

# *Linguistic and Cultural Aspects of the Irish Settlers in Buenos Aires as Seen in Tales of the Pampas, by William Bulfin*

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**Abstract:** *This article is about Tales of the Pampas, a collection of short stories written and published by William Bulfin in 1900. The book refers to the Irish settlers within the “porteño” country, their days and works. My critical approach concerns language and cultural interrelations between the Irish, the natives, and the South American melting pot, exploring their behaviours, their attitudes and their words. I point out the curious fact that Bulfin’s literary speech becomes a strange mixture of Irish-English, Gaelic and Spanish. It was a slow process in which bilingualism preceded biculturalism.*

*In Tales of the Pampas – we read – Bulfin reissues Sarmiento’s antithesis proclaimed in *Civilización y Barbarie (1845): Barbarism (represented by the countryside) vs. Civilization (city), Natives vs. Europeans.**

In a way the story of the language and literature of the Irish in Argentina is the story of the Irish in Argentina.

Within the context of the last period of Irish migration to Argentina – which, in fact, can be traced back to the Colonial epoch of our history, with its highest point during and immediately after the Great Famine (1845-1850) – a collection of short stories was serialized in *The Irish Argentine* and *The Southern Cross*, Irish migrants newspapers. Eventually, in 1900, the stories were published in book format under the title *Tales of the Pampas*, by William Bulfin.

Who was the man? *The Mercier Companion to Irish Literature* entry states:

**Bulfin, William** (1864-1910), journalist, was born in Derrinlough near Birr in County Offaly, and educated in Birr, Banagher and Galway Grammar School. Emigrating to Argentina in 1884, he was a pampas cowboy for four years before becoming a contributor to and eventual editor of the *Southern Cross* (sic), a paper run for the Irish community in Buenos Aires. Returning to Ireland in 1902, he became a strong supporter of Arthur Griffith and traveled about Ireland

on his bicycle. The pieces written about his tours for the United Irishman and Sinn Fein were collected in the slightly misnamed *Rambles in Eirinn* (1907). The book is nationalist, showing a strong bias against northern Protestants and West Britons, and contains some of the unthinking anti-Semitism of the day. He died at his birthplace.

Curiously, not a word is said about *Tales of the Pampas*, his true contribution to literature.

Let us add that he concluded his formal education at the Royal Charter School in Banagher and at Queen's College in Galway and that in 1884 William and his brother Peter emigrated to Argentina when the future writer was about twenty years old, and that they stayed in Buenos Aires for twelve years. At the time the Bulfins stepped on the country, their uncle, Father Vincent Grogan CP, was the Argentine Provincial of the Passionist Fathers, a catholic congregation linked to the Irish Community. The Passionist Fathers had (and still have) a Monastery in Capitán Sarmiento (Carmen de Areco) next to San Antonio de Areco, one of the principal centers of Irish settlers. It was thanks to Father Grogan's connections with the Irish that the boys were able to start working in the "camp", in touch with their own people and the "gauchos". William Bulfin finally took a position as a "capataz" in an Estancia owned by Juan Dowling (from Longford) located in Ranchos (near Carmen de Areco). It was there that he fell in love with Anne O'Rourke (from Ballacurra) whom he married in 1891. At this time he moved to town, but it is clear that this experience in the country, close to the Irish, natives, and different kinds of migrants, gave him the material for what became *Tales of the Pampas*.

In Buenos Aires he taught English, worked as an employee for H. C. Thompson, a furniture maker, and started contributing articles and stories to *The Southern Cross*. Founded in 1875 by Fr. Patrick Joseph Dillon, *The Southern Cross* became the true thermometer of the relations of the Irish Argentineans and their descendants with the local society. Bulfin was soon sub-editing the paper and quickly became both proprietor and editor. It was in *The Southern Cross* that in 1902 he wrote: "And now I am off for a change, to look for the excitement of a sea-voyage [...]". The result of this was his best known and best-selling book, *Rambles in Eirinn*, where we can find references to his South American incursion.

