

“Becoming Irlandés”. Private narratives of the Irish emigration to Argentina (1844-1912)

Edmundo Murray

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When we think about our historical background, we tend to remember the names of those men and women who played an essential role in the construction of our country's cosmopolitan identity, both as part of a nation and as members of several cultural and linguistic communities. We often call these people “national heroes”. However, this conception that has been taken for granted for so many years, seems not to be the case in Edmundo Murray's *Becoming Irlandés- Private narratives of the Irish emigration to Argentina (1844-1912)*, which provides a new and fresher vision of the experience of the Irish emigration in Argentina, as seen by its protagonists. As suggested by the name of the book, it consists in four collections of private and confidential documents, including letters and memoirs, written by Irish emigrants to Argentina to their relatives or as an autobiography (memoirs). The “heroes” and “heroines” in this book are not well-known people in a political or social sense. The majority of them are just ordinary people who express their hopes, happiness but also their disappointments and worries in the frequent epistolary correspondence they maintain with close and distant relatives, left back in Ireland or living in Argentina in the period between 1844 and 1912 . The purpose of the book , as expressed by Murray himself, is to provide a detailed portrayal of the experiences of a few Irish emigrant families to Argentina. Besides, he attempts to contribute to a better understanding of some aspects of the gradual and continuous process that led them to “become” Irish-Argentine in their daily struggle to develop a new identity in the Argentinian society.

Becoming Irlandés is a documentary work where Murray selects, compiles, edits and explores the private letters and memoirs of a few Irish emigrant families. The author has organized the research materials in four collections : “The Memoirs of Edward Robbins”, “Letters to Martin Murphy and John James Pettit” and “The Memoirs of Tom Garrahan”. Each collection of private narratives is preceded by background information about the authors of the letters, motivations to emigrate and places where they settled. In addition, a detailed explanatory introduction precedes these four collections, containing supplementary information intended to either complete or enrich the reading process. In this work, Murray discusses concepts such as identity, isolation and integration, the notion of becoming and discourse, as well as his personal interpretation of the information and values that emerge from the multiplicity of “voices” in the letters.

Murray makes reference to two possible paradigms of interpretation, the statistical and the genealogical approaches, without favouring either of them. In fact, his book is open to be read focusing only on the original texts of letters and memoirs, or the letters with the accompanying endnotes or enriched by the introduction, the epilogue and the annexes. The book is richly illustrated with lots of photographs scattered all over his work, which constitute a suitable complement to the written text. Some of them show daily aspects of the Irish emigrants lives in Argentina, such as work or entertainment. Others show houses of these emigrants families, both in the Argentinian *estancias* or in Ireland. There are also portraits of people mentioned in the letters and memoirs, family photographs, maps of Ireland showing county origins of the immigrants in Ireland, memorial tablets in tombs or churches, advertisements appeared in newspapers of those times and even names of Irish priests in street name signals. Interestingly, each photograph is accompanied by a quotation from the letters and memoirs which makes reference to what is shown in the pictures. The book concludes with an epilogue titled "Irish Gau-chos" and four appendixes that add useful information for readers. Appendix 1 includes data such as the date of arrival of people mentioned in the letters, political decision of the Argentinian government that affected those people, schools or shops opening, problems with the Indians and Irish farmers becoming *estancias* owners, dating from 1828 to 1929. There is also a genealogical guide of some people mentioned in the letters and memoirs in Appendix 2, intended to illustrate kinship. Appendix 3 contains money, currency, value and other conversion tables which must have been added by Murray since several documents analysed in his book include currency denominations in Argentina and Ireland, as well as different length, weight and area units. A glossary of Spanish terms used by the authors of the letters and memoirs with their correspondent translation in English is shown in Appendix 4. Finally, bibliography, notes on difficult terms, references to people mentioned in the texts, places in Ireland and historical- political explanations for each collection of letters and memoirs close the book.

Based on the conviction that these documents may have different readings, Murray claims that the main source of inspiration for his work was Fitzpatrick's study "*Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*" (1994). Murray sees this work as "a fundamental study and a model for further editions of emigrant letters", since before its publication "emigrant letters and documents were generally treated as sources in themselves, with little or no relation to the context" (2006:13). Fitzpatrick is the first researcher who studied Irish letters from and to Australia, analysing not only the texts but also the epistolary conventions and their structures. However, Murray focuses on the social characteristics of the writers of the letters he studied, their "voices" and discourses and their changing conceptions of their own identity throughout the years. He has also included memoirs (autobiographies) in his research, probably since they mirror

their feelings about their own emigration experience, as protagonists and witnesses and the influence of emigrating on their life as a whole. Murray treats these private confidential correspondence with absolute respect for their authors and their beliefs, trying to preserve the dialogical structure of the letters he selected.

