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An Argentine Child's Wake, with Music and Dancing – As seen by Alfred Ébélot and R. B. Cunninghame Graham

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ABSTRACT

The French engineer Alfred Ébélot in 1870s Argentina helped lay out a ditch 300-plus kilometres long across the grasslands – the pampa – of the huge Province of Buenos Aires. This was to hinder Indian raiders seeking to make off south with white captives and huge numbers of animals. Somewhere Ébélot witnessed a traditional child's wake, accompanied by music and dancing. Graham, fluent Spanish speaker and expert horseman, was in the 1870s utterly captivated by the unfenced pampa and by its cow-herders, the gauchos. He too witnessed a child's wake with music and dancing.

"El Velorio" (*The Wake*), the first of Ébélot's vignettes in *La Pampa* (1890), describes such a child's wake. In 1894 W. H. Hudson, the Argentine-born naturalist and author, recommended *La Pampa* to his friend Graham, advising him to switch his writing focus to short sketches based on his pampa experiences. In 1899, Graham's "El Angelito" (*The Little Angel*) is a five-part description of a child's wake very similar in design to Ébélot's "El Velorio". Ébélot, a positivist, is more critical than Graham of the commercialisation of the child's wake tradition. Graham's passion for the pampa and especially his ability to highlight compelling details give the literary edge to Graham's sketch. Ébélot's *La Pampa* proved a useful help to Graham in his rapid development in the late 1890s as a writer of literary sketches.

In 1870, two foreigners landed in Argentina for the first time – the Frenchman Alfred Ébélot and the Scotsman Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham. In different places each witnessed a traditional child's wake accompanied by music and dancing. This article compares their experiences of Argentina and their literary interpretations of an intriguing piece of Hispano-Argentine folklore.

Alfred Ébélot (1839-1920)¹ had a remarkable career in Argentina. Trained as a civil engineer in Paris, he avoided – as a committed republican – a career in Napoleon III's civil service. After experience with the important journal *Revue des Deux Mondes*, he immigrated to Argentina in 1870, when its population was c. 1.8 million, of whom 32,000 were French. A first venture in journalism failed, and he was employed by the Argentine government to survey and define the frontier 300 kilometres south and west of the capital Buenos Aires.

This frontier was porous. Every few years, untamed Indians from the south raided north to seize women and children as slaves and to drive off cattle, horses and sheep back to their tented villages in the “desert”, the plains beyond the frontier line. Alsina, Minister of War, proposed that a ditch be dug to stop the Indian raiders taking captives and beasts south. The initial plan visualised a ditch 2.6 metres broad, 1.75 metres deep and six hundred kilometres long, linking ninety-two forts and military outposts on a line running from near Bahía Blanca in the south-southwest of the huge Province of Buenos Aires to just south of Córdoba Province towards the northwest. Over 350 kilometres of trench were to be completed.

Ébélot's involvement in this huge nation-building project, known as the Alsina Trench,² and his work in laying out a town planned to house treaty Indians put him in contact with government ministers, landowners, army officers, ordinary soldiers, storekeepers, gauchos, their women and with Indians, both tame and wild. His extensive knowledge of the frontier and its problems is seen in his long and dramatic article “Une invasion indienne dans la province de Buenos Ayres. Souvenirs et récits de la frontière argentine” in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, May 1876):³ this described the raid in late December 1875 by up to 5,000 Indians in the areas of Tandil, Azul, Tres Arroyos and Alvear when the Indians killed hundreds of settlers and made off with 500 captives and over 150,000 animals.

After this massive raid the government adopted a much more aggressive policy aimed at forcing the Indians south of the Río Negro. In 1879-1880 General Roca, the new Minister of War, led a large military force that ‘solved’ the Indian problem by exterminating the Indian warrior castes and relocating the Indian women and children to the “civilized” north as virtual slaves. Millions of acres were opened up for settlement and development, and Roca became President.

