

From Buenos Aires to Belfast to Brooklyn: William Bulfin's rambles in literary journalism.

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Abstract: This article addresses the international literary journalism of William Bulfin (1864-1910), an Irishman who became editor and proprietor of *The Southern Cross* in Buenos Aires and a chronicler of daily life. He penned evocative impressions of Argentina and Ireland for *The Southern Cross* and for influential publications in Ireland and the USA. His tales from the pampas evoke the realities of immigrant life and the ways of the “gauchos”. His later tour of Ireland resulted in a best-selling book. His readers included James Joyce in Italy, whom Bulfin had met and described anonymously. Bulfin wrote to rouse people to a heightened sense of place. His voice was that of a journalist speaking to and of cultures in transition, and for a broad readership. He did not permit genre or format to constrain his ambition, and his body of work challenges any narrow definition of travel writing.

Keywords: William Bulfin; *The Southern Cross*; journalism; the Irish in Argentina.

William Bulfin (1864-1910) was a writer for whom journalism and literature were two sides of the same coin. The currency in which he traded was the celebration of cultural distinctiveness or specificity, whether describing his rambles in his native Ireland or depicting life as an immigrant on the pampas of Argentina. His readership ranged wide among the Irish diaspora and beyond. Bulfin’s vocation challenges any assumption that literature and journalism fall neatly into two distinct categories. While some writers choose one medium over the other, there are those for whom writing itself is the medium and for whom the format or genre is secondary or incidental. Their literary talents enhance their journalism, while their journalism informs their creative efforts. William Bulfin was such a person.

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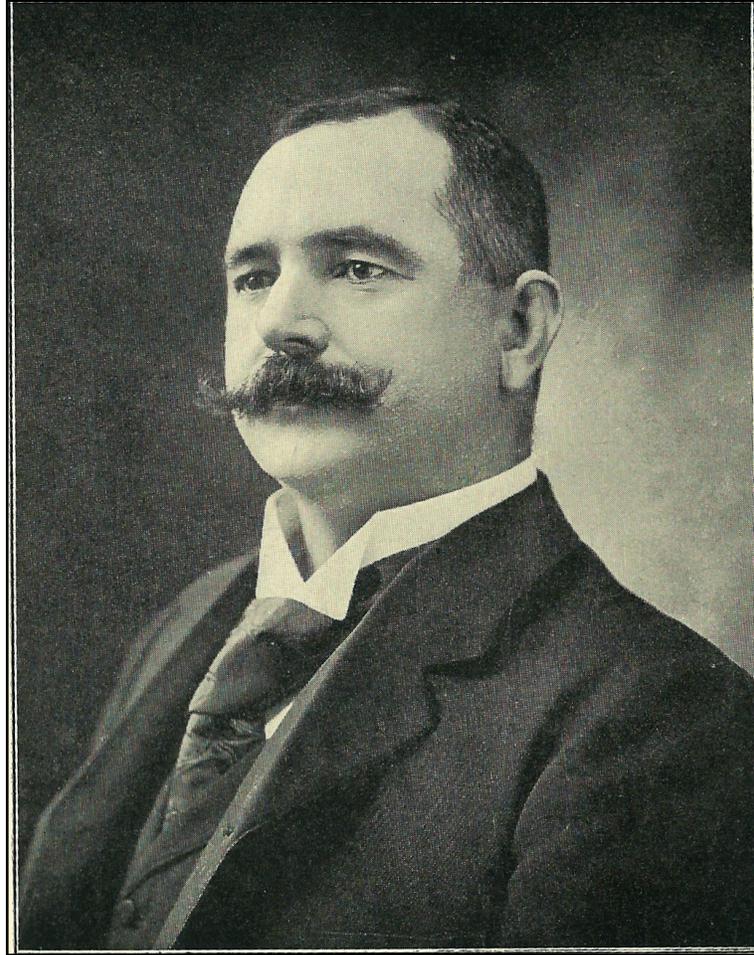


Fig 1: William Bulfin about 1900. Frontispiece, *Rambles in Eirinn*

Bulfin was a popular man and of striking physique, but he died of pneumonia aged just 47. His talents as a journalist were recognized in his own lifetime, although he never achieved the level of literary recognition for which he yearned. He was invited by a London publisher to write a volume of tales about Argentina for a series on colonial societies, and was asked by the editors of the great *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1907-1912 to contribute to it the key essay on Latin America and that on Argentina (MS 13,817 (2)).² He had his stories published in successful New York magazines such as *Everybody's* and the *World's Way*.

