

# Indifference or indignation: Contemporary attitudes towards the Easter Rising in Argentina

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The Argentine press informed their readership about the events that took place in Ireland in Easter Week 1916. This presentation will analyse media coverage and readers' reaction to the Easter Rising with the aim of contributing to the assessment of the impact of this news outside Ireland through the case of Argentina, and particularly among Irish-Argentine circles.

## Some aspects of the Irish in Argentina

But who were the Irish in Argentina? What did they think and feel about Ireland and about British politics?

J. O. P. Bland, a British traveller and writer of Irish descent who visited South America three times (1915, 1916, 1919), wrote that

particularly in the Argentine, the cause of the Allies was never more openly opposed, the side of Germany never more openly espoused, than by a certain section of the Roman Catholic Irish. These men, many of them naturalised Argentines and prosperous settlers, have preserved, even unto the second and third generation, all the characteristics of the priest-ridden, turbulent, ignorant peasantry, whose perverse hatred of all constituted authority is the real curse of Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

John Alexander Hammerton, who had been in Argentina shortly before, while describing what he called "'The British colony' and its ways", gave a more positive picture of the Irish in this country:

In many respects, the Irish Argentine was one of my most interesting studies ... In the Argentine ..., the Hibernian has played no mean role in the development of the young nation. His influence in her counsels to-day is considerable. Prepared as one may be by previous reading to discover him prominent in its life, it is none the less strange to meet eminent men of business, in every fibre of their being fervid Argentines, — using the Argentine tongue with all the nuances of the native, — who speak our own language with the most pronounced Irish brogue.<sup>2</sup>

But he also agreed about the political stance of the Irish community: "Almost without exception they are bitterly anti-English in sentiment."<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that the impression of travellers was that the Irish resented everything related to Britain. But other opinions may shed a different light. A British resident in Argentina for many

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1. J. O. P. [John Otway Percy] *Bland, Men, Manners & Morals in South America* (London: William Heinemann, 1920), p. 100.

2. J. A. [John Alexander] Hammerton, *The Real Argentine: Notes and Impressions of a Year in the Argentine and Uruguay* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1915), p. 262.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

years, Arthur Stuart Pennington, considered himself someone “who really knows the land and sympathises with the hopes and aspirations of its sons.”<sup>4</sup> In his book about the Argentine Republic, he gave a more nuanced view of the ideas of the Irish-Argentine press:

The “Southern Cross” is an Irish weekly paper which would burn everything British, except coal. The editor was until recently Mr. W. Bulfin, whose writings, under the pseudonym of “Che Bueno,” [sic] were so racy that his prejudices were forgiven by his British readers ... The “Hiberno-Argentine Review,” edited by Mr. Edward Finn, is a much more moderate paper than the preceding. Its policy is largely influenced by the Passionist Fathers and its supporters are the leading men of the community to which it owes its name.<sup>5</sup>

From his words it can be inferred that, while *The Southern Cross*’ and Bulfin’s views may not have been generally shared, the relationship among the members of the English-speaking community might be considered pacific and tolerant, allowing enough room for dissent; and also that there were other “more moderate” Irish in Argentina, among which were “the leading men of the community.” But at the same time it can be inferred that, if a particularly important event asked its members for a clear stance, the division among them would become clear.

### Opinions in letters to the Editor

Thomas Murray, the author of *The Story of the Irish in Argentina*, a key book to learn and understand much of the presence of the Irish in this country, was living here during the 1916 Easter Week. In his book he criticizes the Argentine press for giving (almost without exception) a pro-British view of the events that had taken place in Ireland. And he linked it with an Irish community which was not fully imbued by a true Irish feeling. While he acknowledged that “many of these are, indeed, more Irish, and better Irish, than their grandfathers were,”<sup>6</sup> he thought that the mistake of the Irish-Argentines was “want of patriotism, want of spirit and want of common sense; three ugly and degrading characteristics,”<sup>7</sup> and that “the indifference and want of spirit of our people here, at the present time, which is very culpable”<sup>8</sup> was partially responsible for the attitude of the Buenos Aires press.

