



Cormick, E. *El lado irlandés de los argentinos: El aporte de los descendientes de irlandeses en el entramado cultural de la Argentina del siglo XX*. Buenos Aires, El Bien del Sauce, 2020, pp. 216. AR\$ 900. ISBN 978-987-86-5592-5.

One of the worst catastrophes to occur in Europe in the 19th century was the Great Irish Famine, caused by late blight, a disease that destroyed the potato plant. By that time, potatoes had become the staple component of the Irish diet because cereals, with Ireland still under the dominion of the United Kingdom, were mostly carried away to Great Britain. The consequences of the famine were devastating: one third of the Irish population died, and another third migrated to England, Australia, or the United States of America. However, around the 1870s a small portion of those survivors had reached the Southern Cone and settled in Argentina. Gradually, they come to be used to the ways of the land and its

people, and some of them became eminent Argentines. It is with this group that *El lado irlandés de los argentinos* is primarily concerned since the volume invites its readers to explore the contributions of the Irish to the social and cultural framework of the Latin American nation on its way to modernization throughout the 20th century. So far available only in Spanish, the book offers a wide but comprehensive panorama of that process with a particular focus on the individual lives of those emigrés of Irish ancestry who sparkled in Argentine science, politics, arts, and sports.

El lado irlandés de los argentinos contains a prologue written by the renowned Argentine historian Hilda Sabato in which the eclecticism and freshness of the stories in the volume are highlighted. Then, Eduardo Cormick himself tries to place his work in the poststructuralist tradition by wondering about the invention of Ireland and the Irish. Nevertheless, from the first story onwards, Cormick seems to abandon that stance, and he decidedly takes his readers to the deeper, more intimate, spheres of personal histories in a random, not essentially chronological, fashion. Those histories are presented as brief accounts of the lives of men and women of Irish descent who were able to move beyond the confinements of workplace or domestic concerns into the realm of public affairs. The lives of Cecilia Grierson, Patricio Garrahan, or Santiago Fitz Simon, were dedicated to the advancement of Argentine science and education. Therefore, they deserved to be written as biographies of a relatively institutional quality. Other lives shone in the arts, such as those of Guillermo and Horacio Butler, Sylvia Molloy, or Patricio Mc Gough, and in those stories Cormick displays his abilities as an arts critic and a conscientious reader of fiction. There are also some sections that are not strictly biographical but rather anecdotal, mere moments in the lives of their protagonists whose significance remains deeply private but which eventually became public. Climaxes among those are the disclosure of Juan José Cerati's suffering from cancer during an almost ritualistic tea presided by Lilian Clarke or the return of Susana Dillon's granddaughter, born to "disappeared" parents, by a paramilitary militia in the dead of a night in March 1978. The former inspired one of Gustavo Cerati's most famous pop songs; the latter stirred Dillon's involvement with *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and her life-long fight for human rights. Thus, as the life of a person of Irish ancestry juxtaposes that of another, readers are reminded that all life is heroic in itself and that it is necessarily made up of both comedy and tragedy.

From that magma that is life, in *El lado irlandés de los argentinos* readers can hear the voices of the Irish turned Argentine emerge. This is one of the hallmarks of the publication. Cormick is highly knowledgeable of Argentine culture, and he is in command of an incommensurable reservoir of sources. The quotations that flood the pages of the book include excerpts from *zambas* by Buenaventura Luna, *chamamés* by Santiago 'Bocha' Sheridan, tangos by Carlos Sanders and Miguel Treacey, and poems by Maria Elena Walsh, Eduardo Carroll, and José Sebastián Tallon. In all of them, Cormick seems to suggest, you can trace the flicker of Irish genius. Not less relevant are the historical and journalistic documents quoted throughout the volume. There are passages of the *Carta Abierta* and other texts by Rodolfo Walsh

and a transcription of the brief but brave note that Miguel Fitzgerald sent to the British governor of the Malvinas/Falklands islands when he arrived in the archipelago on September 8, 1964, demanding the end of British rule over the islands claimed by Argentina. In a similar vein, the inclusion of the fearless narrative poem “*A Margaret Thatcher*,” by Luis Alberto Murray, decidedly reveals a strong authorial position, which never eludes difficult yet unavoidable issues such as British colonialism, the Irish question, or the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983) and the pain and grief that they caused to their victims.

*Yo vine a ser arriero, viniendo de los mares
tirado en una vela de aquellas irlandesas.*

These lines by Eusebio de Jesús Dojorti, Buenaventura Luna, cited by Cormick, brilliantly encapsulate the idea behind *El lado irlandés de los argentinos*: from beyond the seas and brought by foreign sails, the Irish reached Argentina to become horsemen. Many of them, though, became the prosperous men and women whose achievements in almost every area of Argentine life are succinctly described by Cormick in his book. Unsurprisingly, also the Cormicks belong to that genealogy, and it is to his family that the author devotes the last section of the long list of Irish personalities contributing to the formation of Argentine culture in the 20th century. The Cormicks travelled to Argentina in order to work the land, to become *chacareros*, and they spent most of their lives in the rural areas of Buenos Aires province. This also shows throughout the publication. Not everything in it happens, as is tradition, in Buenos Aires, the capital and largest city of Argentina. The narrative deftly takes its readers to the tough outback of the South American country, as they get to know about the Irish who settled in San Juan, Chubut, Córdoba, Corrientes, or Entre Ríos. Besides, Eduardo Cormick is a skillful storyteller, and he tells stories the Argentine way. This is perhaps one of the most significant traits of *El lado irlandés de los argentinos*. The volume may not be catalogued as a history book in the exact sense of the term, but it tells a story with the serenity, the colour, and the time available for detail and precision with which tales are told in the pampas. That does not necessarily mean, however, that there was lack of reading or research in the making of the text. Throughout its pages, it perspires that Cormick is in possession of a strong, thorough knowledge not only of his Irish past but also of Argentine culture, both aspects which he dexterously integrates with one another in the book under consideration. The stories in it are also packed with romance, adventure, and epic, all elements common to both fact and fiction. Each person whose remarkable deeds are narrated in *El lado irlandés de los argentinos* most probably lived life to the full, and they made outstanding contributions to Argentine-ness in a land where life has not always been easy. Above all, they added to the blend that we Argentines are, the immense depth of the Irish spirit.

Enrique Alejandro Basabe

Universidad Nacional de La Pampa, Argentina