Back in Ireland he got involved with the nationalist cause, mainly with the language question. And although he wasn't a regular Gaelic speaker, he shared the idea that language was intrinsic to identity and, in fact, he had financially helped the American Gaelic League through *The Southern Cross*:

[...] what surprised and heartened them was the support that the League received from the Irish in South America, the Irish of Buenos Aires led by the editor of its Irish immigrant paper, the *Southern Cross* (1875–), William Bulfin. The Gaelic League would, in turn, shape and focus Bulfin's cultural nationalism."<sup>1</sup>

Bulfin's personal interest in language concerns our subject and since it is a leit-motiv in *Tales of the Pampas* we will go back to it further on.

In 1904 he returned to Argentine where he was conferred with the papal title of Knight of Saint Gregory for what he had achieved in favor of the Irish Catholic community. In 1909, he left definitely and that same year he sailed off to the United States trying to interest wealthy Irish Americans in founding a Sinn Féin newspaper. He failed.

After a few months in Ireland, he died in February 1910.

*Tales of the Pampas* was published in London, in 1910, by T. Fisher Unwin for the series which included other "exotic" books like *The Ipané*, by R. B. Cunninghame Graham; *In Guiana Wilds*, by James Rodway; *A Corner of Asia*, by Hugh Clifford; *Negro Nobodies*, by Noël de Montagnac and *Among the Man-Eaters*, by John Gaggin. These titles are enough to give an idea of the publisher's intention. (Some people believe that it was Robert Cunninghame Graham who introduced Bulfin to the publisher). Bulfin's collection belongs to the same literary tradition of Anglo-Argentine writers such as Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936) and William Henry Hudson (1841-1922) but that he differs from them in his concern for language and strong literary intention.

The book consists of eight narrations: "A Bad Character": the story of Sailor John, "a deserter from the crew of a British merchant vessel" who "was a knockabout, or camp atorrante", very unpopular among Irish, Gallegos and natives; "The Enchanted Toad", a funny story of the fantastic that Maureen Murphy links to Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County";<sup>2</sup> "El High-Life": an effective tragedy rich in symbolic elements with the following melting-pot performers: Basques, Spanish, Irish and Criollos; "Castro Telleth of Tavalonghi's Horse": a wonderful short piece of *Bildungsroman*<sup>3</sup> and a song to the horse as symbol of freedom, with "The Defeat of Barragan" as a sequel which concludes with "Campeando", perhaps the weakest in spite of the significant and polemic last lines: "If you're always stuck with the natives behind the *galpon* (sic) instead of attendin" to your good name, you'll be sent with them, and you'll get into their ways, and the day'll come when the dickens a decent man in the country will have anything to say or do with you"; "The Fall of Don José": a very funny story in which we learn that "In the camp, any man who speaks English is an Inglés" and "The Course of True Love", the best story in the collection: an account of a humorous love story which concentrates Bulfin's best components of his writing: colorful descriptions, credible characters, strong verisimil dialogues, humor and an effective structure.

The stories were serialized neither with additional explanations, nor footnotes. When the book was released publishers did not consider a preface necessary. In relation to the local series, nothing of this was necessary since Bulfin was addressing the Irish-Argentine community whose language was the one the writer was conveying.

Who were these Irish? In her brief and clear Introduction to the second edition of the book, Susan Wilkinson gives the proper answer:

The Irish who emigrated to Argentina in the mid 19th century, at the time of Bulfin's tales, were essentially from the midland counties of Westmeath, Offaly and Longford. Like Bulfin, most gravitated to the pampas where so many of their countrymen were establishing themselves in sheep and cattle farming and where wages were high and land prices low. The "seven parishes" alluded to in "The Course of True Love" were most likely the towns around Salto in the province of Buenos Aires – Carmen de Areco, San Antonio de Areco, Navarro, San Andrés de Giles, Chacabuco, Chivilcoy and, of course, Salto itself. Once inhabited by Indians and beyond the pale of European settlement, these towns attracted Irish immigrants – so much so that the Irish had their own schools and their own churches with priests sent out from Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

The other characters are members of the South American melting pot – mainly Italians and Spaniards, but also Basques and British – turning up on the pampa at the time the gauchos were vanishing. The wire fence – introduced by Richard Newton in 1845 and expanded by Francisco Halbach ten years later – is certainly a symbol of the limitations the gauchos were going through. The book is clearly written in the tradition of realism. However, the gaucho and his situation provide a somewhat romantic atmosphere.