Bulfin's body of work has something of the nature of the Latin-American *crónica* about it. His descriptions of the pampas and of Buenos Aires, and

² Bulfin wrote neither piece in the end. Boxes of his papers in the National Library of Ireland (NLI MSS 13,804-13,823) are partly unsorted and uncatalogued. So some manuscript numbers given below are approximate.

later of Ireland as he found his home country on his return journeys, fall into what has been described as “a somewhat unstructured genre that combines literary aestheticism with journalistic form” (Mahieux 2011:1). Bulfin was by no means the only journalist whose ambitions tended towards the chronicle (González 1993: *passim*). Arthur Griffith, an influential politician and editor in Ireland during the first decades of the twentieth century, had a high regard for Bulfin and is said to have believed that the latter could be a future leader of Sinn Féin (Kelly 1922: 690). Griffith himself is frequently described as “the father of Sinn Féin,” a party that later became the driving force for Irish independence, so his judgment of Bulfin was no idle compliment. In 1909 Bulfin rejected overtures to become vice-president of that party, but he wrote for a short-lived daily edition of the eponymous *Sinn Féin* newspaper and Griffith authorized him to act and conduct arrangements for it on Bulfin’s visit to the United States that same year (MSS 13,810 (12) and 13,811 (1)). Griffith’s opinion of some verses that Bulfin published pseudonymously in the *Boston Pilot*, that these were “excellent” (MS 13810 (12)), is less persuasive than was his political judgment.

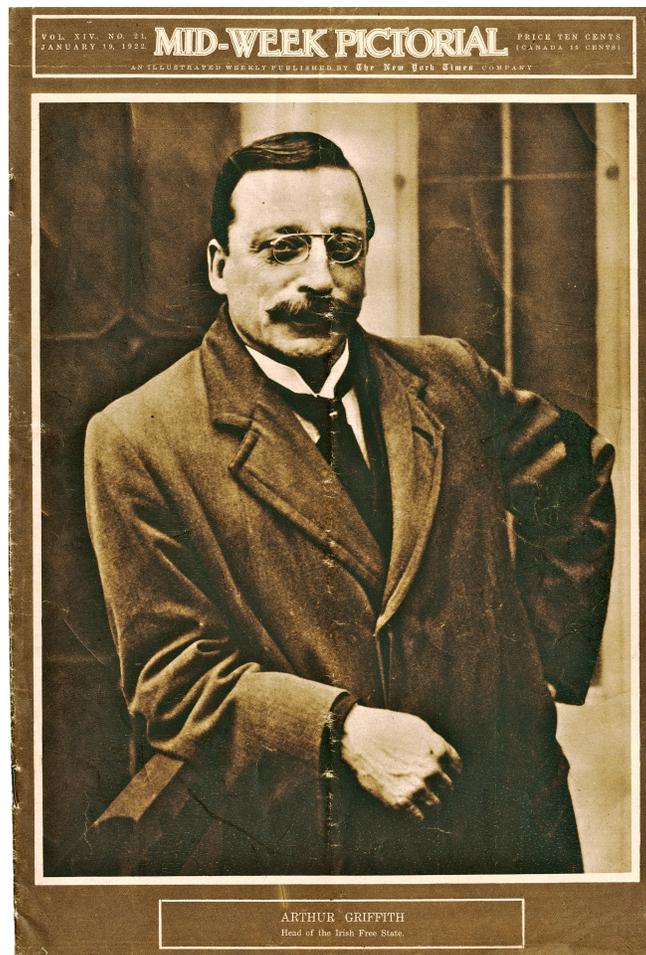


Fig. 2: Sinn Féin’s Arthur Griffith (*New York Times*, 1922)

Bulfin emigrated to Argentina in his early twenties. He was one of a steady stream of people who in the late nineteenth century made the long journey from Ireland (Kelly 2009 and Murray 2006: *passim*). At first he worked on a ranch, in countryside beyond Buenos Aires known as “La Pampa” or “The Camp”. The editor of some of his South American tales later wrote that, “The open plains of the pampas appealed to his adventurous spirit, and the experience affected him profoundly, providing him with a wealth of literary material. In his spare time he began writing—sending his stories and articles to a small Irish-owned newspaper published in Buenos Aires, *The Irish Argentine*” (Bulfin, ed. Clancy: 8). His stories chronicled daily life as he witnessed it, even if the dialogue was reconstructed or imagined. Thomas Murray (1919: 145) has written that Bulfin’s descriptions were in a “well-known humorous vein, with plentiful ornamentation and sometimes, perhaps, what would seem too generous coloring, but there is no invention, no over-drawing, in the picture.”