His engineering skills no longer needed, Ébélot went back to journalism with *Le Courier de La Plata* and *La Nación*, writing and editorialising with great vigour in French and Spanish for thirty years on Argentine national and international affairs. His long residence, his engineering experience and his high-level journalism gave him ample opportunity to study Argentina's headlong rush to modernisation. Aware that the gaucho culture was being rapidly swept aside, in 1890 Ébélot published *La Pampa. Moeurs argentines* in Paris and the same volume, in his own very able Spanish, as *La Pampa. Costumbres argentinas* in Buenos Aires. The first vignette of fourteen in Ébélot's volume is “El Velorio” (*The Wake*),⁴ a

¹ See: Cecilia González Espul: “La conquista del desierto y la zanja de Alsina bajo la dirección de Alfredo Ebelot” at www.rebanadasderealidad.com.ar/espul-08-02.htm ; Pauline Raquillet-Bordry “Alfred Ébélot, La Pampa”, at www.univ-paris-diderot.fr/hsal/hsal96/prb96.html [date of death given as 1912]; and María Sáenz Quesdada “Alfred Ébélot, un francés acriollado”, at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=334247

² Spanish Wikipedia: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zanja_de_Alsina (Zanja de Alsina). The map supplied shows the gradual movement of the frontier towards the south and south-west.

³ The article is available on the *Revue des deux Mondes* website at : <http://www.revuedesdeuxmondes.fr/user/details.php?author=Ebelot&subject=&title=&month1=1&year1=1829&month2=12&year2=2011&content=&code=63410>

⁴ Alfred Ébélot: *La Pampa. Costumbres argentinas* (Joseph Escary, Buenos Aires, 1890), Preface p. 7 and pages 9-22. Full Spanish-language text readable on screen at <http://www.archive.org/details/lapampa00ebelgoog>

description of a child's wake with music and dancing in the heart of the grasslands – the pampa. This event occurred probably in the 1870s.⁵

R. B. Cunninghame Graham (1852-1936) was by age seventeen in early 1870 an accomplished speaker of Spanish and an expert horseman.⁶ In his three extended visits to Argentina in the 1870s, he gained bruising experience as an apprentice rancher, a promoter of plantations for growing Paraguayan tea and as a horse drover and dealer. He travelled widely in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay and acquired a lifelong love of the gaucho cow-herding culture of the open unfenced grasslands. In the late 1870s, he travelled in Iceland and West Africa. In 1882 his and his new wife's cattle ranch in Texas was destroyed in an Apache raid: to recoup losses he drove a caravan-load of cotton to Mexico City and stayed on to work for a time as a fencing master. In 1883, his father died and Graham took over the debt-ridden family properties in Scotland. During his six years (1886-1892) as a radical Liberal Member of Parliament, he took special interest in major socialist reforms relating to labour conditions in factories and became a co-founder of the Labour Party. In the 1890s, his magazine articles criticised British and United States imperialism and gave support to the principle of Home Rule.

In 1896 Graham published *Mogreb-el-Acksha*, a record of his attempt, in disguise, to reach the forbidden city of Tarudant in Morocco. In 1898, he and his wife Gabriela jointly published the collection of sketches entitled *Father Archangel of Scotland and Other Essays*. Four out of Graham's nine sketches in *Father Archangel of Scotland and Other Essays* were set in Argentina or Spain. In 1899, he published *The Ipané*, his first solo collection of sketches. The third sketch of fifteen in this collection was entitled "Un Angelito" (*A Little Angel*),⁷ a description of a child's wake, with music and dancing, at a country store in southern Buenos Aires Province, again probably in the 1870s.

Graham had less continuous residence in Argentina than Ébélot, though he seems to have made up for this in passionate commitment. Graham, the more widely travelled of the two, was familiar with more Spanish-speaking countries than Ébélot. Both men in Argentina had close contact with the pampa and the cow-herding way of life threatened by Argentina's modernisation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Both were careful observers and thoughtful commentators. The speculation is that Graham may have used Ébélot's 1890 sketch "El Velorio" to shape his writing in 1899 in "Un Angelito".

