Cultural Perspectives on the Irish in Latin America

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Edited by

Estelle Epinoux and Frank Healy

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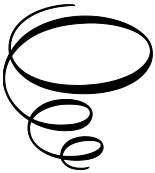

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3013-2
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3013-3

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the following institutions for their financial contribution to the workshop we organised in Limoges on 13th December 2018: 'Images and Perceptions of South America, Central America and the Caribbean in Irish Culture', the success of which encouraged us to embark on the publication of the present collective volume: CRHIA (Centre de Recherche en Histoire Internationale et Atlantique (EA 1163), EHIC (Espaces Humains et Interactions Culturelles, EA 1087) and the IUL (Institut Universitaire des Langues of La Rochelle University).

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Ireland has experienced waves of immigration of successive ethnic groups, from the Celts, through the Vikings to the Normans, but it is associated more with the people who have left its shores, either willingly or by force, and who formed the Irish diaspora. Those who settled in English-speaking lands such as North America and Australia are better-known, and their rich history is well-documented.[1] However, many Irish people travelled to Latin America and, although their story has attracted a little less attention, it is no less fascinating. This volume examines various aspects of the imprint left by these settlers through a cultural perspective (poetry, cinema, literature, memory and linguistics) both in Ireland and in Latin America.

The mythological reference to Saint Brendan visiting Mexico in the 6th century is the beginning of the link that exists between Ireland and South America. There is a long and well-documented history of Irish emigration to France, Spain and Portugal that dates back to the late 16th century,[2] and migration to Latin America appears to be closely linked to the Iberian dimension of the Irish diaspora, "connected with traditional links between the Irish in Britain, Spain and Portugal".[3] Following defeat in the Nine Years war (1689-1690), the Flight of the Earls in 1607 led to the departure of many Irish soldiers to join the Spanish army fighting the English in Flanders. Known as the Wild Geese, the successive waves of emigration that occurred until the mid-18th century were the result of the departure of Irish soldiers who, after the defeat of the Jacobite armies in 1691, left to join different European armies as mercenaries, and many of them settled in Spain.[4]

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[1] Fitzpatrick, D. (1980), Irish Emigration in the Later Nineteenth Century, *Irish Historical Studies, 22*(86), 126-143, doi:10.1017/S0021121400026158

[2] Henry, G. (1992), *Irish Military Community in Spanish Flanders 1586-1621*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, ISBN 9780716524854.

[3] Murray, E., "Secret Diasporas: The Irish in Latin America and the Caribbean", *History of Ireland*, July-August 2008, vol 16, n°4, 16.

[4] Murphy, J. H. (1994), "*The Wild Geese*", The Irish Review, Cork University Press (16 (Autumn – Winter, 1994)): 23–28, doi:10.2307/29735753. JSTOR 29735753

During the 15th century the Irish Catholic church in exile set up a seat in Lisbon, which then became an important centre for Irish trade just as Portugal was establishing a foothold in the New World.[5]

Thus, as Spain and Portugal founded settlements in Central and South America, the Irish clergy and particularly the military became a part of this history.[6] The first Irish missionaries arrived in Brazil in the 16th century and "(…) other priests were born in Spain or Portugal of Irish parents, and were engaged by the Jesuits and Franciscans to missions in Latin America because they spoke English."[7] The Irish were present in most parts of Latin America, in Argentina, Uruguay, the Caribbean, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico and Chile, where their influence was significant in the national struggle for independence. Others became merchants, owners of plantations in Guyana and the Caribbean islands, managers, foremen and workers. Today, the number of Irish – born immigrants living in Argentina and Uruguay, for example, averages 50 000.[8]

It is within the cultural, social and historical space created by the Irish presence in Latin America that our collective volume navigates.

In **Part I**, Sarah O'Brien provides a fascinating insight into the lives of the descendants of the 19th century Irish settlers in Argentina. Using an oral historian approach, through interviews with members of the diaspora, she draws a nuanced portrait of a community that likes to think of itself as being part of the Argentine elite, but whose complex history involved much hardship and deprivation for most Irish settlers. Through her interviews she also retraces the events of the 1976-83 military dictatorship and how this affected the Irish Argentine community. The trauma of this period is revisited and the through the work of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory, O'Brien shows how painful memories, in order to survive in a meaningful way, are "highly contingent on the existence of reference points in the surrounding community".

Based on an interview with Howard Fergus, a historian who has specialised in the history of Montserrat, and the concepts of postcolonial and transnational studies, Cheikh N'Guirane examines the Irish influence in

[5] O'Connor, Thomas, *Lisbon and Counter-Reformation Ireland: Trade, Community and Religious War, 1558–1615*, p. 11-34, *in* MacLennan, Alexandra (ed) (2023). *The Irish Catholic Diaspora, Five centuries of global presence*. Oxford, UK: Peter Lang.

[6] http://www.irlandeses.org/murrayintro.htm, accessed 11 January 2023.

[7] Murray, E., *Ibid*, 16.

[8] Murray, E, "Secret Diasporas: The Irish in Latin America and the Caribbean", *History of Ireland*, July-August 2008, vol 16, n°4, 15.

this Caribbean Island and how the culture of African slaves and Irish colonisers was melded into a narrative that raises important issues concerning the history of the island. N'Guirane draws "parallels between Pan-Africanism and the Irish revolution in the context of the British Empire". He describes how Fergus deconstructs this narrative and in particular the significance of Saint Patrick's Day in the history of Montserrat, questioning "the concept of "Irish diaspora" as applied to people of African descent in Montserrat".