Andrew Graham –Yooll wrote that the stories "were so well received that *The Review of the River Plate* declared them far better and more up-to-date than the writings of Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham". The editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald* also gives his own opinion:

The fascination of *Tales of the Pampas* lies in that many a descendent of Irish stock will recognize their own forebears in these tales. Honest farmers, struggling to make a decent living and give their families a future, come face to face with congenial rogues, thieves, fantasists and a gallery of colourful vagrants. The clash and contrasts of cultures and customs is told always with underlying humour, and the recreation of the language of origin is constant brain-teaser.<sup>5</sup>

The historical context in which the stories by Bulfin are settled is that of the modernization of Argentina, the successful attempt to become part of the wealthy civilized world. Led by General Julio Argentino Roca – head of the extermination of the Indians in what was called the "Campaña del Desierto" (a genocide to others) – the visible face of this process was the so-called "Generación del ochenta": a prominent ruling class inspired by the European-inspired ideas of Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. It was in this process that the liberal credo, the development of political parties and the European immigration were promoted. In more than one way *Tales of the pampas* reissues Sarmiento's antithesis proclaimed in *Civilización y Barbarie* (1845): Barbarism (represented by the countryside) vs. Civilization (city), Natives vs. Europeans.

In this singular collection of short stories related to the Irish-Argentine people working in the Buenos Aires “campana”, country or “camp”<sup>6</sup> Bulfin reproduces Irish-Porteños’ way of speaking, which results a mix of Irish-English, Spanish and certain Gaelic voices. *His stories show that the Irish were doing with language what they had already done with their lives, namely they were trying to adapt it to their new situation.* The aim of what comes next is to show in what way this happens and what social and cultural implications are revealed by the linguistic phenomenon conveyed by Bulfin.

“The Course of True Love”, the last (and best) story of the collection, opens with a series of considerations on the Irish settlers; let us focus on the ones related to language:

[...] Exile has, of course, modified some of their idiosyncrasies and accentuated others. The wilderness has taught them some of its mysteries, has sharpened some of their senses and faculties that would in other conditions of life have remained comparatively dull; has, to some extent, increased their natural sensitiveness and deprived them of some of their spirituality, as well as taken the corners and angles off their Celtic mysticism. Spanish phrases and idioms have inflected the English which they habitually use; but the brogue of Leinster and Munster has remained intact. Spanish and Creole customs have, in a greater or less degree, insensibly woven themselves into their life; but they are unwilling to admit this, and their struggle to preserve the traditions of the motherland is constant and earnest [...].<sup>7</sup>

The writer affirms that exile modified “some of their idiosyncrasies and accentuated others.” Although he does not give further information on this, and since “idiosyncrasy” means a particular way of thinking and behaving, it is understandable that the moving to a different culture must have modified certain ideas on human relations and behavior. A gregarious attitude seems to have been the easy and regular attitude of those migrants: this is what we guess reading Bulfin’s stories and what can be found in chronicles; it is ratified when the author assures that the Irish settlers were surpassed by the strong influence of the native “idiosyncrasy”, a violent force able to deprive them “of some of their spirituality, as well as taken the corners and angles off their Celtic mysticism”. And because the writer believes that language and identity are linked, he points out that the process admits a linguistic correlation: “Spanish phrases and idioms have inflected the English which they habitually use; but the brogue of Leinster and Munster has remained intact.” As Susan Wilkinson writes:

