

“A Shamrock Could Arise”: *The Southern Cross* and the Making of Irish Identity in Argentina, 1875-1889

Elizabeth Cowan

Abstract

In 1875, *The Southern Cross* was founded in Buenos Aires as means of communication between the Irish immigrants who lived in the city and those scattered throughout the *pampas*. Its articles, editorials, and letters to the editor provide insight into the daily lives of Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century Argentina, the majority of whom worked as sheep farmers in the rural *pampas*, while the wealthier *estancieros* resided in the city of Buenos Aires. These immigrants wrestled with questions of identity and assimilation that were particular to their setting, and the study of the negotiations of these questions in *The Southern Cross* adds a dimension to the broader conception of the global Irish diaspora. The Irish immigrant community in Argentina was truly a transnational entity, engaging with ideas and events from Ireland and Argentina, as well as from other locations of the global Irish diaspora that were printed in *The Southern Cross*. Neglecting the narratives of the Irish immigrants in Argentina fails to capture the entirety of the Irish diasporic phenomenon. Studying *The Southern Cross* – its creation and evolution, and its content pertaining specifically to Irish and Argentine politics and Irish cultural identity – informs this narrative and begins to fill the gap, while also revealing more about the Irish immigrant community in Argentina and their creation and negotiation of a communal Irish identity.

Irish Cultural Identity

- *The Southern Cross* served both as a means to communicate to readers the diasporic Irish identity and as a channel for readers and editors to contribute their own ideas to what it meant to be Irish
- the newspaper exhibited rhetorical elements used throughout the Irish diaspora – an Irish Catholic association, an emphasis on a “Celtic” past, a pastoral idealization of Ireland, a tragic but fortifying historical memory of English oppression that shaped an Irish worldview, language of exile, and identification as not-English
- Dillon and his editorial board attempted to engage *The Southern Cross* readers with a transnational Irish identity interpreted through an Argentine lens and create an Irish identity despite socioeconomic divisions within the community
- the Irish identity articulated and promoted by *The Southern Cross* was about more than what one called one’s homeland; it also indicated a certain interpretation of past events and identification with a global Irish community
- readers adopted the language of the editors, but the acceptance of a common Irish identity was not enough to reunite the community

Irish and Argentine Politics

- between 1875 and 1889, *The Southern Cross* became increasingly willing to involve themselves in Argentine as well as Irish political affairs
- Dillon and other editors encouraged readers to get involved in political causes, either through monetary support or exercising their rights as citizens
- reports of political movements and legislation regarding Ireland were presented to the Irish readers as a means to keep them united as a community, and politically and emotionally engaged with their homeland
- *The Southern Cross* increasingly participated in Argentine politics, and imagined their readers similarly engaged but this political involvement was often divided along differing socioeconomic lines of the urban and rural Irish
- the General Brown Club was founded in 1879 to encourage elite, urban Irish involvement in Argentine politics; Irish Associations with similar goals were founded in the *pampas* in 1887
- the dialogue between editors and readers reveal Irish immigrants navigating involvement in the politics of their old and adopted homelands



Patrick Joseph Dillon
Chief Editor (1875-1889) and Irish Chaplain in Argentina (1871-1889)



Estancia building in San Antonio de Areco, Buenos Aires Province

Irish Cultural Identity in *The Southern Cross*

“Yesterday, whilst passing along the Paseo Julio, we were surprised to see a number of our countrymen evidently listening with attention to a poor blind hurdy-gurdy man. On approaching we caught the last few strains of what was intended for St. Patrick’s day, but it sounded quite melancholy, evidently mourning its exile. When it had quite finished, and our feelings were wrought up to extreme agitation, we dropped the sympathetic tear, and, a few dollars into the musicians hat.”

The Southern Cross, March 1875

“Oh! if for every tear
That from our exiled eyes
Has fallen, Erin dear,
A shamrock could arise
We’d weave a garland green
Should stretch the ocean through
All, all the way between
Our aching hearts and you!”