In his Spanish-language Preface Ébélot states that his "ciencias positivas" contain his imagination and that his sketches ("bosquejos") are precise. He has lived successfully in the "desert", the untamed pampa beyond the frontier, and for long periods has lived and thought as a gaucho. He is acutely aware of Argentina's rapid process of change: "El indio ya no existe. Antes de diez años, la desapiadada (= despiadada) civilización habrá pulido como con esmeril las anfractuosidades y las líneas toscas de la acentuada figura del gaucho".⁸ (The Indian no longer exists. Within ten years heartless civilisation will have smoothed out the rough coarse edges and lines of the sharply defined figure of the gaucho). His notes, feels, will soon be "documentos pre-históricos".

This writer identifies five sections or phases in Ébélot's "El Velorio". The opening section (37 lines, to "llover de lo lindo.") shows Ébélot, commissioned by the Minister for War,

⁵ A child's wake is illustrated in "Largo Viaje" (1967) by Patricio Kaulen: <http://pasatelapelicula.blogspot.com/search?q=Largo+Viaje+Patricio+Kaulen>

⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bontine_Cunninghame_Graham

⁷ R. B. Cunninghame Graham: "Un Angelito", in *The Ipané* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd. [First published 1899], 2nd impression (Cabinet Library) 1925. Full text of this edition readable on screen at: American Libraries Free Books: <http://www.archive.org/details/ipanrbcun00cunnrich> ("Un Angelito" on pages 36-46).

⁸ Alfred Ébélot: *op. cit.*, pp. 7 and 9-22.

journeying with his guide across the pampa. Ébélot's horse-drawn carriage moves very slowly over the roadless grassland. Caught in a rainstorm they head for Torres' store.

In the second phase (85 lines, to “y de guitarra.”), Ébélot and his guide arrive at nightfall, drenched, at Torres' isolated country store. A voice directs them to the kitchen hut. When Torres is brought, he explains that his four-year old son had died the previous day. Torres invites Ébélot to join the wake.

Ébélot's third section (78 lines, to “el primero que contemplé.”) is set in the main hut, a room smelling of candle wax, tobacco and gin. Towards the back, the dead child, dressed in its best clothes, is sitting propped in a little chair set on gin cases on top of the table. On this second night of the wake, green shadow is showing around the child's lips. On one side of the table a seated gaucho holds a guitar: the music and dancing had stopped when Ébélot entered the room. The men stand clasping the women and whispering to them, the women laughing loudly. On the other side of the table is the mother, “la mirada fija y cruzadas las manos” (*the eyes staring and her hands crossed*). Speakers tell her that “el angelito está en el cielo” (*The little angel is in heaven*). She agrees, “y seguía mirando fijamente” (*and carried on staring*). Ébélot, shaking her hand, omits to murmur the expected formulaic phrase “El angelito está en el cielo”, and joins the older men in a corner. The dance picks up again. The women dancing shake their hips, bless themselves and cackle loudly as they spin past the dead child. The rain-storm outside momentarily drowns out the guitar, the voices, the feet beating on the floor, the kisses.

Ébélot's third section has two images that to the average reader might seem grotesque. The first is of the dead child – “horroroso y enternecedor” (*horrific and touching*) – sitting up “a manera de pedestal”, as if raised on a little throne, and the dancing women blessing themselves and hooting at their partners' “galanterías” (*compliments*) as they pass by the dead body. This is the “horroroso” dimension. The “enternecedor” dimension is suggested in the body's slack arms and dangling legs and in the two flashes of the stricken mother staring fixedly as Ébélot forgets to murmur the standard words of sympathy to her. Ébélot does not dwell long on the mother's grief.