However, it would be difficult to sustain that there was indifference among the Irish in Argentina. This can be seen in the English-language press of Buenos Aires, and particularly in the letters to the editor. Its reading can give an insight of the attitudes of the local British community in general, and of its Irish-Argentine readers in particular.

*The Standard* had a pro-British editorial line, and its owners of Irish descent continuously repeated that the actions of the rebels did not represent the true feelings of the Irish, who were loyal to Britain:

All that remains to be done now is to clear up the wreck of the Irish Republic, dispose of the organisers with firmness and mercy, reconstruct that part of the city which the Sinn Feiners have desecrated and wasted, and formally declare that 1500 fanatics in a population of 4,500,000 do not, and never can, no matter how they try, constitute a revolutionary force. The loyalty of Ireland was never more clearly demonstrated than it was during the final kick of expiring disloyalty.<sup>9</sup>

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4. A. [Arthur] Stuart Pennington, *The Argentine Republic: Its Physical Features, History, Fauna, Flora, Geology, Literature & Commerce* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1910), p. 7.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

6. Thomas Murray, *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1919), p. 493.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

9. “Peter Pearce [sic], President,” *The Standard*, 2 May, p. 11.

On the other side of the opinions, *The Southern Cross*, addressed specifically to the Irish-Argentines, mildly started saying that “the bombardment of Dublin in 1916 is not a favourable commentary on British rule in Ireland after an experiment of seven hundred years” and that “with regard to the new situation that has arisen there can be only one unanimous feeling among people of Irish blood—sympathy with the cradle-land of our race and hope that she will emerge in triumph from this ordeal.”<sup>10</sup> But less than a month later its attitude was more clearly in favour of the rebels: “It is good to know that once again the Isle of the West has leavened a mercenary and decadent age with a lofty example of spiritualism and self-sacrifice. Physically they have been beaten ...; but morally they have won.”<sup>11</sup>

A few lines before, it had stated that “a feeling of intense horror and indignation has been produced in the Irish-Argentine community by the vengeful brutality of General Maxwell in dealing with the brave insurgents who have proved that patriotism and heroism are still alive in Ireland.”<sup>12</sup> But in fact that reaction had not been unanimous, as a letter to the Editor of the same *The Southern Cross* referred to the rebels as “Dublin Traitors” and “distinguished criminals.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless this letter was an exception in *The Southern Cross*: its readers were in general in favour of the Rising, or at least were proud of those who had taken part in the rebellion: “They are the heroes of our generation. From their blood will spring a new race of patriots determined on the nationality and independence of Irishmen... [W]e celebrate ... that we still have men ready to die for Ireland.”<sup>14</sup> But the fact that *The Southern Cross* also published letters that criticised the rebels may indicate that the Irish weekly acknowledged the existence of a diversity of opinions among the Irish in Argentina.

The same can be said about the *Buenos Aires Herald*, which, although it clearly condemned the Rising, allowed all voices to have their say. For example the letter that stated that the rebellion had been “undertaken by despicable curs ... after one year and nine months of war, after thousands of the sons of Erin have returned to their country maimed and wounded in bearing their share, voluntarily as men, in the defence of the United Kingdom, while the shirking rebels have been arming themselves for a coward’s blow.”<sup>15</sup> And two days later the *Herald* published the angry reply from an Irish reader:

to imagine that you or anyone else should have the bad taste to call them “despicable curs” shows, I am sorry to say, absolute ignorance. Was Washington a “cur”? Was San Martin a “cur”? And it is the sad fact that these young men are fighting a forlorn hope, that compels all gentlemen and gentlewomen to bow their heads in silent honour for such self-sacrifice. These unknown gallants, and maybe, God knows, many a humble colleen, have at least the courage of their convictions.<sup>16</sup>

Although *The Standard* was particularly clear in its criticism of the Rising, something similar happened. When the executions had just begun, a reader wrote that Ireland

has her countless thousands of sons fighting the cause of liberty and justice and right in the trenches, not rioting in Sackville St., and when the day comes, as it surely will come, when Ireland’s cause is heard, she will be remembered for her

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10. “Sensational News from Ireland,” *The Southern Cross*, 28 April 1916, p. 13.