“Shamrock Leaves,” *The Southern Cross*, April 25, 1879

A letter to the editors signed by “A Leinster Maid,” who identified herself as “an Irish girl who has been some years in this country,” reminisced about Ireland and the “pleasant winter nights when we all sat by the fireside and one of the boys read a chapter of some pious book or some funny story. It is a pity the practice is not kept up in this country.”

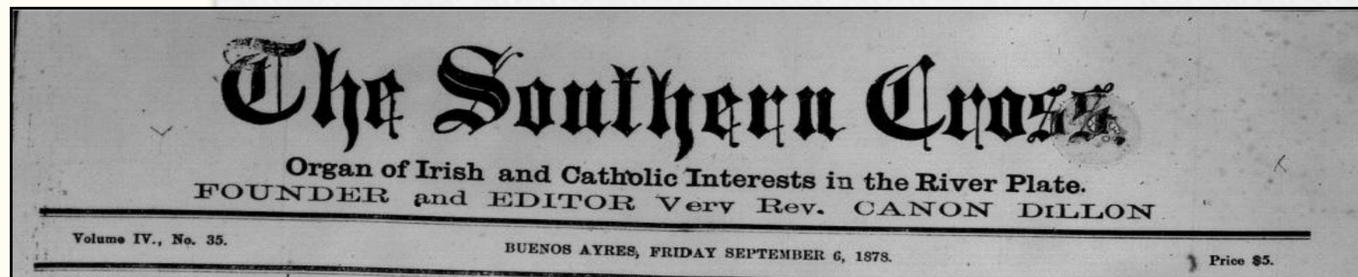
“Letter from an Irish Girl in the Camp,” *The Southern Cross*, March 5, 1880

“The country around San Pedro is dotted with Irish homesteads; and the genial smile, the gay humour, and the proverbial hospitality of the occupants indicate at once a state of comfort and independence which forms a striking contrast with the forlorn condition of their countrymen at home. Not are the Irish people of San Pedro forgetful of their traditions, or of that faith which seems to be so mysteriously bound up with their existence.”

“Irish Land Meeting in San Pedro,” *The Southern Cross*, May 20, 1881

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Irish and Argentine Politics in *The Southern Cross*

“The nation demands ‘Home Rule’. The people pant for their (catholic) university. The press preaches tenant-right and the abolition of minor grievances...All these have to be effected and full justice done to the dear old sod before the kingdom can become thoroughly united. That this day is at hand we entertain not the shadow of a doubt. Irish blood and Irish brains enter more largely every day into the service of the realm and the claims thus established may not be forever overlooked.”

“General Items,” *The Southern Cross*, May 30, 1879

“I am an Argentine citizen, because, not being able to fulfill the duties of citizenship in the land of my birth, I must do so in that of my adoption, in which I live and prosper, in which are my interests, my affections, and my home.”

“General ‘Brown’ Club,” *The Southern Cross*, May 2, 1879

“In spite of their title of ‘Hiberno-Porteños, [they are] as purely Milesian as if they first saw the light within sight of the ruins of Tara’s halls, of the Blarney Stone, or of the Lakes of Killarney... There is not a drop of Porteño or Spanish blood in their veins, and for this reason their debut on political life and their subsequent career will be watched with all the keener interest by their countrymen in the Plate. The law of the land they live in says they are Argentines: to us they will always be Irishmen.”

“Hiberno-Porteños,” *The Southern Cross*, January 14, 1881

“The objects of this society [are]... to promote, protect and defend the interests of its own members against all unjust abuses and arbitrary measures coming either from private individuals or public functionaries...to encourage and assist all charitable and laudable institutions... in particular to the advancement of our people in this country...to aid and encourage our countrymen at home who are gallantly struggling to recover those social and political rights of which they have been robbed by a selfish and unjust government.”

“Proposed Irish Association in Arrefices,” *The Southern Cross*, January 28, 1887