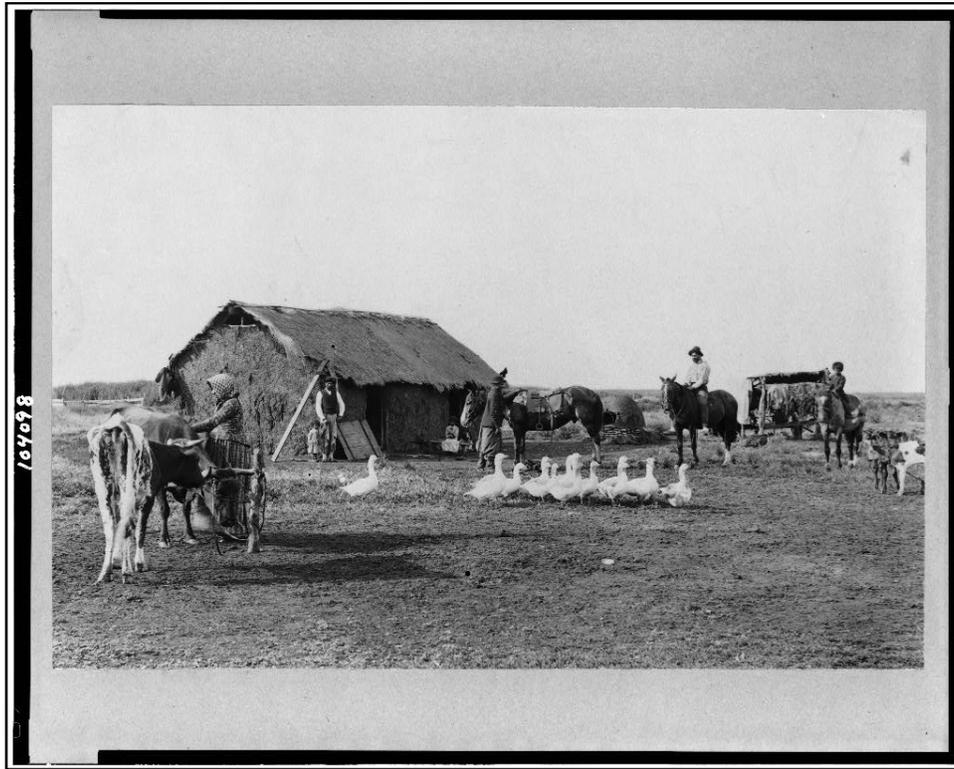


Fig. 3: An immigrant’s home, Argentina (courtesy US Library of Congress).

Moving from the pampas into Buenos Aires in 1889 he found work in less romantic circumstances, being employed by a furniture importer while continuing to write. In 1892 he joined the staff of the *Southern Cross*, a

weekly newspaper for the Irish in Argentina that was then owned by Michael Dineen. It had been founded in 1874 by a Catholic priest, Patrick Dillon, which fact was noted before 1896 below its masthead. However, on 3 January 1896 its then editor wrote “This is not a religious paper, nor the church organ. The *Southern Cross* is perfectly independent”. And that included political independence, as Bulfin later explained (*Southern Cross* 27 Jan. and 3 Feb. 1899).

During the 1890s Bulfin wrote for a local directory an account of Fr Anthony Dominic Fahey’s earlier work with Irish immigrants in Argentina. He based it partly on “a conversation which some of the old hands will still repeat to you.” Referring to this account in 1919, Murray thought “no writer that I have any acquaintance with has so genuinely entered into the spirit of camp-life, and so accurately and sympathetically described it as Bulfin” (Gran 1899: 504; Murray 1919: 139-146, 189-95, 495-6). In 1898 Bulfin succeeded Dineen as proprietor and chief editor of the *Southern Cross*, in which capacity “he was a leader of thought and progress of the Irish Argentine community” (Condon et al. 1910: 157). He became well enough known for a letter to reach him from New York that had been addressed to him only at “Buenos Aires, S.A,” as he wrote to J. O’Hara Cosgrave on 1 July 1903 (MS 13817).

THE SOUTHERN CROSS

TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR—No. 9. BUENOS AIRES, FRIDAY, MARCH 4, 1898. FOUNDED 1871.