Although ostensibly very different in theme and approach, Ivette Romero also deals with a narrative in which there are blurred boundaries "separating truth from invention, especially those related to place and provenance". She looks at the career of Irish-born Lola Montez, whose real name was Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert and who spent her life pretending to be a Spanish or Cuban artiste. Montez occupied a "multiplicity of physical and culturally diverse spaces" that "fed her sense of identity, creating in her a highly complex and pliable personality". Through both film and literature, Romero explores how Montez, "with her "racialized," exotic, and enigmatic otherness", became an enduring icon of popular culture.

Part II looks at perceptions of Irish and Latin American culture through films. Film director Peter Kelly's fascinating insight into *Radharc*, a religious affairs documentary series, with a production team that initially consisted of a group of Irish priests, that was broadcast on Ireland's public service television station, *Radió Teilifís Éireann* (RTÉ) between 1962 and 1996. Kelly shows the importance of this "small eye on a big world" in shaping the perceptions of a mainstream audience of the principal political, social and cultural themes of the time. Kelly himself was a member of the production team of *Radharc* and has access to its extensive archives. His central argument is that, thanks to its "unique capacity to create images in the popular imagination", these documentaries contributed significantly to the awareness of the issues that were prevalent in Latin America, but in so doing led to these issues being discussed in an Irish context. Kelly argues that this "helped transform Ireland in the 1960s" by bringing into people's living rooms the shock waves of the social revolution of the 1960s, thus altering the social and political trajectory of Ireland.

The film *Eliza Lynch Queen of Paraguay* is analysed by Cécile Bazin through the lens of the rehabilitation of a woman who was both a heroine of Paraguay and a figure of scandal. Irish director Alan Gilsenan used a docu-drama genre for his film, and Bazin examines how this format "provides a space for a re-enactment of her life and the unheard voice of an Irish woman in South America", and "offers a means to assert Eliza Lynch's legitimate

place in history". The docu-drama format allowed Gilsenan to portray "the tragic dimension of the life of an Irish woman intermingling with the tragic national history of Paraguay". By doing so, it also offers an alternative historical discourse in which the place of women is redefined.

The Irish film director Paddy Breathnach, together with his scriptwriter Mark O'Halloran, took a different approach in their 2015 film *Viva*. As Estelle Epinoux and Frank Healy show in their article, their fictional account of Havanna is "imbued with an almost "documentary-like discretion". The film is centred around a cabaret for drag queens, and the *transformista* of the main character, Jesus, a young man who is trying to affirm his sexual identity in a confrontation with his dying father. The transformation of the body is a key theme: the body of Jesus is also a metaphor for the "body" of Havana after the end of the Castro regime and speaks to the evolution of Cuban society. Nonetheless, the film also tackles universal themes, such as abortion and same sex marriages, but refracted through an Irish lens onto a Cuban canvas.

Part III examines Irish Literary Perceptions of Latin America. In the first chapter of this section, Aedín Ní Loingsigh takes us through a language-centred analysis of Roger Casement's writings while he was working as a diplomat for the British government in Peru. Casement's brief was to report on the working conditions of the indigenous workforce of the Peruvian Amazon Company (PAC), who were systematically subjected to "colonial violence". She focuses on Casement's dependence on translators for the work he was mandated to carry out with the PAC workers and his realisation that "in colonial contexts language encounter is not neutral but is bound up with questions of power". As Ní Loingsigh makes clear, this awareness of the importance of language in a colonial context was informed partly by Casement's sensitivity to questions concerning the Irish language, as shown by his support for the 1909 campaign to make Irish compulsory in the matriculation exam for the new National University. She also contends that it is important to recognise "how translation — and language-aware research more generally — is paramount in understanding how individual lives are shaped and how encounters across cultures function."

Cathy Roche-Liger examines the concept of home in the work of the Irish poet Harry Clifton, who has a unique insight into South American culture as his mother was from Chile. She compares and contrasts his vision of Chile in particular and South America in general with his perception of Ireland. Roche-Liger quotes from Keatinge's review of *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass*: "his poems deliberately cultivate a kind of detached and exilic awareness, an "original homelessness"". This awareness colours his

perception of South America as a "lost paradise", a "sunlit world of yellows and purples" that is in stark contrast to "grey Ireland, north, in the rain and fog, people are lost". Through his work, Clifton creates "both the myth of the eternal return and the impossibility of returning home". As Roche-Liger argues, "both South America and Ireland are described as lonely places, as holding the illusion of home. Yet Chile has a sort of magical, mythical dimension because it is the place of origins."

The concluding chapter of this volume is a fascinating insight into the relationship between Irishness and *argentinidad* [Argentineness], which is a relatively new field of study. María Luján Medina takes the fictional narratives of William Bulfin as an exemplar of diasporic writing in Argentina in the 19th century. She considers this work as a valuable representation of the host country, and examines in particular the relationship between the *gaucho*, "one of the most prominent national symbols of Argentine identity", and through which "other ethnic groups could participate in Argentine cultural traditions, and eventually become part of the Argentine nation". Luján Medina shows how the symbolic figure of the *gaucho* not only helps shape the Irish-Argentine hybrid identity, but could also "challenge the hegemonic literary constructions of national identity promoted by the Argentine state at that time".

PART I

MAPPING THE IRISH IN SOUTH AMERICA

CHAPTER ONE

CARTOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE IRISH IN ARGENTINA

SARAH O'BRIEN

At midday on 5 February 2018, I received a text message from an unknown number. Frowning, I scrolled through the first line: "Dear Sarah. I saw your article in the paper this morning." I read the rest of the message, then returned the phone to the counter-top. Outside, black rain spattered the window, blotting out the sky beyond.

