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In the Shadow of the Ombu Tree

Hugh FitzGerald Ryan.

Chaos Press

by Vincent Banville

MANY years ago I taught English in West Africa, where the most popular book on the course was W.H.Hudson's idyllic account of his boyhood in a 19th century Argentina "Far Away and Long Ago."

My students were highly amused at stories of gauchos cutting steaks from live animals, patching them up and allowing them to roam free once more.

Mr Ryan, while not quite as bloodthirsty as that, relates similarly exotic tales in his new novel, a large amount of it being located in newly explored Uruguay in the mid-1800s.

Based, possibly loosely, on fact – the author's great-grandparents did live for a time in Uruguay – the book is colourful and exuberant in its language, individual in its character delineation, and precise, yet lyrical, in its descriptive sections.

It begins in Co Wexford, where 17-year-old Catherine Doyle, daughter of small farmers Tom and Dorothy, is ensconced in a boarding school. Modern for her time, Catherine meets and falls in love with the dashing medical student John Cardiff.

John is of an adventurous spirit and has no wish to become a doctor. He is determined to head off into the wild to discover what the world might bring him. Catherine is of a like nature and they elope, catch a boat to England, and then set off for South America.

On the voyage they become friendly with a couple from Uruguay, a soldier named Jose Luis and his wife Maria Jesus. They also make the acquaintance of a young Welsh mining engineer called Henry Jones, who is destined to play a large part in the story that follows.

John and Catherine become the owners of a small ranch, they thrive for a time, children are born, and the family seems to be settling in to this strange and exotic land, which they now call home. However, John proves to have a number of character flaws, which eventually lead to a break-up, and cause Catherine to return to Ireland.

This is just a very bare outline of a fine, historical novel that blends in high adventure, love, tenderness, endurance, and that longing to see faraway places that seems always to have gripped the Irish down through the centuries. Salutations to Mr Ryan on a very fine achievement indeed.