<p>Contents.</p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="width: 80%;">Letter from Rosario</td><td style="text-align: right;">Page</td></tr> <tr><td>The Rebellion of '38</td><td style="text-align: right;">1</td></tr> <tr><td>The Argentine Irish Highly Praised in Belfast</td><td style="text-align: right;">2</td></tr> <tr><td>Henry George's Influence (by Bishop Spaulding)</td><td style="text-align: right;">5</td></tr> <tr><td>The Husband of a Wheat Farm (by William Allen White)</td><td style="text-align: right;">5</td></tr> <tr><td>The Camp</td><td style="text-align: right;">7</td></tr> <tr><td>Commercial news; Market Notes</td><td style="text-align: right;">9</td></tr> <tr><td>Telegrams of the Week</td><td style="text-align: right;">10</td></tr> <tr><td>Subscriptions</td><td style="text-align: right;">11</td></tr> <tr><td>Editorial Notes</td><td style="text-align: right;">12</td></tr> <tr><td>The State and the Commonwealth, V. (by Justice)</td><td style="text-align: right;">13</td></tr> <tr><td>Social Progress and its Responsibilities</td><td style="text-align: right;">14</td></tr> <tr><td>A Hint for St. Patrick's Day (by Adelaide)</td><td style="text-align: right;">14</td></tr> <tr><td>White Slavery (special article)</td><td style="text-align: right;">14</td></tr> <tr><td>Nativity (special article)</td><td style="text-align: right;">14</td></tr> <tr><td>For Young Men</td><td style="text-align: right;">15</td></tr> <tr><td>General News</td><td style="text-align: right;">15-16</td></tr> <tr><td>Births, Marriages and Deaths, and Most announcements</td><td style="text-align: right;">16</td></tr> <tr><td>A Great Hunt (by Che Buono)</td><td style="text-align: right;">17-18</td></tr> <tr><td>The Hiberno-Irish Predecessors of Columbus (by Mrs. Marion Malhall)</td><td style="text-align: right;">19</td></tr> <tr><td>Little Bessie's Story</td><td style="text-align: right;">20</td></tr> <tr><td>The Turf-Cutters (story)</td><td style="text-align: right;">20-21</td></tr> <tr><td>Some Fashion Notes</td><td style="text-align: right;">22</td></tr> <tr><td>Around the House</td><td style="text-align: right;">22</td></tr> <tr><td>The Town of Nogood (verse)</td><td style="text-align: right;">23</td></tr> <tr><td>Wis and Humour</td><td style="text-align: right;">23</td></tr> </table>	Letter from Rosario	Page	The Rebellion of '38	1	The Argentine Irish Highly Praised in Belfast	2	Henry George's Influence (by Bishop Spaulding)	5	The Husband of a Wheat Farm (by William Allen White)	5	The Camp	7	Commercial news; Market Notes	9	Telegrams of the Week	10	Subscriptions	11	Editorial Notes	12	The State and the Commonwealth, V. (by Justice)	13	Social Progress and its Responsibilities	14	A Hint for St. Patrick's Day (by Adelaide)	14	White Slavery (special article)	14	Nativity (special article)	14	For Young Men	15	General News	15-16	Births, Marriages and Deaths, and Most announcements	16	A Great Hunt (by Che Buono)	17-18	The Hiberno-Irish Predecessors of Columbus (by Mrs. Marion Malhall)	19	Little Bessie's Story	20	The Turf-Cutters (story)	20-21	Some Fashion Notes	22	Around the House	22	The Town of Nogood (verse)	23	Wis and Humour	23	<div style="text-align: center;"> <h2>COOPER'S POWDERS KILL SCAB</h2> <p>If you want Scab Killed—try Cooper's Dip</p> <p>THE ONLY ORIGINAL POWDER DIP</p> <p>WE PROMISE AND WE PERFORM</p> <p>BEWARE OF IMITATIONS</p> <p>Sole Importers: TOSO, CRANE & CO., 265 CALLE MAIPU, BUENOS AIRES.</p> </div> 
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Fig. 4: *The Southern Cross* (front page, March 1898, Contents refer 'Che Buono').

Bulfin penned a humorous and self-deprecating account of his early involvement with the *Southern Cross*, including this explanation of how he acquired a distinctive pseudonym. He had submitted an early article for the *Southern Cross* above the pen-name “Cui bono?”, meaning “To whose benefit?” A typesetter changed this to “Che Buono,” which is an Italian expression meaning “tastes delicious”. This took Bulfin’s fancy and he came to use it regularly on his articles wherever published. It has been suggested more recently that the pseudonym is a mixture of the Argentinian-Spanish usage of “che” as an affectionate vocative (such as earned Ernesto Guevara his nickname among Cubans) and the single Italian word meaning “able” or “good” (*Southern Cross*, 6 Jan. 1899; Bulfin, *Pampas*, ed. Wilkinson, p. 8).

His journalism for the *Southern Cross* included regular colorful and substantial sketches of life in Buenos Aires that began in 1892 and ran for seven years. Other locations that he described included the seaside city of Mar del Plata and the Parana delta (12 Feb. 1897, 27 Jan. and 3 and 10 Feb. 1899). Seven long pieces on “Ballads Old and New” were based on a lecture he had delivered to the English Literary Society in the Argentine (Jan.-March 1898), while in an appreciation of Lewis Carroll over six columns he described that late author of *Alice in Wonderland* as “the greatest of English humourists and, after Swift, the most original of them all” (4 March 1898). In a piece scorning what he saw as the high self-valuation of citizens of his new country, Bulfin wrote modestly of himself that “the writer [Bulfin] came from the camp, and from being an *estancia* [ranch-]hand blossomed into a sort of journalist” (7 Jan 1898). He was willing to publish criticism of his own articles, for example regarding his piece on Rudyard Kipling’s “Recessional,” a poem celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria (6 Jan. and 10 March 1899).

