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The Irish-Argentine Community and the Falklands Crisis

1. There are in the region of 300,000 Argentines of Irish descent in Argentina, making it the largest community of Irish descent in the non-English speaking world. A small number of Irish arrived in Argentina in the early years of the 19th century. Some of these participated in Argentina's wars of Independence. Among the most famous were Admiral William Brown (1777-1871), founder of the Argentine Navy and General Thomond O'Brien, who was aide-de-camp to General San Martin, Argentina's national hero. Emigration proper from Ireland did not begin until the 1830s and while it continued to a greater or lesser extent throughout the century, the largest numbers arrived during the famine and post-famine years. It has been estimated that overall between 30,000 and 40,000 Irish people settled in Argentina up to the end of the 19th century after which any significant emigration came to an end.
2. The pattern of Irish emigration to Argentina was fundamentally different from that to the U.S. The emigration was localised in origin, with the majority coming from the midlands (Longford and Westmeath) and a smaller number from Wexford, and they settled almost exclusively in rural areas, encouraged by the potential of the land and their farming background in similar conditions. By the end of the last century a large part of the land in the Province of Buenos Aires was in Irish hands. The Irish are recognised as having played a significant role in the foundation and successful development of Argentine agriculture.
3. A small number of the Irish became owners of vast tracts of land and became extremely wealthy. The majority, however, remained as small farmers or as labourers on Irish farms. In the early years of this century they began to move from the country to the cities, principally Buenos Aires. This pattern continued through the century and the Irish-Argentine community became increasingly urban oriented, with a declining predominance in agriculture. They became active in the professions, the law and in commerce, many of them being employed in British or U.S. companies because of their bilingualism.
4. The community to-day

Of the 300,000 people of Irish descent today in Argentina, perhaps some 20,000 can be said to be conscious of their Irish ancestry and in any way active in the community. Many remain bilingual, although this is declining notably with the present generation. They have a number of (mainly social and sporting) clubs, and they have their own weekly newspaper founded in 1877 (The Southern Cross) which is now edited in Spanish and has a declining circulation. Their attachment to Ireland, while obviously genuine, is essentially emotional and lacks the necessary contact to have kept it in touch with the reality in Ireland today. Most are third or fourth generation, few have ever visited Ireland and their knowledge of Irish affairs is minimal. In recent years the community has declined perceptibly, particularly as inter-marriage with Argentines of other ancestry (which was unknown for the first few generations, thus accounting for the tight community cohesion) becomes the rule rather than the exception. As a community it cannot be said that they exert any recognizable influence on Argentine society (despite the fact that there are some notable Irish-Argentines in public life and in the professions).

5. The Falklands

The Irish-Argentines are as a general rule deeply conservative. They have, however, largely avoided becoming involved in Argentine politics, or in the army (which since the 1930s has largely meant the same thing). This should not, however, be taken as an indication of any self-imposed isolation from the community, As a group they are deeply patriotic. They remain grateful for Argentina's generosity towards their ancestors and they pride themselves on their successful integration into Argentine life. They often claim to be "Argentine first, Irish second". They compare themselves favourably with the Anglo-Argentines, whom sometimes they see as aloof and as having developed apart from the rest of the population.

On the question of the Falklands, an issue that unites a population that is fragmented in many other respects, they are as deeply committed as the rest of the community to the islands' return to Argentine sovereignty. An indication of their perception of the issue may be had from an incident during the 1960s when an Irish-Argentine, Capt. M. Fitzgerald, landed a plane on the islands and planted the Argentine flag. He received a hero's welcome from the community on his return.

Although there were occasional anti-British demonstrations in Buenos Aires at the start of the century (such as after the death of Terence McSwiney) Irish-Argentine opinion today is not exercised on the Irish question. In so far as they have views on the situation in Ireland, they would be simply in favour of a British withdrawal and a united Ireland. It would be easy to exaggerate the extent to which they would compare the Falklands issue with that in Ireland. Nonetheless to the extent that such a comparison would be made they would, in my view, be strongly attracted by the superficial analogy between the two situations, seeing both as relics of British colonialism of a past age. They would stoutly defend the Argentine use of force and would probably express difficulty in understanding Ireland doing other than supporting their case given, as they see it, the parallel in both situations.

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