Bulfin delighted in the midlands brogue of his fellow countrymen’s speech, and he strove to reproduce it by his pen as it fell upon his ears. “Wan” means “one”, “wance” is “once”, “tay” is “tea”, “yez” means “you” (plural) “sez” is common for “says”. The “t” in the middle of a word is frequently thickened as in “sthraight” for “straight”, etc. while “d” at the end of a word is often pronounced as a “t”,

such as “beyant” for “beyond”. “When”, “men”, “them”, etc. are written as they were pronounced (“whin”, “min”, “thim”). Some of his phrases are old English and are no longer or rarely used, such as “for the nonce”, meaning “at the moment”, “for the particular purpose” and “without”, meaning “outside”.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the fact that Bulfin does not refer to the Irish language, the whole book is invaded by solitary Irish words threading through the English speech. It is curious that the Irish tried to preserve their identity by protecting themselves with the language which was actually not their own.

Let us see a few examples:

“*Musha* the dickens a doubt, Misther Tim Shannahan, yerself and your frog!”. (p. 41).

“What the dickens are you lookin’ at, you snakin’ undherhad *bocaugh*?”. (p. 43).

“I’m going over to Joe Hagan’s to give him a hand to coort that *garrahalya* he’s afther, and I won’t be back until late”. (p. 137).

“Don’t be goin’ gabblin’ an’ makin’ an *oncha* of yourself whin we go over to Dooley’s,” [...]. (p. 138).

“It’s Julia that will have somethin’ to say to it wan way or t’hoother. Eh, Julia, *alannah*, what would you say to gettin’ an offer of a fine presintable rock of a husband?”. (p. 146).

Very few words of Irish (gaelic) origin can be found in the book. Not many compared to the Spanish ones that regularly sprinkle the stories. This is symptomatic of a deeper experience: that of the speakers who in a slow, but inevitable process, were possessed by the language of the new land; it also explains the weakening of the Gaelic, finally dropped.

Mainly referred to *camp* activities, *gauchos*, their sayings and habits, a range of about forty Spanish words (sometimes misspelled) contribute to enrich the linguistic melting pot:

“The dirty blackguard! to go away like that, and *quien sabe* (sic) if he hasn’t taken some of my things with him.” (p. 22)

“Francisco was behind the counter when I went into the *pulperia* (sic), and to see the grin on that crooked ould Gallego’s face when he bid me good morning, would make you sick.” (p. 23)

“You consider it strange, eh? Ah! but my *companero* (sic), (companion), “did I not say that the horse was an animal the most intelligent? And, all the same, this Tavalonghi’s *bayo* had never demonstrated any surpassing cleverness.” (p. 76).

“*Entre bueyes no hay cornadas*,” he corrected with a smile, quoting the time-honoured pampa *refran* (sic). (p. 81).

Beardless boys in *alpargatas*, whose riding gear would not sell for a dollar, called “pago” (translated as done) for fifty cents; and they called each other “señor,” and “compañero,” and “amigo” with as much style and swagger as their elders showed in arranging for bets of \$ 50 or more. (p. 84).

“Alpargatas” went through two processes: a) Originally a trade mark, it became a synonym of a local slipper; b) Bulfin incorporates the word to his Irish-English text.

Note in the two following lines the typical rhetoric Spanish questions stuck into the English sentence:

That’s it, *compañero*; but do it softly, *eh?* and do it soon. (p. 85).

What an early start the old *bayo* wanted to make, *no?* (p. 93).

The speech is gradually invaded by the Spanish language:

*Està bien, señores*, then! (p. 95).

Including the famous porteño vocative:

Who was he, *che?* (p. 115).

*La gran siete!* Don Tomás, what intelligence! (p. 124).

I wonder did Bulfin know the meaning of this last porteño expression; he probably didn’t since it has a clear sexual connotation the conservative Irish community he was addressing would not take. (By the way, he drops the initial exclamation point).