The article in question had been published that morning in the *Irish Times*.[1] The headline read "The Irish in Argentina: not always a successful diaspora". The by-line, selected by the newspaper editor, was similarly direct: "Conventional success story hides suffering of ordinary Irish-Argentines." In the main body, I had written about atrocities perpetrated against Irish-Argentines during the 1976-83 military dictatorship. One included the mass murder by military forces of five priests in Saint Patrick's Irish Church in Buenos Aires.[2] The person who had texted me, the text message's last line revealed, was Tomas Kelly. Tomas' uncle was Alfie Kelly, one of the five priests murdered that July 1976 night in Saint Patrick's. Until the publication of my article, the fate of Alfie Kelly had never been openly discussed. Now, within a few hours of the article's publication, it had spread halfway across the world, from Argentina to Ireland and back again.

It is ominous, the poet Carolyn Forché once wrote, to live through a memory that is not your own.[3] For me, Forché's insight reflects the position of the oral historian, whose recovery of violent, traumatic and suppressed

[1] O'Brien, "The Irish in Argentina: Not always a successful diaspora".
[2] Guest, *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War against Human Rights and the United Nations.*
[3] Forché, "In conversation with James Longenbach."

memories can feel eerily voyeuristic. There is also the dilemma of projecting a personal, family-based memory onto a transnational canvas. I had first heard about the murder of Alfie Kelly from his brother Dickie, while recording an oral history of Irish emigration to Argentina. Though Dickie was third-generation Irish-Argentine, this story of his brother was told to me in hushed tones, with evident reticence. It had been framed by Dickie as a family memory: no more, no less.

And yet, within oral history scholarship, family memory is understood as a critical unit in the production of broader social memory.[4] Indeed, the work of Maurice Halbwachs — a leading twentieth-century philosopher of social memory — was rooted in family memory.[5] Halbwachs' work observed how family-based memories mirrored larger social processes of remembering, which Halbwachs went on to define as "collective memory." No-one remembers alone, Halbwachs' work had concluded. Memories, for all of us, hinge on the existence of a community that has borne witness to our recollections. This community must be able to conceptualise the lived event and verify its veracity. For Halbwachs, this explained why soldiers returning from World War I could not speak of their experiences. A society did not yet exist that was capable of conceiving the unprecedented horrors of the trenches. In the absence of external coordinates in our surrounding community, recollection remains trapped in a state of phantom-hood. Paralysed, it is fragmentary in form, haunting in tone, orphaned from the narrative required to give it the coherence of a memory.

Encountering Irishness in Argentina

When I moved to Buenos Aires in 2009 it did not take long to perceive the existence of two separate communities. On the one hand, there was a society that had blossomed through the leftist Kirchner presidency. In 2003, Nestor Kirchner succeeded the right leaning Menem. One of Kirchner's first decrees in 2003 was to illegalise the laws of immunity that had protected military leaders of the 1976-83 dictatorship from prosecution.[6] In San Telmo, my low-budget, city centre neighbourhood, *Kirchernismo* and its attendant values had visibly altered the linguistic landscape. Terms like "truth", "memory", "justice" and "reconciliation" were part of the public

[4] Barclay and Koefoed, "Family, Memory and Identity: An Introduction", 4.
[5] Halbwachs, *Collective Memory,* 70.
[6] Grandin, "The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History and State Formation in Argentina." Sikkink "From Pariah State to Global Protagonist: Argentina and the Struggle for International Human Rights", 14.

lexicon. These terms were deployed everywhere from the neighbourhood's daily newspaper to graffiti-covered walls. Memorials to *los desaparecidos* — the disappeared — were freshly set in cement. They marked locations from which some 7000 people had been taken and never seen again. Murals commemorating assassinated left-wing activists were painted on street corners. A former naval barracks and site of torture, La Esma, was renamed "La Ex-Esma." It had been converted into a museum for public memory and free tours were offered daily. When I visited, school children crowded through its gloomy corridors, pens and paper in hand. One week of each school year was dedicated across the country to studying the dictatorship. Memory, in 2009 Argentina, was having its moment.

On the other hand, there was the Irish-Argentine community, which I had come to study and which appeared to exist outside of the broader cultural framework. In the suburban Irish-run school where I taught, no mention was made of the truth trials that were taking place in the courts. Walking through the school's luxurious library, I did not find one book about the nation's 1976-83 military dictatorship. In comfortable Irish-Argentine associations like the Fahy Club and the Hurling Club, located in the affluent northern suburbs, there was a straining toward memory, but it was of another origin. Its lexicon involved terms like "el campo" — the family ranch. It echoed around certain stalwart names: Father Fahy, the Irish priest who had started the movement from Ireland to Argentina; Admiral William Browne, the Mayo man who had fought in the Argentine independence movement.[7] It indexed particular rural towns, far out in the pampas: Carmen de Areco, Suipacha, Junín, Arrecifes. Often, it reached deeper into its linguistic heritage, retrieving the incantational rhythms of older homelands: Mullingar, Tyrellstown, Westmeath. Here, in these private Irish clubs, as in San Telmo, memory was as practiced and polished as the verses of a folk song.

My oral history research began in the Hurling Club. For ethnic-based studies like mine, immigrant associations provide tangible starting points, representing the coagulation of ethnic minorities' value systems and mentalities. My first visit to the Hurling Club was revelatory. I had in mind a place that would look like my local GAA club in Limerick. But Buenos Aires' Hurling Club bore no resemblance to the windswept, unadorned playing fields that rimmed my home-village. Here, security men guarded the entrance and a high boundary fence cut the grounds away from the

[7] O'Brien, 2013, "Politics, Community and Nationhood in Irish-Argentine Oral Narrative", *in* O' Aodha and O' Cathain, *The Silent People? New Perspectives on the Irish Abroad*, 75.

public. Carefully manicured lawns were edged with exotic foliage… Handsome youths dressed in white played cricket on the grass. In the back field, a game of rugby was in play. Inside, men wore smoking jackets and sipped whisky. I was warmly welcomed and contact details with willing interviewees were readily exchanged. This too was indicative of the outward alterity of this community. In my previous oral history studies of Irish emigration to Britain it had taken months and sometimes years to find participants willing to put their immigrant experiences on record.[8] Where Irishness in Britain was fraught and contested, it seemed in Argentina to be the opposite: it was something to talk about.