While working as “a sort of journalist”, he continued to write in a manner that crossed from literary journalism into the genre of literature itself, on matchmaking for example (10 June 1898). He was ambitious to publish such accounts of daily life for a readership beyond Argentina. He submitted an article to *McClure’s* but that popular US journal rejected it, replying on 23 September 1898 that “We are so crowded with war material that only matter which fairly clamors for publication can get any chance at all” (NLI MS 13817 (1)). This was a reference to the Spanish-American War that had erupted that year. Coverage of the war by the *Southern Cross* itself included on 17 June a report on the US landing at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In 1899 he proclaimed that he was giving up his Buenos Aires sketches after many years, but one finds him the very next month penning for the *Southern Cross* a vivid account of bullfighting in that city (17 and 24 Feb. 1899).

The *Southern Cross* described itself on its editorial page as “The leading weekly paper and best advertising medium in the River Plate” and its commercial success allowed it to run to twenty pages that included some fiction. He worked hard to sustain it, and surviving correspondence shows him preoccupied in subsequent years with many of the usual concerns of a managing journalist, both writing articles and acquiring new machinery while corresponding with contributors who were not always reliable, and being kept abreast of the behavior of a competitor. He had to fend off efforts by the “aristocratic” *Hiberno-Argentine Review* to poach his advertisers (MSS 13,816). For a while Bulfin also taught English literature at the Jesuits’ Colegio del Salvador in Buenos Aires. Bulfin wrote that he “had the chair of English, teaching a speaking and literary knowledge of the language through the medium of Spanish” (O’Kelly 1910; MS 13,811 (1)). Someone who later also taught a course in literature at that same college was Jorge Mario Bergoglio, better known today as Pope Francis.



Fig. 5: Colegio del Salvador, Buenos Aires. (where Bulfin taught literature)

When in February 1899 the publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin (1848-1935) personally contacted Bulfin as editor of the *Southern Cross*, the latter saw an opportunity to advance his own literary ambitions. Unwin wrote that he was planning a new series called “The Overseas Library” which was to consist of “colonial literature” and noted that, “A good newspaper is a centre of literary influence, and should attract and appeal to any literary talent in its neighbourhood.” The new series was intended to give “descriptions of colonial life true to the special local colour and

atmosphere of the district” and, for this reason, Unwin wanted “good writers who may create artistically truthful pictures of their surroundings.” Unwin concluded that, “Contributions of the above nature are cordially invited from your own office, and from your literary friends and a paragraph in your paper may help to draw out local response” (MS 13817 (2)).

Bulfin responded by insinuating himself as the sole author of that planned volume (MS 13817 (2) for his contract). It appeared in 1900 as *Tales of the Pampas*, consisting of eight tales out of thirteen submitted by Bulfin. They are “free and easy, broadly humorous stories of the rough life in Argentina, where Irish settlers are numerous. The contrast between Spanish and Hibernian character gives point to several of the tales” (Sturgis 1927: 7). Delaney suggests that, in them, “Bulfin reproduces the Irish-Porteño way of speaking, which results in a comic mixture of English, Gaelic and Spanish. His stories show that the Irish were doing with language what they had already done with their lives, namely they were trying to adapt it to their new situation” (Delaney 200: 138).