11. *The Southern Cross*, 19 May 1916, p. 12.

12. *Ibid.*

13. P. Ganly, letter to the editor, *The Southern Cross*, 12 May 1916, p. 14

14. Ambrose Griffith, letter to the editor, *The Southern Cross*, 19 May 1916, p. 17.

15. “Nauticus,” letter to the editor, *Buenos Aires Herald*, 29 April 1916, p. 6.

16. “Gallipoli and Kut,” letter to the editor, *Buenos Aires Herald*, 2 May 1916, p. 9.

contingents in the great army and not by the cowardly Liberty Hall crowd who waited to stab in the dark and stab in the back.<sup>17</sup>

But the days passed by, and the executions seemed to have had their impact on its readers, who now had more varied opinions. That may be the reason why *The Standard* allowed discordant voices to have their say in its pages, like the reader who wrote about “the very sad, for Irishmen who keep their nationalistic views, news of the execution of the by me personally considered Dublin heroes.”<sup>18</sup>

It may be difficult to determine whether these opinions in the letters showed a sensible view on the real problems in Ireland and their solutions. But they seem to show that its authors were deeply interested in Ireland’s fate.

The year before the Rising, Hammerton had gone as far as to affirm that the most contemptible rubbish that I have seen in print took the form of letters to the editor of the *Standard* or the *Herald*, which gave admittance to good and bad indiscriminately. Ignorant diatribes against English politicians and home affairs from uneducated residents, who rejoiced to sneer at their motherland, too often found their way into type instead of into the waste basket, and could not but exercise a bad influence on other ignorant members of the community.<sup>19</sup>

This opinion may seem excessively harsh, but it refers indirectly to an important point: the opinions of the Irish in Argentina, most of whom had not visited Ireland<sup>20</sup>, usually depended on the influences they had received from their readings.

In any case, the opinions among the Irish were divided on the Rising, as a *Southern Cross* reader tried to say from a more balanced point of view:

No matter, if one class considers the Revolutionists did wrong in Rebelling at the present moment, or if another class considers they were right, no Irishman should forget the motive which urged on the Rebellion, namely, the Independence of Ireland.

All honour and praise to any man whether he is black, yellow or white, if he lays down his life for his country.

To those men who have been shot because they loved Erin too well, if not wisely, the respect of all Irishmen should go out ungrudgingly and unsparingly<sup>21</sup>.

### **Support for the “Irish cause”**

In any case, many Irish in this country had a strongly-felt reaction to the events in Ireland. Masses were organized in Buenos Aires and in other cities and towns.

An enthusiastic correspondent later described in *The Southern Cross* the Mass that was said in Clonmacnoise (San Antonio de Areco):

Surely the eloquent tribute paid to the dead heroes by the Irish communities of San Antonio, Baradero, and Giles on the 24th May is one of the many expressions of sympathy which will be paid by the Irish in Argentina to the brave Volunteers of 1916.

The graceful Gothic chapel of Clonmacoise [sic] lends itself to decoration and the key note of the whole celebration was nothing too good for the men who gave all for Ireland. Nothing but the severe simplicity suitable in a military funeral was allowed to check the magnificence of the scale of decoration ... A bodyguard of six

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17. “Caterlogh,” letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 3 May 1916.

18. “Blarney Stone,” letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 14 May 1916, p. 4.

19. Hammerton, *The Real Argentine*, p. 277.

20. “Comparatively few of these Irish Argentines, moreover, have ever crossed the seas to the green isle of their ancestors” (Hammerton, *The Real Argentine*, p. 262).

21. Miguel Harte, letter to the editor, *The Southern Cross*, 19 May 1916.

surrounded the catafalque, and a fine contingent of men of splendid soldierly bearing wearing green sashes marched in to the solemn but triumphant strains of a beautiful march specially composed for the occasion. During that march there was not a dry eye in the church for all thought on those other splendid boys who marched so proudly to death.<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes some attendants to these Masses showed a clear rejection of British rule. At least, that was the case, according to Bland, of a Mass in Rosario,

celebrated under the auspices of the St. Patrick's Society "in memory of the dead who fell fighting for the freedom of their country in April and May" —not, mark you, of the Irishmen who had fallen on the battlefields of France to preserve Europe (and incidentally Ireland) from the heel of the Hun, but of those who had met their fate after murdering British soldiers in the streets of Dublin. Describing this interesting ceremony, the *Irish Monthly* (a German subsidised rag published in Buenos Aires) deplored the absence of a number of influential members of the St. Patrick's Society; the entertainment was undoubtedly calculated to attract prosperous renegades.