This pride, and its historicity, manifested in the early interviews that I would go on to record. Frequently, my interlocutors expended great time and energy in describing their family's Irish lineage. My speakers emphasised the cases where both their maternal and paternal ancestors were Irish. Double barrelled Irish surnames were worn like badges of honour. "My grandparents came from Ireland", one woman explained to me. "Both sides. Grandparents, not great parents." Another woman described her father in terms of racial purity: "Pure Irish. Pure. Pure. Irish of the cradle."

One interview, recorded in an opulent residence in Buenos Aires' most exclusive suburb, noted that the Irish of his grandfather's generation "were very easily and quickly and smoothly accepted into the high society":

> Because they were educated. They had good looks. They were charming people, in general. Happy people. Catholic. And hard workers, honest. So they started marrying very quickly into high society. And today, all the Lynch, O'Farrell, Donovans, Kavanaghs – they are all prominent names. If you go to the Jockey Club, which is the most prominent of high society, you'll find a lot of Irish names there. Murray, Casey, Murphy, Lynch. So I think the Irish were well received.

Through this style of prose, the different poles of Irishness in Argentina soon became apparent. Catholicism was one facet of this community's identity politics. "Good looks" was another and, as I will discuss in due course, this was euphemistic for whiteness. Middle-class prestige was the next. By emphasising their reputation for honesty and hard work, the narrator above justified the "high society" status that was associated with the Irish-Argentine community at large. Another commented that "the Irish here, in the big estancias [ranches], made fortunes:"

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[8] O'Brien, "Irish Associational Culture and Identity in Post-World War II Birmingham", 13.

> Huge amounts of money. There were I'd say twenty families – O'Connor, McDermot, Sills, Lally, O'Rourke, Kelly, Brennan, Ganly, Howlan, O'Brien, Cahill.

I asked my interlocutor if he thought that most of the Irish-Argentine community had experienced such fortune. He replied, "the ones that liked to work made a great living."

In time, I managed to break beyond the participant pool recruited through the Hurling Club. I travelled more extensively into the pampas, sent many emails and made serendipitous contacts through my own friendship networks in the city centre. As these interviews stacked up, I began to note a subtle but pervasive pattern across the oral history study at large. In the majority of cases, narratives concentrated on general community lore, as exemplified in the stories of the wealthy Irish landowners. By contrast, there was a sparsity of memories that referred to the particularities of individual narrators' family situations. Few memories seemed to emerge from what Assmann calls the intimate corridors of "communicative memory." This dearth in personal Irish-Argentine memories was sometimes addressed by narrators when acknowledging their parents' and grandparents' reticence to talk of themselves. One man explained that "they passed it so bad in their country that they tried to forget. They tried to forget." "They didn't speak much", another elderly woman told me from her flat in Buenos Aires. "My grandmother was born in Argentina but she never spoke about Ireland. And everyone says the same. They never commented." I asked if they felt that there was perhaps some trauma about that past. One woman disagreed, arguing that they were just shy. Another agreed. "I think so", she said. "Because we didn't learn no songs at home, no Irish songs."

Others attributed discontinuity in family memories to the separation of children from their homes. Across the twentieth century, it was commonplace for the children of pampas based Irish-Argentine families to be sent away to an Irish-Catholic boarding school.[9] Saint Brigit's school in Buenos Aires or St. Paul's monastery in Chipilcóy were two such institutes. There, according to one interviewee, it was "100% Irish surnames. You had to be Irish to get in, your parents or grandparents." Another male narrator explained that boarding schools for the less affluent members of the Irish Argentine community were sponsored by its wealthier constituents:

[9] O'Brien, *Linguistics Diasporas, Narrative and Performance: The Irish in Argentina*, 130-131.

> The rich Irish, I'll tell you, they didn't have anything to do with us. But they saw to it that we had everything we needed. They organized a train to collect all the children of the workers and made sure they went to school

This drawing of a distinction between the "rich Irish" and a separate "us" was one of several clues that subtly undermined the more dominant historical narrative of a universally middle-class Irish Argentine community. A third-generation woman in the pampas added evidence to the existence of socio-economic divergence when she accounted her family's reticence about speaking of themselves in the following terms:

> I don't know very much. Because my mother used to say nothing.
> I think she didn't like talking about it. Because she had an aunt
> that sent her money when she got married.
> To buy a sewing machine. That was in 1939.

Could it be, I wondered, that this sewing machine suggested that this woman's family had not accumulated the wealth that the surrounding community had come to expect of an Irish-Argentine family? Had they failed to live up to the broadly-held conviction that "the ones who liked to work made a great living"?

More pressing still, this second question: if my interlocutors had not inherited memories through the collective life of the family, from whence had their narratives of Irish-Argentine life emerged?