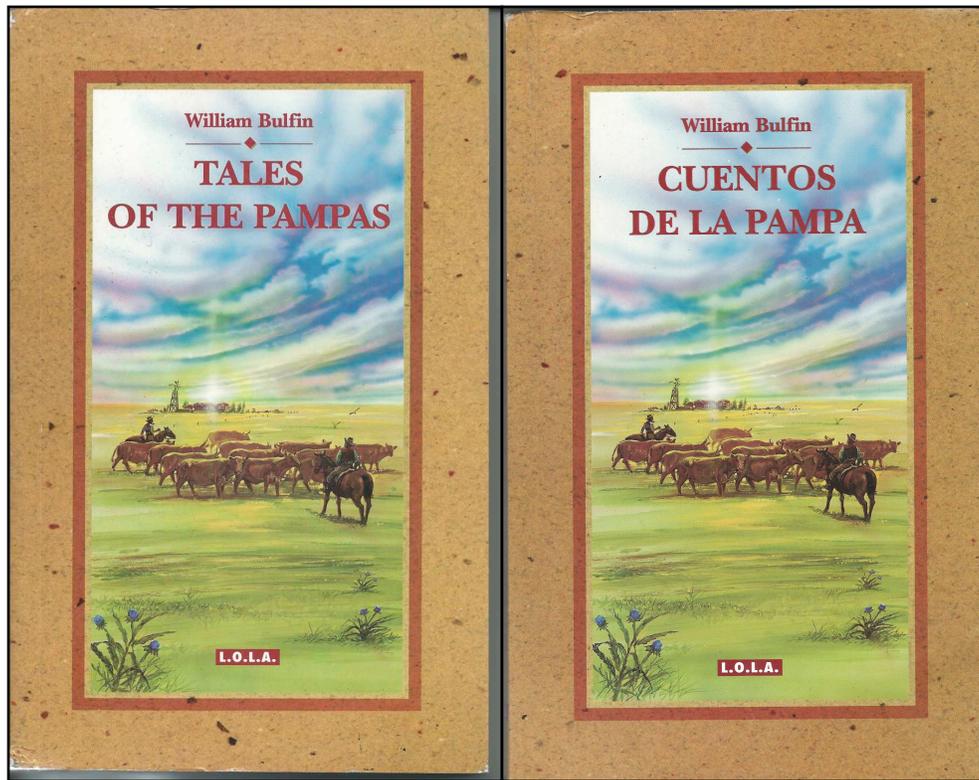


Fig. 6 & 7: *Tales of the Pampas* (front and back covers of 1997 edition, first dual language)

His friend Seamus MacManus thought that “that book is simply lost in the Overseas Library”, and it did not sell many copies. McManus added that his friend Catalina Paez, granddaughter of the liberator and first president of Venezuela José Antonio Páez, who was herself a writer and translator, had “never read any Spanish-American stories that pleased her” as did Bulfin’s *Tales of the Pampas* [MSS 13810 (5 and 21)].

Bulfin returned to Ireland in 1902 for a few months, again in 1904 for a year and a half, and finally in 1909 until his death. When visiting Ireland he was kept abreast of developments at his newspaper office in Argentina, and he dispatched articles and essays for publication in the *Southern Cross*. These were received warmly there, he being told in 1902 that his pieces were “redeeming the paper”. The break from his quotidian duties appears to have inspired him. He was assured that “...the articles and stories you sent us lately are some of the best you ever wrote. I understand that. Tis not easy to write literature at 1661 [Calle] Congallo [then the newspaper’s address]” (MSS 13,804 (3), 13,815).

Bulfin fostered Irish cultural activities in Buenos Aires, backing there an Irish bookshop called “Our Boys,” for example (MSS 13,815-6). At home and abroad, he actively supported the movement known as the Gaelic Revival, which promoted an interest in older Irish literature and in the Irish language and which stimulated a creative renaissance in Ireland itself. The biographers of Douglas Hyde, who was a leader of the Gaelic Revival and the future first president of an independent Irish state, have described Bulfin as his “friend”, and Hyde certainly thought Bulfin’s *Tales of the Pampas* “most delightful”. Complimenting the author, Hyde added that “I have just written a new play satirizing Trinity College [Dublin] which I should like you to see!” (Dunleavy 1991: 235-6; MS 13810 (14)).

Bulfin first met Hyde at a music festival (*Feis Connacht*) in Galway during a visit to Ireland in 1902. He was relishing their conversation when, to his irritation, the poet W. B. Yeats, interrupted them with a query about certain singing and did so “in a nervous, uneasy, troubled, pins-and-needles way that made you anxious about him in spite of your self” (*The Gael* (New York), Dec. 1902, 378-9 and Jan. 1903, p. 4, p. 124). Bulfin remained ambitious to further his own literary efforts and wrote to other publishers such as Doubleday in New York. His new tales began to appear in the United States, in *Everybody’s*, the *World’s Work*, *New York World* and the *New York Daily News*. In 1903 he told John O’Hara Cosgrave, managing-editor of *Everybody’s*, that, “I like to write stories. I am not depending on it for a living of course or I should starve” (MS 13,817 (2)).

Between 1902 and his death in 1910, Bulfin had more than one article published each year in *Everybody’s Magazine*, and a couple more in the *World’s Work*. These successful New York titles published both fictional and factual articles, including serious journalism, at a time when the distinction

between the genres was not as commercially determined as it later became. Bulfin wrote both types. Bulfin, for example, saw one of his tales of pampas life printed in an issue of the *World's Work* in which Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Islanders" made its American debut, while his straightforward journalistic analysis of present and future economic opportunities in Latin America was published by the same title just seven months later (Bulfin Feb. and Sept. 1902).

