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"We are all Uruguayans now. No longer Charrúa or Irish or Inglés or Spanish."

In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree

Hugh Fitzgerald Ryan

Chaos Press, Enniscorthy: 2005

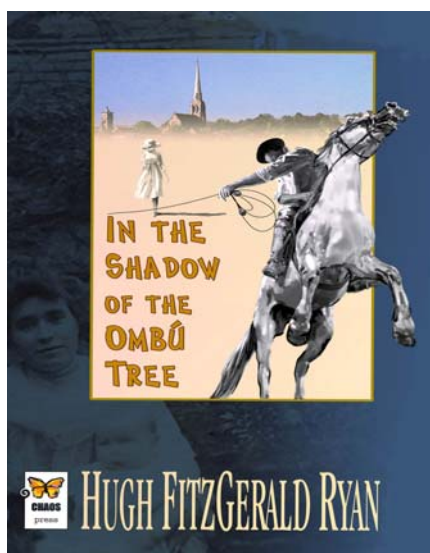
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By Edmundo Murray

Perhaps one of the most shared wishes among the Irish gauchos and their cousins in Ireland and other countries is to write the fictionalised memoirs of their ancestors, trying to imagine their nineteenth-century settlement in both sides of the River Plate. The fascinating stories of these sturdy young men and women who left their homes in Westmeath, Longford, Wexford and other counties in Ireland and settled in the wide flat pampas are worth conceiving a narrative enterprise. The author of this novel is not the exception.

Hugh F. Ryan of Skerries, Co. Dublin is a veteran novelist. He published "The Kybe" (1983), "Reprisal" (1989), "On Borrowed Ground" (1991), and "Ancestral Voices" (1995). He is also a renowned landscapist, and some of his works can be observed and freely downloaded from his personal pages (<http://homepage.tinet.ie/~hfryan>). Ryan commented about his recent book: "The story of my great-grandparents, John and Catherine [Cardiff], and their dramatic elopement from their native Wexford to Uruguay has been told in my family for generations. Fascinating me since childhood, I embarked on an imaginative reconstruction of their turbulent and passionate life. The story, surviving in the



oral tradition had taken on the patina of legend, but research revealed that the legend was borne out by empirical facts" (website cited 7 February 2005).

I delighted in reading Hugh Ryan's novel (not to be mistaken with the romance novel "Meet Me Under the Ombú Tree", also set in a ranch in the pampas). I think this book is important for the study of the Irish in Latin America. Through its pages we can learn how people in Ireland today think about the pampas, the gauchos and the Indians, their governing elites and labourers, their customs and traditions, and their relations with nineteenth-century Irish settlers. We can also detect their beliefs and attitudes towards Latin American cultures. In this context, their understanding of the genocide of indigenous people in Latin America and the roles that Irish estancieros may have played in the appropriation of Indian land seems to rank high in present-day Irish perceptions.

As a matter of botanical fact, the *ombú* is not a tree but a gigantic bush (*Phytolacca dioica*) that grows in the grasslands of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. The ombú often has multiple

trunks and is the only tree-like natural species to be found for kilometres. Its sap is poisonous, therefore the bush is not browsed by cattle. Its fire-resistant wood is soft and spongy, soft enough to be cut with a regular knife, and for this reason it is unsuitable for construction. Why a pseudo-tree with worthless wood and fruits would become the recognised emblem of the pampas? Myths are rarely logical! Conceivably, it was William H. Hudson (1841-1922), the great novelist of *South Americana*, who handed the ombú myth on to the English-speaking culture, yet with a nostalgic nuance: "They say that sorrow and at last ruin comes upon the house on whose roof the shadow of the ombú tree falls" (*South American Romances*, London 1930). Carried by cargo and passenger ships, ombú seeds germinated in Cape Verde, Canary Islands, Portugal and Spain, and are today a living testimony of the migrant mobility of our ancestors through the Atlantic world.

The South Atlantic is the route journeyed by Ryan's characters John and Catherine after their elopement from Wexford. From Liverpool (were they decently look for a priest to bless their union) they board the steamer that would take them to the River Plate. Their fellow passengers José Luis and María Jesús tell them about Uruguay and the possibilities in the pampas. John and Catherine settle in an estancia in Soriano, they struggle for years and have children in this place which becomes home for them. But John's intense nature leads them to split up and Catherine goes back to Wexford. It is a well-constructed plot, with lively characters in a colourful setting.

In real life, the Cardiff estancia "Santa Catalina" became a village with 1,000 population in Soriano department, 197 kilometres from Montevideo. In this region and neighbouring department Rio Negro, several estancias were owned or

managed by British and Irish settlers, especially in the area between Fray Bentos and Young. “Barrio Anglo” near Fray Bentos is a startling example of integration of English and Latin American cultures, and a few Irish surnames that are still present in the telephone books of the region.