Creating Memory

On a hot weekend in November, I attended the annual festival of ethnicities in the pampas city of Rosario. There, I recorded an interview with a third-generation Irish Argentine man. He was overseeing the Irish stand for the festival. Around us, people drank cans of Guinness, in spite of the spiralling heat. Our backdrop was an Irish medieval castle, built from cardboard and plywood. "In Rosario", my interlocutor began, "the Irish community grew up around Father Sheehy…

> And in Buenos Aires, the first immigration grew around Father Fahy, who founded the Fahy Club. If you go into Recoleta cemetery, you'll see Brown at one side and in front of it is Father Fahy… They're putting a bust of him over the Rio Parana so that the people know about him…

By then, I was accustomed to the tone of familiarity and affection assumed by my interlocutors when speaking of Father Fahy. Despite the

vast swathes of time that had passed since his expiration - Anthony Fahy died in 1871 - the priest still provided a starting point for a majority of Irish-Argentine life narratives. As suggested in the above passage, repetitive forms of public commemoration play a role in maintaining Fahy's memory. Each year, on Saint Patrick's Day, the Irish ambassador, in a public ceremony, lays a wreath on Father Fahy's tomb in Recoleta cemetery — the final resting place of Argentina's most elite families. It was not difficult to interpret the extent to which these commemorative performances in Recoleta satisfied this community's present-day upper-class aspirations. Over time, it was also not difficult to interpret how Fahy's singular aspirations to create an elite Irish-Argentine community would become cultural memory, subverting its communities' more subjective narratives and experiences.

In 1841, Anthony Fahy wrote a letter back to Ireland from Argentina. "I have never met a man who could not find employment", he began:

> 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 more than one hundred pounds a year each in making ditches alone.[10]

A year later, another letter followed. "Would that Irish emigrants come to this country instead of the United States", the priest wrote:

> 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.[11]

Fahy's letters clarify his belief that a successful transplantation of Irish-Catholics could take place in Argentina. This conviction was fuelled by the favourable conditions that he knew to exist for European settlers in 1840s Argentina. At the time, under General Rosas' political administration, the indigenous peoples were cleared from the Argentine pampas and replaced by European settlers primed for agricultural capitalism. Fahy does not say it overtly but the "friendly welcome" he predicted was premised on a racist

[10] Ussher, *Father Fahy: A Biography of Anthony Dominic Fahy, Irish Missionary in Argentina 1805-1871*, 46.
[11] *Ibid*.

political administration set on the Europeanisation and whitening of Argentina through the removal and genocide of its brown constituents.[12]

At the same time, Fahy's reference to the United States reveals his awareness of the potential challenges faced by Irish immigrants. In 1840s Britain, America and Australia, Irish re-settlers faced rising prejudice, propelled by WASP nativism as well as by the deplorable poverty of the Famine-era Irish immigrants.[13] In magazines like *Punch* and in American popular newspapers, the Irish were portrayed as more closely related to the African than the Anglo-Saxon, challenging their claims to civility by bent of their whiteness.[14] Anti-Irish prejudice was heightened by immigrants' concentration in working class employment and their perceived indifference to the dirt, violence and poverty of their urban tenement conditions. Fahy and his co-religionists understood that, to avoid the same outcome, specific strategies would need to be mapped out to ensure a different legacy for Irish-Catholicism in Argentina.

The patterns of resettlement of some 60,000 Irish to Argentina from the 1840s to the 1890s reflect these strategies. Unlike migration to the U.S., which featured widescale departures of poverty-stricken Irish Catholics from the West of Ireland, some seventy percent of Irish immigration to Argentina originated from selected villages in the more affluent Midlands. Another fifteen percent arrived from select towns within Co. Wexford. This geographical specificity suggests the intervention of individuals in encouraging and arranging the migration of a carefully selected cohort of immigrants.[15] Murray builds on this theory, discussing the recruitment role that local Catholic clergy in the Midlands played in the migration process. Murray argues that clergy may have targeted and screened potential immigrants, "thus controlling who would emigrate and who would not."[16] McKenna's study of the Irish in Argentina may suggest the criteria used during the selection process, since he considers that the first arrivals from Ireland to Buenos Aires were:

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[12] O'Brien, *Linguistics Diasporas, Narrative and Performance: The Irish in Argentina*, 175-77.
[13] Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 323-324-329. For more on racial discourse and racial representations see Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White.*
[14] Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White,* 35-37.
[15] Murray, *Becoming Gauchos Ingleses*, 13.
[16] *Ibid*, 73.

> the younger, non-inheriting sons, and later daughters, of larger tenant farmers and leaseholders, emigrating from farms which were in excess of twenty acres, and some were from farms considerably larger.[17]

Maintaining Memory

In Argentina, steps were put in place to ensure that the Irish remained an endogenous community, untainted by "native" bloodlines. For one, educational institutes were founded by Irish Catholic clergy to oversee the segregated formation of younger family members. Newly arrived Irish immigrants were quickly shuttled from Buenos Aires to the pampas, where opportunities for mixed marriage decreased. There, a myth of their racial superiority was fuelled through popular cultural rhetoric. For instance, Thomas Murray's 1919 *The Story of the Irish in Argentine* claimed that "the poor native in those days was a rather lawless and unlovely character, while rich and poor alike in the country districts were, in the eyes of the Irish settlers, shamefully immoral."[18] Through the oral history study, I was able to glimpse how the twenty-first century Irish Argentine community remembered their Irish-Catholic leader's attempts to achieve this goal. One of my interlocutor's explained that "On St. Patrick's Day Father Fahy would arrange for the girls to be present":

> This Father Fahy used to see all these boys coming in to the city to see the wool. So he let them go wild for a few days with the wild girls. And then they'd bring them together [with Irish girls], in an English owned hotel. Many of the girls found their husbands there. In those days it was all negotiated.

Another, commenting on the propensity for Irish-Argentines to intermarry, admitted that "there was something about races:

> it wouldn't be the exact word. But if you weren't Irish, if you didn't speak English, if you weren't tall and didn't have blue eyes or green eyes or fair-haired, you weren't the right guy. Especially between the Irish, only between the Irish.

