from Irish or British sources. Even so, over the past quarter-century, the remarkable genealogical work of Eduardo Coghlan, and

studies based on nominal data by Hilda Sabato and Juan Carlos Korol, have yielded rich information on a substantial sub-set of Irish settlers and their descendants. Such studies have enabled Murray in his introductory chapter to provide a succinct account of the places of origin and settlement, the age of emigrants at the time of arrival, marriage, and death, and their occupations as recorded in the Argentinian census. The meat of his book, however, is four chapters of personal testimony, incorporating two brief memoirs (presumably based on lost diaries) and two sets of letters from Irish emigrants or their descendants in Argentina.

The memoirs are of less interest to historians of migration than the letters. That by Edward Robbins (1802–66), a prosperous farmer from King’s County (Offaly) who was active in the Catholic Association and the Repeal movement, contains but a single page on his life after emigration to Argentina in 1849. ‘Don Tomás’ Garrahan (1864–1936), although of Westmeath descent, had no direct knowledge of Ireland and spent his life making and losing large sums of money on a succession of sheep and cattle ranches (‘camps’) in various parts of Argentina. The social and economic networks documented in his account were overwhelmingly Irish in origin, and the climax of Garrahan’s narrative is his marriage, aged forty-six, to another Argentinian of Irish descent. He congratulated himself on his repudiation of tobacco, drink (apart from a flirtation with wine as a boy), and gambling (after ‘several times being sold by either rider, starter or judge’). Although a practising Catholic, his moralizing was as much the affirmation of a respectable *ingles* as an *irlandés*.

Similar values are expressed in a large collection of letters (1844–79) sent to Martin Murphy in Westmeath by his brothers and other relatives in Argentina. Mainly written by James Murphy, a relentlessly successful *estanciero* intent upon importing his extended family to Argentina and in building up transoceanic business connections, these letters are particularly valuable in chronicling the complex and intricate process of chain migration. James portrayed himself as *paterfamilias* of a far-flung clan, sending home sage advice reinforced by substantial remittances with strict instructions as to their use. By contrast, the letters received by John James Pettit in Victoria (1864–75) are primarily concerned with fostering emotional solidarity among the descendants of Irish emigrants rather than with business connections. Pettit, born in Buenos Aires of Wexford parentage, had moved as an infant with his widowed father to the gold-town of Dunolly, but his maternal cousins in Argentina (mainly young women who likewise ‘never visited Ireland’) were determined to incorporate him into their extended family and to share their news, hopes, and losses as cholera and yellow fever engulfed Argentina. Like Garrahan, another descendant of Irish emigrants, the Argentinian cousins belonged to a strongly Catholic ‘Irish’ sub-culture within the *ingles* and ‘Foreign Community of B. A.’ (p. 107). Their correspondence illuminates the multiple meanings of Irishness for those conscious of Irish origins, dependant on Irish contacts, yet without personal knowledge of Ireland.

As Murray admits, these testaments of Irish Argentina are random records, neither remarkable for their eloquence and informativeness, nor demonstrably representative of ‘ordinary’ emigrants and their descendants. He makes little attempt to subject so small a dossier to content analysis or to close textual critique, apart from suggestive if inconclusive dissections of the usage of the words ‘camp’ and ‘home’, and an interesting discussion of the occurrence of Spanish terms in these Hiberno-English texts (pp. 23–6). Instead, the idiosyncratic introduction and epilogue offer impressionistic insights into the ‘search for identity on the part of the Irish in Argentina, that is to say, the recognition of what they are not’ (p. 132). Murray uses his four chapters of personal testimony to illustrate a process, which he believes to be general, whereby Irish emigrants and their descendants acquired first an English, then an Argentinian, and subsequently a self-consciously ‘Irish’ identity (p. 6). This process was largely dictated by changes in the Argentinian political context, producing different solutions to the identity problem for successive generations of emigrants, while also encouraging individuals to redefine their identity in the course of an Argentinian career. Murray’s general comments, though often thought-provoking and nuanced, appear to have only a tenuous connection with the transcribed narratives. Textual interpretation is left up to the reader, helped by an armoury of very detailed and methodical notes on individuals, places, and public events mentioned in the text. Though naturally stronger for Argentina than for Ireland (or Australia), Murray’s contextualization is enriched by some superb illustrations including the author’s own photographs of buildings and scenes in Ireland as well

as Argentina. The outcome is an important contribution to the study of the Irish overseas, using unfamiliar personal testimony of interest to every imaginative student of international migration and ethnic identity.

Other reviews:

Buenos Aires Herald

<http://www.irlandeses.org/devenir.htm> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/607>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4046>

[2] <http://www.irlandeses.org/devenir.htm#kiernan>