In the fourth section (47 lines, to “especulación repugnante”) Ébélot opens up a general debate. This custom of celebrating a child's death with music and dancing, according to Ébélot widespread across Spanish America, can be turned to commercial ends. A storekeeper can hire a dead child's body and use it to set up a dance and sell liquor. This may give isolated pampa-dwellers a chance to meet, though the dead child's parents may spend at the store any money gained from renting out their child's body. When the storekeeper tries to keep the body fresh for use on a second or even a third night, Ébélot finds this “bárbaro”: he opines that these small dead bodies should not become part of the struggle for money or of “una especulación repugnante”. His distrust of religion – evidenced in his closing phrase “los paganos de la pampa” – may blind him to the spiritual and emotional support that the original “angelito” ceremony might have provided for simple believers in times of high child mortality in remote rural areas. His reformer's anxiety to criticise the commercial abuse of the custom perhaps also draws him away from the individual human pain, especially that of the suffering mother.

Ébélot's fifth and final phase (27 lines to the end) recognises that the advance of civilisation will erode “las viejas leyendas”. Once given the perspective of time, such customs may take on “una apacible tonalidad de arcaísmo (= arcaísmo) pintoresco” (*a gentle toning of picturesque archaism*). As of 1890, though, he concludes:

Superstición singular, característica mezcla de brutalidad y de poesía [...] el velorio es un genuino rasgo de los antiguos usos y la más curiosa manifestación del catolicismo de los jesuitas interpretado por los paganos de la pampa.
(*A remarkable superstition, a characteristic mixture of brutality and poetry [...] the wake is a genuine feature of ancient customs and the strangest manifestation of Jesuit-style Catholicism as interpreted by the pagans of the pampa*).

Ébélot – trained engineer, experienced journalist, a believer in positivism and rational progress – has witnessed and recorded a curious piece of pampa folklore. His sketch is a fine piece of social observation and thoughtful commentary, perfectly in tune with the subtitle of his collection of sketches – “Costumbres argentinas” or “Argentine Customs”.

The literary link between Ébélot and Graham is pinpointed by Watts and Davies in their critical biography of Graham:

He [Graham] was encouraged by Hudson to set down his South American experiences in sketches and essays. In 1894, when Graham was struggling with a projected history of the gauchos, Hudson recommended that, instead of writing at length, he should follow the example of *La Pampa*, a collection of vignettes by Alfred Ébélot. Ébélot, a Frenchman long resident in Argentina, combined depictions of gaucho life – brawling, dancing at wakes, tracking runaways – with speculations on themes close to Graham's heart: biological evolution and the nature of civilisation.⁹

Graham in 1870 was utterly enthralled by the open pampa and by its free-ranging cow-herders, the gauchos. So profound was the pampa's impact on him that of his two hundred-plus sketches and tales in fourteen volumes (1896-1936), several dozen are set on the pampa in Argentina and Uruguay. Blessed with a phenomenal memory, even forty or fifty years after an incident Graham seemed able to recall settings, characters and events in considerable detail.

This writer identifies five phases in Graham's 1899 sketch “Un Angelito”.¹⁰ In the opening section (79 lines, to *out on the open 'camp'*), Graham rides across the pampa in southern Buenos Aires Province from Tandil through the Tres Arroyos area heading towards Bahía Blanca on the Atlantic coast. The horses are described in great detail, and mention is made of the great expanses of grass and sky, the ombú tree, an ostrich, a Patagonian hare, the salty rivers, the rare and very cautious travellers met and the news shared regarding the depredations of the Indians. Ébélot in his horse-drawn carriage offers a less romantic image than Graham on horseback, and Ébélot's comments on horse behaviour are straightforward, almost mundane, whereas Graham's descriptions of landscapes and horses bubble with wonder and enthusiasm.

The second phase (107 lines, to *uninstructed minds*.) shows Graham arriving towards evening at an old fort surrounded by a peach grove. Hitching posts front a house and the great number and variety of horse types tied to them puzzle Graham. He is welcomed at the hitching posts by his acquaintance Eustaquio Medina: the latter reports that his son has died and that folk have gathered for the child's wake, to celebrate the fact that “his soul is with the blest [...]. When a child dies it is the signal for a dance to celebrate its entry into bliss”. On

⁹ Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies (1979). *Cunninghame Graham - A Critical Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 155.