The attempts of Irish-Catholic clergy and its elites to create an ethnically and socially sanitized Irish-Argentine community is tantalizingly evidenced

[17] McKenna, "Irish Migration to Argentina", 71.
[18] Murray, T. 1919. *The Story of the Irish in Argentina,* 26-7.

through the "Dresden Affair."[19] *The Dresden* was the name of a schooner commissioned in 1889 to resettle some 2000 Irish migrants in Argentina. Notably, this resettlement was not overseen by Catholic clergy but instead by capitalizing Irish-Argentine government agents. According to Murray and Gerathy, these agents undertook a vigorous recruitment campaign in Ireland for potential migrants, motivated by the profits that their passage would yield. Unlike previous migrations overseen by the church, the Dresden agents were unselective about their recruits and many that made it onboard the schooner were said to be of the most destitute of Irish society. On 16 February 1889, the ship landed into the dangerously overcrowded port of Buenos Aires. There, they found that the accommodation and provisions that had been promised to them did not exist, rendering them homeless. Established Irish Argentines were horrified at the event, fearing the impression that this group might have on their reputation at large. By way of response, a boarding school called the Fahy Institute was founded to care for the younger boys that survived the journey. More perplexingly, according to Boland, the remaining survivors of the Dresden were "relocated" to Bahía Blanca, some 600 kilometres from the Argentine capital. Of this group of survivors Boland states:

> they had to live in tents, ditches or under trees, weakened by untreated illness and death. By March 1891 some 500 of the demoralized settlers returned to Buenos Aires. Many had died before them, more than 100, a majority of them children... They are buried twenty-five kilometres from Rivadavia Plaza.[20]

It remains unclear why this long and deadly march to Bahia Blanca took place in the first place. Why Bahia Blanca, a windswept, unpopulated outpost at the very southern tip of Buenos Aires? Why were these destitute Irish not sent to their compatriots in the established and edifying environs of the pampas? Could it be that this swift removal of a markedly poor group of Irish immigrants occurred to maintain the coherent class image of Irishness so carefully orchestrated in previous decades?

Geraghty notes the outrage of the Irish Catholic clergy to the outcomes of the Dresden. In Ireland, Archbishop Croke publicly decried the scheming

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[19] Both Edmundo Murray and Michael Geraghty write that *The Dresden* disaster was the result of a scheme of Irish-Argentine government agents to bolster their personal interests through a vigorous recruitment campaign in Ireland. Cf Murray, *Devenir Irlandés: Narrativas íntimas de la emigración irlandesa a la Argentina (1844-1912)* & Geraghty.

[20] Boland, "Los Irlandeses en la Argentina y en Bahía Blanca *La Nueva Provincia*".

government agents, stating that "Buenos Aires is a most cosmopolitan city into which the Revolution of '48 has brought the scum of European scoundrelism":

> I most solemnly conjure my poorer countrymen, as they value their happiness hereafter, never to set foot on the Argentine Republic however tempted to do so they may be by offers of a passage or an assurance of comfortable homes.[21]

That Croke's speech particularly dissuades "poorer countrymen" from immigrating to Argentina is significant. It suggests, once again, the creation of a socially engineered Irish community in Argentina, capable of the kind of middle-class respectability that had evaded the Irish in Britain and America.

It is debatable whether the Irish-Catholic elites' aspirations for its immigrants in Argentina were ever realized. To be sure, the repeated narratives of a "high society" Irish Argentine community have some bearings in reality. According to a 1981 study by Sabato and Korol, about 600,000 hectares of agricultural land was purchased by Irish investors between the years of 1865 and 1890. By 1890, 17% of the total landmass of the province of Buenos Aires was owned by Irish investors and 300 Irish landowners had been accepted into the agricultural bourgeoisie of Argentina. However, the same study also found that land prices in the Pampas were accessible for no longer than a ten-year period between 1865 and 1875. By 1890, Irish landownership was already consolidated.[22] An estimated 60,000 Irish immigrants arrived in Argentina but just 0.6 percent became large-scale landowners.[23] A more micro perspective on the realities of daily life can be sourced in the personal letters of Irish-born doctor Arthur Wilkinson. Wilkinson was a doctor in the Pampas town of Mercedes in the

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[21] Geraghty, "Argentina: Land of Broken Promises."

[22] Sabato and Korol's study links the origin of Irish inspired towns like Luján, San Andrés de Giles, Carmen de Areco, Pilar, San Antonio de Areco, Baradero, Rojas and Salto with the accessible land prices of 1865 that allowed Irish immigrants to purchase *camp* there. However, as noted in the text, between 1875 and 1885, the process slowed down, and the expansion of the Irish and their descendants only continued in Arrecifes, Pergamino, Salto, Chacabuco and 25 de Mayo, and to a lesser extent, in 9 de Julio, Junín and Lincoln, where Sabato and Korol found relatively few landowners with Irish surnames. By 1890, Irish immigrants had purchased over 600,000 hectares of agricultural land, making up 17% of the total landmass of the province of Buenos Aires. Korol, J. C. and H. Sábato (1981). Como fue la inmigracion irlandesa a Argentina. Buenos Aires, Editorial Plus Ultra.

[23] *Ibid,* 194.

late nineteenth century, and his writings betray the brutality of everyday pampas life. In particular, he wrote in horror at the predominance of deaths by cholera in Mercedes, a Pampas town of high Irish concentration. He also commented on the "meddling" of the local priest with the physical health of his unworldly and superstitious congregations.[24]

Insights from the oral history project add weight to Wilkinson's insights. By indexing tragic family events like the premature death of adults and children, they communicate what the written archive and the elite gatekeepers of the Irish-Argentine community wished to silence. In the following narrative excerpt, recorded in the *pampas* town of Junín, a story of death, economic hardship and psychological breakdown emerges, through the story of my interlocutor's grandfather, Lorenzo. Interestingly, the man who told this story was prompted by his listening wife to tell it. "Tell her about your great grandmother!" she had urged. Bemused at his wife's insistence, he began to narrate the sad story of the night that his grandfather, Lorenzo, became orphaned:

> One night there was a terrible storm and she [Lorenzo's mother] was very sick. So Lorenzo decided to go off on the horse to get the doctor. So she stayed with the younger children and when he returned with the doctor, she had died, with all her little children sitting around her. The eldest was only fourteen years old, Lorenzo. So he was charged with the responsibility of the family.
>
> And then Lorenzo, he who had been charged with so much responsibility at such a young age, renounced all of it. He left, left the family, the children and the wife. He went, not very far, to the country, to work as a *peoñ*.[25] Our father, as he understood everything about the work, then started working in the railway. And there in the country Lorenzo had a very hard life, the life of a peoñ in the country is very hard. And he had a very affected life.