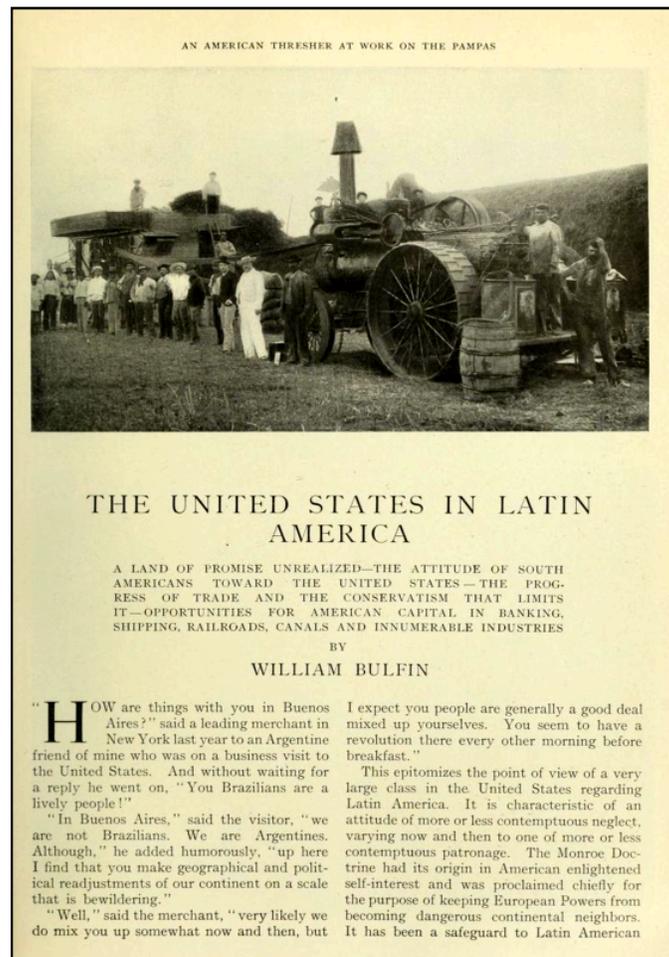


Fig. 8: Bulfin article on Latin America (from the *World's Work* 1902, USA)

It is notable that the *World's Work* identified itself on its title page not as journalism or literature but simply as "a history of our time". This slogan effectively framed its content as chronicle and analysis. Its editor had explicitly told Bulfin that the magazine did not publish history when rejecting in 1901 a retrospective piece by him entitled "Uncle Sam in South America" (MS 13,817 (1)).

The dual nature of these magazines is underlined by even a cursory

reading of *Everybody's Magazine*, which published more than a dozen tales by Bulfin. At the time *Everybody's* had established a reputation for “muck-raking” by well-known journalists such as Charles Edward Russell and Upton Sinclair. But *Everybody's* also prided itself on its fiction. In 1906, for example, it boasted a “Fiction Number – Best Ever”. This included stories by Jack London and O. Henry and a poem by Burges Johnson, humorist and professor of journalism at Vassar College, New York. It also included Bulfin's tale entitled “The betrothal of Juanita Casas: A gaucho story.”



Fig. 9: *Everybody's Magazine* New York (special fiction number 1906).

Like many writers Bulfin encountered disappointments, and one rejection related to his idea that he might pen for an American readership tales with a distinctively Irish flavor that would supplement those set in South America. Cosgrave, *Everybody's* Australia-born editor, replied,

You ask about Irish story telling. It seems to me you have a much better field in the Pampas, which is really fresh, and more

unconventional than the one afforded by the more familiar atmosphere of Ireland. Seamus MacManus has done so much of the latter these late days that I feel the opportunity is rather passed. No one else writes Pampas stories, — the field is your own. I should strongly advise you to work it (MS 13,817 (1)).

It may be that, whatever his pretensions to write literature, American publishers saw his short stories as belonging to the genre of “westerns”, adventures of cowboys that fired the popular imagination. He also tried to get articles published in Boston and Chicago newspapers. (MS 13810 (11))

His efforts to interest British and American publishers in a full-length novel entitled *A Man of the Pampas* were unsuccessful. Some publishers thought him unable to sustain a plot sufficiently. Others found fault with the genre. Paul R. Reynolds, an agent on Fifth Avenue, saw considerable merit in Bulfin’s manuscript but wrote in December 1902 that “a story which is placed in South America labors under some disadvantage. It is the same way with Australian stories. People over here don’t care much about Australia or Australian life. They don’t know about it and therefore have not much interest in it” (MS 13,817). For its part, Lothrop Publishing of Boston thought “Novels of a historical romantic sort have been supplied to such an extent that the public is getting tired of them” (MS 13,817).