These samples show what the whole book reveals: the slow but inevitable process of linguistic incorporation on behalf of the Irish settlers, an operation that implied a social and cultural interaction.

Due to conscious and unconscious reasons it will be a very slow course, and for years it was the English in its Westmeath version which prevailed. Bulfin himself explains this and his writing successfully shows its different inflections, accents and intonations:

What’s that? In the name of goodness can’t you spake in plain language and thry to make it easy for yourself to get out what you want to say and make it easy for them that’s listenin’ to you to understand what you mean? (p. 21).

““Good mornin’, gintlemin,” sez he in Spanish, ‘how goes it, Miguel? sez he to me.

“Purty well,” sez I. ‘Have you any news? ‘sez I.

“No,” sez he, “nothin” sthrange, Miguel, sez he. I asked him to have a tot, and while the Gallego was fillin’ it out for him, what do you think he doesn’t up and ask if the sailor was around the place. (p. 23).

None of them knew that he was stoppin' at my house, or that the pot was mine, and I kept my tooth on it, for I didn't see any use in cryin' over spilt milk and makin' a laughin' stock of myself. (p. 28).

"Give the dogs plenty of grub, Delaney, and lots of wather three times a day. This red pup's name is Blunderbuss, and that brindled fellah there is Watch. Th' other fellah's name is Sodger."

"All righth! Never fear. I'll stuff them. Lave 'em to me wud all confidence, Tim'".

"Well, you'll be seein' a frog, too, hoppin' about the flure. Don't molest him. Lave him to himself. He's an owld friend. If you intherfare wud him or inconvanience him in any way, I'll shake the livers out of you whin I come back – d'ye hear?'" (p. 38).

[...] don't go about the house like a gandher afther a sick goslin' makin' up to the girl. Be as independint as if you were doin' thim a favour, an' carry on just the same as if you didn't care the bark of a dog whether they gave you the *garrahalya* or not [...] are you listenin' to me, Joe?". (p. 139).

"Yis, it's thru. Tom and me came to ax yez for Julia. I have the house ready beyant, and I can go and see the priest any day – tomorrow mornin' if it comes to that. I'm ready to marry this minit, so I am, and I'll take the girl if she comes. If yez give her to me, well and good; ef not, thez as good fish in say as ever was – I mane – no, I don't mane that – I mane that I want the girl – as I was tellin' Tom – and as he sez to me – about it – 'If it comes to that,' sez he, and I say the same – I don't care the bark of a dog whether I get the girl or not!". (p. 146).

"Let me out, Joe – me mother'll kill me. Well then – I'll say yis, but don't tell nobody – oh! stop, will you; put me up and let me go home". (p. 156).

Even nowadays Irish visitors are surprised at the Irish-porteño's brogue, their strong accent and outdated locutions. The Irish community in this country became, then, a kind of a linguistic Noah's ark.

Words in *Tales of the Pampas* also show how the Irish migrants organized themselves and how they managed to survive in a far off country, within a remote culture, interacting with people who spoke a different language. It was not easy. They preserved their identity by preserving their Irish-English language. As I explained, sporadic linguistic fissures gradually set up Spanish voices in what constituted an analogy with what was going on in real life, namely the social integration with Argentine people.

The opposition between Barbarism and Civilization – perhaps the main or basic question in Argentine literature – is clearly disclosed in *Tales of the Pampas*, inhabited by the people who created the South American Melting Pot, natives and gauchos included. "Fatalist", "Scamp", "Barbarian", "Bucktoe" and other words of negative connotation are regularly endorsed to the gauchos. The confrontation between formal education and intuition is one more relevant component that defines migrants and natives' behaviors.

It is at the end of "Campeando" where one of the Irish characters goes to the medullar question and attitude towards the natives:

You're gettin' too much of the country into you, me boy – racin', and bettin', and helpin' the natives to cut each other to pieces, and galavantin' round the seven parishes suckin' *mate* an' colloguerin' with the gauchos– that's all right while it lasts. But you'll get a bad name for yourself, take my words for it. [...]