If the oral history project managed to capture these heartbreaking accounts of death and survival it was also successful at noticing the learned tendencies of Irish-Argentines to downplay their physical and economic struggles. For instance, during an interview with the following narrator in Mercedes, I was struck by the emphasis he placed on the economic incline of his first Irish ancestor. By contrast, the hardships that the man had suffered — he was effectively homeless in his early years — were skated

[24] Wilkinson, "Arthur Pageitt Greene 1848-1933: A Rural Doctor in Argentina", 207-209.
[25] Agricultural laborer.

over with a nonchalance that surprised me. “So, when Tom Kavanagh came here they came to a big estancia belonging to Hamm”:

> And they gave him a wagon and they set him out in the middle of nowhere. They set him out with, let’s say, 300 ewes and some rams. And the system they used at that time was that by the end of the year, the lambs, half of the crop was for the owner and the other half was in payment for his work. And then at the same time they'd give him a different tag in their ear. There was no tags so they'd carve a little sign on the ear, take a snag. So, after the first year Tom had his own flock of fifty sheep and the other had grown to five hundred, so he started parting away his flock and each year it grew.
>
> *Where did he live?*
>
> Well, first he just went off with his wagon, ‘til he built a hut with poles and mud and straw. They were the first ranches.

That my interlocutor had to be prompted by my follow-up question, “where did he live?” is indicative of this community’s broader tendency to maintain its high society narrative by downplaying its difficult past. With this in mind, we might return to the earlier comment that “they passed it so bad in their country that they tried to forget,” and argue that this ancestral silence on the past was less an effect of their experience in Ireland and more symptomatic of the degradation and hardship that Irish immigrants had themselves suffered in the Pampas.

Contesting Memory

One year into my oral history study, I attended a language refresher class with my Spanish tutor. As we prepared for the lesson, he asked how my research was going. I briefed him on my interviews, and he asked me if any of my participants had mentioned Rodolfo Walsh. Who is he? I replied. The surname sounded Irish but I had never heard mention of this man’s name before. My tutor shared some brief details of Walsh’s life. He had been a well-known writer in Argentina and was particularly celebrated for his practice of investigative journalism. Walsh had written several publications including a memoir, *Un Oscuro Dia de Justicia*. The memoir was a damning chronicle of his years as a pupil in the Fahy Institute. In 1976, at the beginning of the dictatorship, Walsh rose to national awareness when he published an open letter to the press accusing the military of human rights abuses. The next day, Walsh was murdered by military forces… Walsh’s

open letter would later be described by acclaimed writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a jewel of South American literature.[26]

Once I had been made aware of Walsh's presence he seemed to appear everywhere. As though hiding in plain sight I realized that the life size mural of a frowning man with thick glasses across from my apartment depicted Walsh's image. When I visited the University of Buenos Aires' Department of Sociology, I was surprised to see another large painting of Walsh in the building's main foyer. When a new train-line was added to the city's underground network one of its stops was named 'Rodolfo Walsh.' How, I wondered, was it possible that my oral history project had evaded an Irish personality that loomed so large in the national consciousness?

"We are not friendly with his memory." I was sitting in the Fahy Club, a social institution for the former pupils of the Fahy Institute. A few weeks had passed since the Spanish lesson and I was determined to understand Walsh's position in the Irish-Argentine community's memory. My narrator, a man otherwise well-disposed to talking about all things Irish-Argentine, was visibly displeased that I had brought up Walsh's name. "He talked shit about our school and we're angry about it", he cried. Later, reading through Walsh's memoir, *Un Oscuro dia de Justicia*, it was difficult to understand the force of my narrator's response.[27] Certainly, Walsh was critical about his experience in the Irish-founded Fahy Institute. However, this personal disdain did not seem to explain his outright ostracization from the memory of the wider Irish-Argentine community. The perpetuation of this silence around Walsh's memory also seemed to be reflected in academic circles. In 2018, an edited book on the history of Irish autobiography was published.[28] I was pleased that one chapter was to be dedicated to the autobiographies of Irish immigrants in South America. However, on publication, I was surprised that in spite of the author's systematic review of the most obscure of Irish-Argentine autobiographies, no mention was made of Rodolfo Walsh or of his well-known memoir.

"Have you been to Holy Cross?" I was asked, one afternoon. My interlocutor had prepared a thermos of mate and we were sharing it on her balcony, bathed in late summer light. I shook my head. She sighed. "I was married in Holy Cross", she began:

> So was my mother. Almost all the Irish community was married in Holy Cross.