The writer has not arranged each collection in a chronological time line. Instead, he has chosen the time-space criteria expressed by migrants themselves to sequence the letters so as not to interfere with the protagonists' way of expressing their views. The first collection, Edward Robbins' memoirs, covers from 1800 to 1853. Edited in a personal diary's style, it summarizes key events of this writer's life such as deaths, marriages or businesses of relatives and friends in Ireland from 1800 till 1849, when Robbin and his family left Ireland to settle down in Buenos Aires. From his memoirs, that end abruptly in 1853, we learn that he could never adapt to this new land.

The second collection of letters belongs to Martin Murray and his brothers, during the period 1844 – 1879. In contrast with the pessimistic tone of Robbin's account, these letters are full of self-satisfaction and expressions of economic achievement, since "the Ireland in their minds has been relocated to Argentina in the form of Irish shepherds and labourers living in the pampas as if they were at home" (Murray 2006:16). The third set of letters was written by three women to John James Pettit, their cousin in Melbourne, Australia. Murray has chosen this collection since it presents the feminine standpoint of three cousins born in Argentina, with no connection to Ireland. In their letters they do not express a desire to return to their ancestors' country, even though they do not feel as culturally belonging to Argentina either.

The last collection is that of the memoirs of Tom Garrahan, born in Argentina in 1864. The letters written by Garrahan in his *estancia* in Lobos between 1920 and early 1930 are based on his personal diary and written in a first person narrative style. They are reminiscences that provide information about the history of his family that portray values, attitudes and thoughts of a typical Irish Argentine *estanciero*.

Becoming Irlandés has been praised by different researchers of Irish Studies all over the world as a very useful work. It is considered as "an essential text for researchers and students of the Irish emigration to Argentina" (Delaney, May 2004). Dr Laura Izarra has qualified it as "a significant work of compilation ... in a present-day society and cultural context". In addition, Hilda Sabato sees this book as "the first attempt to publish this kind of documentation of the Irish –Argentine community in a scholarly format" (2003). She also remarks Murray's admirable editing task, emphasizing that his compilation of both letters and memoirs includes several types of narratives with a variety of voices, representing the experience of immigration as seen from different points of view.

In contrast, the author himself signals what is absent in his own work:

“There are many pending issues to complete the research. There are more letters and documents to analyse (however, there are still no letters in the other direction, from Ireland to Argentina)... There is a possibility to intensify the linguistic study of these texts and, in particular, the analysis of their discourse ...” (Murray, 2006: 135).

Furthermore, Edmundo Murray claims that other aspects of the Irish-Argentine culture could be a matter of study, such as literature, music, the press, clothing styles, among others. He also hopes new scholars are able to do further research on topics such as the history of Argentine-Irish nationalist movements, their relations and points of contact or the institutional role of the Catholic hierarchy in the formation of an Irish-Argentine identity.

This collection of private narratives of the Irish emigration to Argentina between 1844 and 1912 challenges some of the common myths people usually have about the lives of Irish immigrants in our country. Readers are not only faced to historical and statistical information about these phenomena, but also to the psyche and system of values and beliefs of those “human beings on the move” (Murray, 2006: 3). All through this book Murray allows readers to enter into their inner self and answers questions such as: What was it like to be an Irish emigrant in Argentina in those times? How did diasporic subjects of different ages, sex and economic status undergo this experience? Did success help them overcome the disappointments and nostalgia for what they had to leave? How did their identity change through the years? How did they survive this process of “becoming”? Where was “home” in emigrants’ minds? and How did they see Ireland from a distance?

To conclude, this documentary book is quite valuable as a primary source of research material, because it reveals the personality, values and points of view of emigrants themselves. However, as Murray himself sees it, this type of research should be carried out as complementary of historical and genealogical approaches, in order to provide a more objective and a wider picture of the phenomena of Irish emigration to Argentina in the analysed period. Finally, the author’s decision not to privilege an approach over others is very valuable, since it allows readers to interpret materials in a more personal way.

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Works cited

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