

Argentine, the 1916 Rising and the Irish Revolution

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Rector Tobias, Ambassador Harman, distinguished guest, colleagues and friends, it is a pleasure to speak to you today on a topic which is, in part, the subject of my very recently published book. Ireland and those Irish living abroad have been celebrating the centenary of the 1916 Irish revolution this year, not least here in Buenos Aires and in Irish towns in the camp. This year is also the bicentenary of the centenary of Argentine independence. Irish-Argentines commemorated the centenary of Argentine independence on 9 July in two very different Irish contexts. Firstly, they came to terms with the terrible news from Dublin about the Rising, death of 485, [184 civilians, 107 British soldiers, rebels 58, and 13 policemen died.] Fifteen leaders were executed, the last being Roger Casement on 3 August 1916 who needs no introduction to audiences in Latin America – the great defender of the human rights of Indians of the Putumayo).

Secondly, there were those, I am sure, who feared hearing bad news from the World War One battle front where over one million died in the Battle of the Somme between July and November 1915, 57 on the first day, nearly 2,000 soldiers from the 36th Ulster Division. Overall, there were 3,500 Irish and many more wounded. Willie Redmond MP, who was so warmly received during his tour of Argentina on a fund-raising mission for the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1913, was killed on 7 June 1917 in Flanders, Belgium. [Irish-Argentine and World War 1 has not been covered in study and that can be done through a study of the pages of *The Standard* and the *Buenos Aires Herald*.]

However, for Irish-Argentine of whatever political or religious persuasion, all could join forces in commemorating the centenary of Irish Independence: ‘By being good Argentines we shall be better Irish, and by being good Irish we shall be better Argentines.’ A wreath was laid at the tomb of Admiral William Brown in Recoleta. Masses were celebrated in Irish churches in Buenos Aires and in the towns throughout the camp with a major fiesta for the Irish at the Passionist Monastery at Capitán Sarmiento which attracted huge numbers from the Irish in the neighbouring partidos. A Southern Cross journalist wrote in his article: ‘Al gran pueblo argentino salud and God Save Ireland.’ He felt it appropriate ‘in the present circumstances,’ and by that he meant, the repression which followed the 1916 rising when near 3000 people were rounded up, [he felt it appropriate] to quote the ‘undaunted’ lines:

Whether on the scaffold high or the battle field we die
Oh, what matter when for Erin dear we fall

Here, the centenary of Argentine independence intertwined with the recent history of Ireland and many Irish Argentine, I do not say all, felt conscious that the independence that they enjoyed as citizens of the Argentine republic should be belatedly seized by Irish nationalists in an independent republic. Why should Irish people not liberate themselves from suzerainty of British

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colonialism – in the self-same way that Argentines had done 100 years before, sentiments held by the editorial board of *The Southern Cross*, but not universally held by all Irish Argentines.

Irish-Argentine nationalist sentiments were further reinforced by the honouring of Admiral William Brown, the distinguished Irish hero of Irish Argentine independence, with the unveiling of a statue in his honour on 7th July 1919 – a ceremony performed by President Hipólito Yrigoyen and which attracted the Irish from throughout the country to attend. Senator Santiago O'Farrell told the crowd that Admiral Brown exemplified the 'glory of his race and hero of our Independence'¹. That day the Irish received from the President validation for their role in Argentine nation-building. They were citizens of an independent republic liberated by a great antecedent – Admiral Brown from Foxford, Co Mayo.

For Irish Argentines, represented by the radical Irish Ireland policies of *The Irish Southern Cross*, the battle was joined – sentiment was not sufficient. Solidarity needed to be expressed in actions in support of the cause of Irish nationalism in a militant and concrete manner. Such an identification with the justice of the Irish cause for self-determination had been a feature of the writing in *The Southern Cross* during the editor/proprietorship of William Bulfin which had lasted from the mid-1890s to 1909. Forceful in his views, Bulfin had introduced his friends into the paper as columnists like William Rooney and Arthur Griffith, and later Eoin MacNeill. Readers became very familiar with the details of cultural rebirth of Ireland, the rise of the Gaelic League. While passionately interested in Argentine affairs, Bulfin really lived between two worlds, Ireland in Argentina. More accurately, at the turn of the century he lived in the world of Irish Ireland but physically in two places. So much so, that Bulfin brought his wife, three daughters and a son back to live in Ireland permanently in 1902. A strong Gaelic Leaguer, both in Argentina and in Ireland, and a friend of intellectuals like Patrick Pearse, Douglas Hyde etc. In his important work of re-imagining Ireland published in 1907, *Rambles in Eirinn*, he moved far from simply describing the topography of Ireland. His political philosophy is clearly visible in those pages. Bulfin sought an Ireland free of seoinins and seoininism [a preference for imitating and preferring 'superior' English customs and culture to Irish ways.] He had given up on the panacea of finding an Irish solution in the granting of Home Rule; In *Rambles in Eirinn*, he wrote:

We were told it thirty years ago, and we are told it to-day. And yet it does not come. Nor will it come as a result of a worn-out system of Parliamentary agitation which is at death's door. It will come when Ireland, by her own effort, makes England fear her – and not until then. All the Devolution and Conciliation and "step-by-step" scheming that could be hatched in a century by Dublin Castle officials would not be worth one hour of independent government to Ireland.'²

Bulfin, throughout his trip, presents a strong critique of British misrule in Ireland. While repairing his broken saddle, mentioned above, he noted: 'four men in the khaki uniform of the Army of Occupation staggered past me, shouting the chorus of some rank barrack-room song in hoarse and obscene discord.' He met 'other parties of khaki-clad warriors' when he resumed his journey³.