... and thereafter a card, printed in Spanish, was distributed amongst the faithful, announcing the death "due to a serious attack *Germanofilo* [sic] comforted by holy shells and torpedoes, of the *Queen Mary, Indefatigable, Invincible, Black Prince, Warrior, Princess Royal, etc., etc.*" The imperishable quality of Irish humour was manifested in the statement that "Lord Kitchener would not attend the funeral, having gone to inspect British submarines at the bottom of the North Sea." Well might the anonymous author conclude with "God save Ireland!"<sup>23</sup>

A more neutral stance was shown by a subscription launched by *The Southern Cross* "for all the poor of Dublin who have suffered by the rising ... irrespective of creed and politics".<sup>24</sup>

But even this positive attitude would be answered in political terms:

I intend to send my mite next week for the victims of the Irish insurrection. Irish of Argentine, men and women, Argentine born and Irish born, let us show all whom it may concern, that we are proud ... of them and of the cause for which they have fought and died, and for which our forefathers fought and died, generation after generation.<sup>25</sup>

Contributions were collected and sent to Ireland. Proud sentiments were expressed in the pages of newspapers. But no personal commitment to any patriotic cause seemed necessary. In this context it may be relevant to comment on the Proclamation of the Republic published in *The Southern Cross*.

This weekly carried a version of the Proclamation which seems to be the same that *La Nación* had published some days before.<sup>26</sup> In both newspapers the text presents the same several omissions, perhaps as result of a common imperfect source used. But there is a sentence in the text in *La Nación* which does not appear in *The Southern Cross*: "The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman." Although there can be several reasons for this further omission, it might also indicate a deliberate suppression which was made in order not to trouble an Irish-Argentine readership which would not like to feel indirectly asked to commit themselves personally.

Perhaps the reason was that Ireland was somehow a distant reality for the Irish people in Argentina. Although they were interested in the land of their ancestors, they had more immediate

22. "In memory of the dead." *The Southern Cross*, 26 May 1916, p. 14.

23. Bland, *Men, Manners & Morals in South America*, p. 101.

24. *The Southern Cross*, 5 May 1916, p. 13.

25. P. M. Kelly, letter to the editor, *The Southern Cross*, 12 May 1916, p. 13.

26. *The Southern Cross*, 5 May 1916, p. 8. See also *La Nación*, 2 May 1916.

issues to look after in their native soil, where their families had lived for many years and where their own future lay. Also, they would not be particularly eager in taking part in an unlikely future armed revolution which, as had been proved in those days, was doomed before it started.

And there was the prospect of Home Rule which, according to Government promises, would be finally introduced after the War ended; a hope that seemed more appealing to many of the Irish in Argentina, who had frequently considered themselves as part of the British world. This was proved by the number of Irish-Argentines who volunteered to fight in the British armed forces during the World War.

This was not only the case of the Irish in Argentina, but of those born in Ireland who also joined Irish units to fight on the British side, who for many years were not usually remembered, something that was in some way predicted in a letter in *The Standard*: "I extend my sympathies to all true Irish Nationalists. The deeds of their countrymen will stand as a blot in Irish history for years to come when the bravery of the Irish soldiers will not be remembered."<sup>27</sup>

From the analysis of the sources, it is difficult to agree with Thomas Murray about the "indifference" of the Irish in Argentina towards the Easter Rising. But something similar can be said about the "feeling of intense horror and indignation" mentioned by *The Southern Cross*, which does not seem to have been a unanimous feeling in the Irish-Argentine community. The opinions of the Irish in Argentina, like those of many Irish in Ireland and around the world, showed a complex reality full of shades, which was capable of successive changes.

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27. "Africander," letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 17 May 1916, p. 11.