¹⁰ R. B. Cunninghame Graham *op. cit.*

arriving at Torres' store, Ébélot had been directed to the separate kitchen where meat and fuel were available for the travellers. Torres, told of Ébélot's high government connections, was concerned to pamper his guest – almost even to the point of setting aside his sorrow at his child's death. Graham on the other hand goes straight from the hitching post into the main living space where the wake is being held.

The wake is described in Graham's third section (61 lines, to *Yet so it is: ...*). Fifty people crammed a room filled with candle and cigar smoke. Cotton-gowned women – “Chinas” – sat along the wall. The dead child – the “Angelito” – “sat in a chair upon a table, greenish in colour, and with his hands and feet hanging down limply – horrible, but at the same time fascinating”. An old “Gaicho” played the guitar. In a corner old men talked of horses' brands. The younger people performed various popular dances, with the guitarist occasionally bursting into shrill falsetto song. A man recovering from an Indian lance-wound lay poncho-wrapped on a litter. The girls dancing occasionally blessed themselves as they passed the child's body before then breaking into laughter.

The wake scenes in Ébélot and Graham are fairly similar, perhaps necessarily so in that custom would demand that the ceremonial be followed rigorously. Even so, Ébélot's “*ligera sombra verdosa*” (*faint greenish shadow*) on the child's lips becomes Graham's “greenish in colour”. Ébélot's “*caídos los brazos, colgando las piernas, horroroso y enternecedor*” (*arms and legs dangling, horrific and touching*) is paralleled by Graham's “with his hands and feet hanging down limply – horrible, but at the same time fascinating”. Whereas Ébélot's encounter with the grief-stricken mother covers eleven lines, Graham mentions her only in one phrase on the final page: Graham misses the opportunity here to draw out the potential for pathos. Ébélot reports a touch spicily that “*una que otra bailarina [...] meneaba las caderas con la provocativa ondulación propia de la habanera o de la zamacueca*” (*one or other of the girls dancing [...] wiggled her hips in the provocative sinuous style of the habanera or zamacueca dances*). Graham on the other hand openly reports the girls as for hire: they are prostitutes attached to the country store. The details of the women dancing, blessing themselves and cackling as they pass by the dead body are again very similar across the two sketches.

In Graham's fourth phase (23 lines, to “I cannot tell”) “a commercial element has crept into the scheme”. An owner of a pampa store “will beg or borrow the body of a child just dead to use it as an “Angelito” to attract the country people to a revel at his store”. Graham does recognise the role of the country store as the “Pampa Club”, but does not know the origin of the “Angelito” custom. Where Ébélot the positivist gives nearly twenty per cent of his text to the commercialisation of the wake custom, Graham gives barely eight per cent. Graham had been a great proponent of social reform in his time in Parliament but here in the pampa shows little inclination to promote change. Ébélot is harsher in his extended criticism of the abuse of the folk practice, as in “*pulperos, nada propensos a la sensibilidad*” (*storekeepers, not at all prone to being sensitive*) and “*Este ardid*” (*this ruse*). Ébélot recognises that “*Su mercantilismo es una mancha en el cuadro, no lo niego, un manchón poco simpático. Hasta concedo que es algo bárbaro*” (*Their money-making spirit is a stain in the picture, I do not deny it, a large and not very pleasant stain. I even grant that it is somewhat barbarous*). Yet he feels obliged to add: “*Es de notar sin embargo que no ha sido producido por la barbarie, sino por un rudimento de civilización*” (*It is to be noted, however, that it has been produced not by barbarism, but by a rudiment of civilisation*).

In the fifth and final section (47 lines to the end) Graham strikes a fully elegiac note: he does know that all such pampa customs “are doomed to disappear”. Progress in the form of barbed wire fences and telegraph poles will break up and destroy the apparently unlimited space of the old pampa. Within Graham's memory the Indians have already gone: “though

savages”, they will leave a blank that can never be filled. In time gauchos, ostriches, huanacos will all disappear. European nettles and thistles, cities, cabs and railways will occupy the old grasslands.

Graham’s final lines emphasise that he can always recall the precise details of that first wake:

Eustaquio Medina, the wounded man lying smoking on his *catre*, the decomposing “Angelito” in his chair, his mother looking at nothing with her eyes wide open, and the wild music of the cracked guitar seem to revisit me.