[26] Murray, E. "Dictionary of Irish-Argentine Biography."
[27] Walsh, *Un Oscuro Día de Justicia. Buenos Aires.*
[28] Harte, *A History of Irish Autobiography.*

> And St. Patrick's. But St. Patrick's is more swanky. It's more swanky people.
>
> Holy Cross was a beautiful church, a beautiful church. But what happened in Holy Cross…

She went to explain that, in January 1977, Holy Cross Church had been a target for military retribution. The church, long a meeting point for the Irish-Argentine community, had become a refuge for women seeking shelter from military terrorism. On the night of the attack, two French nuns and three members of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo were dragged from the church. A subsequent investigation by the French embassy found that the nuns had been taken to military headquarters, where they were tortured. Afterwards, their bodies were flung from an airplane into the Rio Plata.[29]

"In the Hurling Club", my interlocutor continued, "there are people and you start chatting and they say, "No I don't go to Holy Cross anymore":

> Those two French nuns are buried there in the gardens of Holy Cross. And that is why these Irish people — old Irish people — won't go to Holy Cross. They say they're *Peronistas*… There was no compromise. I couldn't be indifferent to that. And they were. Lots of Irish.

Back in the Fahy Club, I asked two elderly men about Holy Cross. One cried out, "it's a terrorist… it's inclined to terrorists!" He continued, explaining in the following terms his refusal to attend a church that had for a long time kept his community together:

> The Irish priests in Holy Cross Church actually tended to the claims of the *Disappeared*. That was the way things started. Helping the families that claimed their children had been stabbed by the military. Of course, the military had their sins, of course. But they were having meetings there. Officially, for the disappeared! Officially! If you go to *Iglesia* Santa Cruz you have all the pictures there on the walls with all the claims. The priests actually opened their doors to the families of the people who claimed to be disappeared.

In another interview, I asked about Holy Cross again. This time my interlocutor, sighing heavily, said:

> That church fell into some hands that are very embarrassing. If you go there you're going to be very disappointed. There was a priest, a group of priests, that were very linked to the Madres of Plaza de Mayo. And they did a mess

[29] O'Brien, *Linguistic Diasporas, Narrative and Performance,* 156.

> there and you go there and you find writings hanging about politics: very, very embarrassing. We're all very disappointed about that.

From these narrative insights, it became apparent that the reason for Rodolfo Walsh's disappearance from Irish-Argentine memory may have had less to do with his negative writing about the Fahy Institute and more to do with his left wing sympathies. Since the Perón era, leftist politics in Argentina was equated with the disenfranchisement of the landed classes.[30] For the Irish-Argentine community, whose high class reputation had originated in land ownership, any expression of sympathy with the left was thus seen as treacherous. Like Holy Cross, Rodolfo Walsh had been erased from memory because both were deemed to have compromised the position of the Irish-Argentine community.

The furious commitment to a particular Irish-Argentine narrative was forced to its moment of crisis in one of the last interviews that I collected in Argentina. It occurred in December 2012 in the parochial home of a church in Mercedes. In the priest's kitchen, women moved about, scalding tea pots and cutting up sandwiches. A white cloth gleamed on the table set up in the dining room. Around it stood a dozen or so Irish-Argentine descendants. They had come, at the behest of Mercedes' Irish parish priest, to talk to me. Most seemed to know each other. They circled around, embracing as old friends, hands on backs, kisses planted upon one cheek, then another.

Near the end of the table, an elderly couple sat quietly together, slightly apart from the rest of the gathering. I sat in the empty chair beside them while the priest clapped his hands, willing the others to commence their tea. Chairs scraped across a golden floor, tea was poured, and sunshine flooded in from the glass conservatory at the gable end of the room. From all sides, the crowd spoke, giddily shouting over each other, sharing one after the other their Irish surnames and where they had been born. One man disappeared off to the priests' sitting room to help set up a projector. Someone had brought a film documentary made some years before, about the Irish in Argentina. The plan was to watch it, after tea.

Shyly, taking their cues from the others, the couple that I had sat beside began to join the talk. His voice was soft, his accent extraordinary. Dickie Kelly spoke as though recently arrived from Mullingar. I took out my recorder and asked permission to set it on. He nodded.

> I'm Kelly on my father's side. And Casey on my mother's side. And my grandmother on my father's side, Gilligan. From Westmeath.

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[30] *Ibid,* 173-187.

Tessie, Dickie's wife, was about to speak when a woman sitting across the table from us suddenly interrupted. She had been listening attentively to us and now she said, clearly and in Spanish, from across the table: "Tell her about your brother."

Silence fell. Someone coughed. Someone else clattered a spoon against a teacup. The noise served to heighten the tension in the room. Dickie looked at me from beneath two bushy eyebrows. He could read the puzzlement on my face and could see that I did not understand what was happening. The moment felt like an eternity. The priest got up from the table and left the room, muttering something about the projector. Others shifted the talk, turning toward each other to speak in smaller units, the flow of the table's talk now paralysed. The woman opposite the table watched on, saying no more. Dickie leaned toward me and whispered, "She says to tell you that I had a brother, a Palatine, who was killed here, in Buenos Aires."

"Can you tell me more about it?", I asked. (Later, when I listened back on the recording, I could identify distracting noises in the background that had then escaped my notice. A woman tapped her fingers on the table, humming a tune, a note too high. Someone called to us to come on into the priests' sitting room, the projection was ready.) But Dickie continued to speak, ignoring these interruptions:

> Well we never found out anything. We never got an answer.
> There was five of them killed; three priests and two seminaries. There was no answer.
> He was thirty-five years old. We were always very united with the Palatines.
> Fr O Brien came out to the farm to let us know. '76. 4 July 1976.
> It was a shock. But them things happen in life. I'm not surprised.
> Of course, in the case of my brother, he told the truth about what was happening
> And they shot them down. 4 July 1976

Dickie's voice was low and shocked. The effort that it took for him to tell me the story of his brother was painfully visible. And yet he persevered:

> We were the two youngest in the family.
> I say it like a thing that had to happen. If we read the calendar and the martyrs and the saints that died, they all have a story of how they died, more or less the same way.
> And we have that story fresh today.
> That's the answer I give to it. It's just a personal thing.