[In parenthesis here, I want to make the general point that there is a mistaken view that disillusionment with Home Rule was the result of the terms of the Bill in 1912 and its postponed implementation at the beginning of World War 1. In 1907, the island was replete with individuals and groups who professed no confidence in the Irish Parliamentary party and the Home Rule

1. 'Historic Ceremony in Plaza Irlanda,' *TSC*, 11 July 1919; O'Farrell paid tribute to the artist, Alejandro Chiapasco, a Florentine who had achieved critical success in Buenos Aires.

2. William Bulfin, *Rambles in Eirinn* (M.H. Gill and Son, Dublin, 1907), pp. 276-7

3. William Bulfin, *Rambles in Eirinn* (M.H. Gill and Son, Dublin, 1907), pp. 212-3

solution in the first decade of twentieth century. That process of alienation was accelerated by the weakness of the terms and by the weakness of John Redmond who had become a prisoner of the British government.]

William Bulfin was an Irish Irelander, a supporter of Arthur Griffith and Sinn Féin, and, probably, a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Returning permanently to Ireland in early 1909, he threw himself into Irish cultural politics as a speaker for the Gaelic League and he was marked down as a future editor of *An Claidheamh Soluis*. His sudden and unexpected death, at 46, on 1 February 1910, may have been advanced by an unsuccessful fund-raising winter voyage in steerage to New York with his friend The O'Rahilly to raise funds to save Griffith's *Daily, Sinn Féin*. The Irish-Ireland movement lost a powerful journalistic voice, an orator, an activist and so much unrealised leadership potential. What he would have done during the 1916 Rising can't be known. But like his close friend, The O'Rahilly, he would have probably been with him in the GPO – as he, too, had 'wound the clock' and would want to have heard it strike.

While we don't know how William whether would have been a by-stander or a participant in the Rising, we do know that he had been the second parent to enrol his son, Eamonn, in Patrick Pearse's new school, St. Enda's. Denied the guiding hand of his father, not surprisingly, Eamonn, became one of Pearse's inner circle, the Dogs, a particularly close friend of Willie Pearse and a favourite of Mrs Pearse and her two daughters. He had moved from St. Enda's to study at UCD. But of more importance in his formation was his active engagement in the Irish Volunteers and in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) – the engine of the 1916 rising. Eamonn Bulfin, born in Argentina in 1892 and brought to Ireland in 1902, led the Volunteers from St. Enda's and Rathfarnham into the GPO on Easter Monday, was ordered to deploy his men on the roof, raised one of the flags over the GPO as instructed by Willie Pearse, survived the week in an exposed position, survived the retreat to Moore St., was captured, tried by military court martial and sentenced to death.

The editor of the *Southern Cross*, Gerald Foley, was cut from the same cloth as his predecessor. *Che Buono's* spirit and political philosophy permeated the paper and its voice grew more strident in the lead up to the Rising. Time does not allow me to dwell on the coverage of the Rising, but it is covered in my book. However, the fate of Eamonn, or 'Ned' Bulfin was covered in the edition on 12 May, describing him as 'an Argentine citizen' who had been born in Buenos Aires about 21 years ago where he had received his early education. The paper, which reproduced a photo of him in a kilt, described Eamonn as fluent Irish speaker and member of the Gaelic League: 'He is unusually tall and is a magnificent type of young manhood; he is extremely popular among his fellow-students of the University where he is studying for his degree. Whether he took any part in the insurrection or not we are unable to say, as we have no data beyond the telegrams.'⁴ *TSC* readers learned in an editorial on 19 May that 'Eamonn Bulfin is, we believe, the only Argentine amongst the insurgent prisoners. It is reported this week that he has been interned in England and this means, we suppose, that he has escaped General Maxwell's court-martial.'⁵

Maxwell, the supreme commander of the British forces in Dublin for most of the rising, was dubbed 'the butcher of Dublin' by the editor of *TSC* and that description appeared frequently in the editorials of the paper in the weeks following the executions of the leaders.

For the record, Bulfin - although born in Argentina - was not an Argentine citizen at the time of the Rising, but he was represented as being one to the British authorities by his mother supported by the Argentine vice-consul in Dublin. The acting consul did intervene to save his life as he was one of the 67 condemned to death. Whether this saved Bulfin's life is not certain. More likely the

4. Editorial, 'Eamonn Bulfin,' *TSC*, 12 May 1916

5. Editorial, 'Eamonn Bulfin,' *TSC*, 19 May 1916

reaction to the first fourteen executions had given the British cause for pause. Bulfin had his sentence commuted and he was deported to Frongoch internment camp in Wales. Bulfin, in turn, promised the British vice-consul that when released he would present himself at the Argentine consulate to receive an Argentine passport. This, he duly, did in early 1917 setting in train a series of events which – having been jailed twice for his political activities - had him called up for military service in Buenos Aires and deported by them in mid-1919. Opportunistically, his friend and superior in the IRB, Michael Collins, refused him allow him to ‘go on the run’ when was given compassionate leave. The Government of Dáil Éireann made him the first Irish envoy to Latin America, based in Buenos Aires. He duly arrived in mid-1919 and not even the influential friends of his father, the great Che Buono, could prevent him having to serve in the Argentine navy for a few months. Once discharged in March[?] 1920, he made several unsuccessful attempts to contact headquarters in Dublin. One piece of his correspondence, sent on 26 January, arrived in Dublin on 19 March. His other reports had gone missing, probably intercepted in the post by the British authorities. But Diarmuid O’Hegarty, secretary to the Dáil, wrote to him assuring him that he would accomplish much in his post throughout Latin America.