In his last ten lines, Ébélot makes slightly distracting reference to his friend Charton, the great editor of “Le Tour du Monde”: mention of his death in 1890, the year of publication of *La Pampa*, might be meaningful to an educated French-based reader but perhaps falls rather flat in the Spanish-language version published in Argentina. Ébélot’s view that the passage of time will give the original customs and his sketches a veneer of “arcaísmo pintoresco” is less impactful than Graham’s closing elegy.

Some similarities of presentation may derive from the formulaic nature of the child’s wake tradition in remote places and from the fact that both Ébélot and Graham are seeking to record curious scenes witnessed twenty or thirty years previously. Other similarities may occur because Ébélot and Graham are opinionated individuals, both highly educated or extremely well-read and thoughtful witnesses and commentators, mistrustful both of them of organised religion. Ébélot’s final phrase “los paganos de la pampa” is mirrored by Graham’s biting remarks: “we separated with a fallacious “Go with God,” knowing full well our only trust was in our spurs”; “faith, that first infirmity of uninstructed minds”; and – referring to the creeping urbanisation and civilization of the pampa – “His will will be accomplished who, having made the earth a paradise, gave it to us to turn into a purgatory for ourselves and all the dwellers in it”. It has to be recognised, however, that the organisation of Graham’s 1899 sketch into five phases or sections – the journey across the pampa, arrival at an isolated country store, the wake with music and dancing, the commercialisation of the wake and the sense of loss as the old customs disappear – carries strong echoes of Ébélot’s 1890 sketch. Of the two sketches, however, Graham’s sketch seems superior.

Whereas Ébélot views the pampa and the gauchos with the eyes and mind of a technically educated (*vide* “anfractuosidades” in his Preface), rational and practical man, Graham’s intimate feeling for the pampa – its vast sense of space, its horses (in the opening section and even more so at the hitching posts in section two), its flora and fauna, its gauchos – seems all-encompassing. If Ébélot is a careful observer and student of the pampa, Graham is its passionate lover, acceptive of all its splendours and abject realities.

Graham also has an incredibly sharp eye for striking and suggestive detail, as when he illustrates the terrible dangers from the wild Indians: “the body of the owner lying before the door, swollen to the dimensions of an ox, and festering in the sun” and “a woman’s body hanging naked to a post, and decorated with leaves torn from a Bible skewered artistically about it where decency required”. He understands that the hitching post before an isolated house is an unspoken boundary between public and private space, and that the Christian traveller must approach that pampa house by identifying himself from a distance with the opening words of the Mary prayer. Graham subtly presents the gauchos as very material-minded yet made occasionally proud by being in direct touch with heaven through the death of an “Angelito”. As Argentina engages in a cycle of monumental economic, social and political change, Graham logs the signs of the arrival of six million immigrants, listing the presence at the wake of “the ubiquitous Italian with his organ”. He shows delicate irony and a

measure of compassion in describing the rural prostitutes, the “Chinas”, “waiting as patiently for any man to hire them as the eleventh-hour labourers in Holy Writ”. His keen eye spots the richer men – with silver-handled knives and spurs – standing just a little apart from the general company. Old men trace out horse-brands with fingers dipped in gin. The men dancing rattle their spurs on the floor. The wounded man on the litter “ate great pieces of beef cooked in the hide, and smoked incessantly”. The pulpería, the Pampa Club, is resorted to by “all the elite of frontier ruffianism”. Graham’s eye is so precise and revealing that a film-maker would find everything he needed in his sketch to re-create this scene perfectly.

Graham seems, then, to have had unlimited empathy with the pampa and gaucho world. His almost uncanny skill in capturing particularly memorable and compelling detail helps him evoke the dying heartbeats of the plains and gaucho culture. Yet Graham’s rapid development in the late 1890s as a writer of literary sketches may to some extent derive from the lessons he learned during his extremely deft re-manipulation of Alfred Ébélot’s “El Velorio”.

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