“That's all collywest. Of course they sent you. If you're always stuck with the natives behind the *galpon* (sic) instead of attendin'” to your good name, you'll be sent with them, and you'll get into their ways, and the day'll come when the dickens a decent man in the country will have anything to say or do with you. (p. 110).

Notes of discord also crept into the Europeans relationship.

This Tavalonghi he was an Italian hide-buyer in Lujan (sic) ten years ago and he made a fortune out of your countrymen, the sheep-farmers, buying their produce at half nothing and selling it in Buenos Aires at high prices. He was a man of ambition, and when he found himself wealthy he took the notion of going home to his country to be a personage, no? They say when Italians go home rich they become notabilities – counts and princes and folks of that style. I do not know if they become kins; but I have always heard it said that they buy pieces of parchment which make them noble. (p. 74).

In “The Defeat of Barragan”, a story in which money and power are the main subjects, we read:

Horsemen arrived at every momento from every direction – horsemen in picturesque finery, horsemen in picturesque raggedness – whitebeards and youngsters, stock-masters and workmen, Irish landowners and shepherds, criollo rough-riders – all assembled to have some sport, to kill time, and, if possible, to win one another's money to the last quarter of a cent. (p. 82).

Even the Irish and British antagonism is been transferred to the Pampa:

What are you talkin' about, you H-H-Hirish hass? sez the sailor. (p. 32).

By reading Bulfin's stories we learn that ethical misbehavior mainly on politics and justice is a long story in this country.

To him (to Castro, the gaucho) no more than to his fellows did a wire fence convey any idea of the right of property: it merely constituted an impediment. (p. 70).

Why not? Does not all the world know that Don Barragan is the best man to ask for information about missing stock – being an *alcalde*?. (p. 88).

This fellow sent my father to prison three years ago on false charge. (p. 97).  
It was not law. It was not morality. Psychologically it was the attitude of people who had never seen justice come but from themselves. (p. 98).

In this context where “ages of twisted theology and warped religious tradition” mislead people, to the Irish settlers the Catholic church appears to be the only true authority.

*Tales of the Pampas*, by William Bulfin should be considered an important literary document mainly because of its social and cultural implications. His rendition of the Irish in the Argentina countryside and their attitude towards society and reality through a linguistic point of view becomes an original contribution to the understanding of bilingualism. Presumably without knowing it, through his stories Bulfin was able to give an eloquent account of the Irish in Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century, a slow process in which bilingualism preceded biculturalism.

## Notes

- 1 Maureen Murphy: “The Cultural Nationalism of William Bulfin” in *John Quinn. Selected Irish Writers from his Library*. Edited by Janis and Richard Londraville. West Cornwall, CT, Locust Hill Press, p. 47.
- 2 Op. Cit., p. 50.
- 3 A kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity. (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, 1991*).
- 4 Susan Wilkinson: “Introduction” to *Tales of the Pampas*, Buenos Aires, LOLA, 1997, (not paginated).
- 5 Cfr. “Buenos Aires Herald”, December 3, 1997, p. 13.
- 6 In 1910 Alberto Gerchunoff, a Jewish immigrant from Oriental Europe, published *Los gauchos judíos*, an account of the Jewish Immigrants in Argentina. In conception and intention, both works are alike.
- 7 William Bulfin: *Tales of the Pampas/Cuentos de la Pampa*. Bilingual edition. Buenos Aires, LOLA, 1997, p. 136. All the quotations in this work are referred to this edition.
- 8 Cfr.: Susan Wilkinson op. cit., (Introduction, not paginated).

## GLOSSARY (Irish words)

*Musha*: interj. means ÒindeedÓ or ÒwellÓ. It can be used positively or negatively depending on the context.

*Bocagh*: beggar.

*Garrahalya*: girl.

*Oncha*: fool.

*Alannah*: from *leanbh*: child; and expression of affection.

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