Apart from Hudson’s “South American Romances”, there are at least two direct predecessors of “In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree”, the celebrated “You’ll Never Go Back” by Kathleen Nevin (1946), and Susan Wilkinson’s “Sebastian’s Pride” (1988), which has been published in Spanish as “Don Sebastián” (1996). In “You’ll Never Go Back” Kate Connolly and other characters are unmistakably Irish. They are born in Ireland and they do not dispute their origins. But they are *geographically* Irish, and their differences with the English are derived mainly from the place of birth. The identities in “Sebastian’s Pride” play an interesting role in the novel. Wilkinson’s characters are *ingleses*, an ambiguous label that was, and sometimes is, used to accommodate the uncertain idiosyncrasies of English-speaking settlers and their families in Argentina and Uruguay. Perhaps the characters in “Sebastian’s Pride” are *ingleses* because of their perceived social identity of landed gentry, which in the pampas united English-speaking immigrants from different places and with different cultures and religions.

The Cardiffs and other characters of “In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree” are proud of being Irish. They make toasts in Irish: “Sláinte” says John Cardiff to his ranch foreman Fierro (page 58). They are not only born in Ireland but also have a sense of *Irishness* that is conspicuously portrayed throughout the pages of this book. “You are inglés?” asks Fierro when he meets John. “No, Irish ... We come from Ireland” (58). John insists in later chapters, when a military officer is checking the estancia for hidden horses: “Is this the way of the Inglés?” and John replies “We are not Inglés as a matter of fact. ... We are Irish, Irlandés” (144). The native people perceive the difference between *inglés* and Irish. The proprietor of a *pulpería* (public house) seems to be well-informed about the distinctions: “We say inglés but he is not inglés. He is

something else. He does not like to be called inglés. But letters come with the stamp of the queen of the inglés” (199).

We are always tempted to judge nineteenth-century attitudes with twenty-first century values. Historically speaking, we would tend to label Ryan’s ethnic distinctions between Irish and English as anachronistic. The characters’ differentiations between Irish and English may have been received as rather extraordinary comments by their interlocutors at those times. It is like trying to explain in a pub in Wexford that I am Argentine, but not Latin American. The fact that the Irish are (or were at that time) Irish is more complex than it seems.

In his recent study about relations between *Anglos* and Mexicans along the US-Mexico border (“A Tale of Two Families” in *Bulletin of Latin American Research* Vol. 24, N° 1, January 2005, pp. 23-43), Howard Campbell argues that “the closer ethnic groups relate, and the more they find cultural resemblances in each other, the more they may attempt to differentiate themselves in ways that deny similarities and exaggerate differences. Conversely, recognition of cultural affinities among opposed groups may, surprisingly, strengthen ethnic distinctions and power hierarchies rather than erase them.” However, this does not happen between the Irish and natives characters in “... The Ombú Tree”. Keeping their customs and traditions unshaken both groups relate with the *otherness* in a peculiar way that allows them to adjust their beliefs throughout the narrative time. It really does not matter if this type of relations is historical fact or a need of the plot in a fictional work. What pleases the reader is the ability of the narrator to deconstruct complex and intricate value structures and decompose them in plain ethnic categories with a refined esthetical gusto.

Often “In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree” presents examples of how the omniscient narrator perceives the relations between Irish and other ethnic groups, including among others African slaves and their descendants, Charrúa and Guaraní Amerindians, gauchos with mestizo pedigree, and Spanish-Creole members of the powerful local elites. Indians seem to be wise, sharp, gentle (albeit being brave warriors), and mysteriously insightful. They show a natural capacity to adapt to the new rules

of the game in the republic: “We are all Uruguayans now. No longer Charrúa or Irish or Inglés or Spanish” (157) says Guidai, the Indian wife of the foreman. In spite of the social divide between the Irish landowners and their Indian or gaucho labourers, their relations are generally fertile and advantageous for both parties and a new cultural transfer is established. John learns everything about cattle ranching from Fierro and his men. Catherine learns and gradually admires the Indian women.

Stereotypes about Latin Americans are frequently incorporated in the European ethos, and are not absent in the vigorous dialogues among the characters of this book. Innate violence, chaos and never-ending revolutions, erotic dances and alluring rhythms, indolence and idleness, and corruption seem to day-to-day life in Uruguay. These prejudices are balanced by the distinctive reaction of awe expressed by European visitors when confronted with the untamed natural scenery of Latin American pampas, glaciers, and jungles. “They came out into open, undulating grassland. Cattle coughed in the darkness. Birds whirred away at their approach. Waterfowl slapped and splashed as the horses forded a small river and climbed a long grassy slope” (56). Hugh Ryan’s exquisite descriptions of the Uruguayan landscape are only a sample of this blend of fear and astonishment that is legendary among European visitors to the pampas, especially from Britain and Ireland. More than an esthetical experience, it has been argued that the attraction provoked by the wild nature in the Americas, Africa or Asia is based on a possibility that hardly exists in Europe, i.e., the freedom to think that everything is possible. I would add that the attraction is also connected with the possibility of social rise to landlordship, a dream that would have never come true for most tenant farmers in mid-nineteenth century Ireland.

We hope to see a translation of this beautiful novel into Spanish. It will be interesting to see how the translator will cope with the linguistic problems of expressing values and attitudes socially shared by culturally distant readers.

Edmundo Murray
Geneva, March 2005