Bulfin’s attempt to publish a novel set in Argentina failed, but his vivid sketches of Irish life that he penned subsequently during visits to his homeland were to constitute a monument to his talents. He intended these accounts at first solely for “certain Irish exiles”, as he recorded, but added that “literary men of Irish Ireland” urged him to publish them also in Ireland. The sketches celebrated his homeland but did not patronize his people. Written during a long odyssey by bicycle, they were part literature, part journalism and part tour-guide. Serialised first in Dublin papers and also in the *New York Daily News*, they were eventually gathered into a thick, little book, *Rambles in Eirinn*, published in both Ireland and the United States. It became an Irish bestseller and was reprinted many times (Bulfin 1907; Callan 1982; Geraghty 2009).

Although he was sympathetic to the contemporary Irish Ireland movement that promoted new industries and investment, Bulfin revealed on his rambles in Ireland a nationalist or romantic antipathy to the anglicisation and commercialization of Belfast that made him wonder when he visited that city “was I in Ireland” (Bulfin 1907: foreword and ch. 6; Murphy 2001). However, he was not overtly sectarian. While described as a “Catholic journalist” and made a papal “Knight of St. Gregory” for his services to his church, he appeared unconcerned by criticism that his *Southern Cross* had “given up its title as ‘organ of Catholic interests’” and he embraced Protestants such as his friend Douglas Hyde who supported the

nationalist cause (MS 13,810 (32); Anon 1904; *Irish Independent* 2 Feb. 1910).

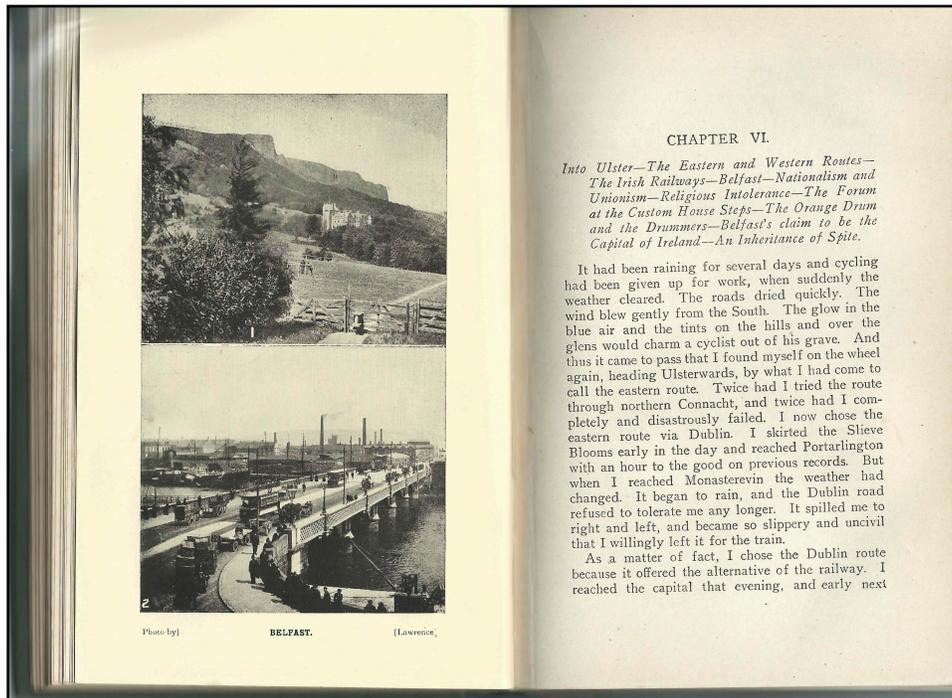


Fig. 10: An opening of *Rambles in Éirinn*

Passages relating to a pedlar whom Bulfin encountered while cycling in the Irish midlands, who insisted that he was not Jewish but Irish, were hostile towards Jews engaged in peddling and moneylending. He had earlier written that "The Jews with their Masonic literature and journalism prostituted France", thus indicating that he shared a prejudice common among European Catholics of his day. Yet he rarely gave vent to it in his work (Bulfin 1907: 307-9; *Southern Cross*, 3 Feb. 1897).

By chance his cycling trip through Ireland also brought him to a tower by the sea at Sandycove where three young men were staying for a few days and causing something of a stir in the neighbourhood. One was James Joyce, whose own visit to the tower that week was to inspire the opening sequence of *Ulysses*.

Bulfin described their encounter of September 1904 in his *Rambles in Éirinn*, which was largely published first as a series in Arthur Griffith's *United Irishman* and *Sinn Féin* papers:

One of them had lately returned from a canoeing tour of hundreds of miles through the lakes, rivers, and canals of Ireland [Samuel

Chenevix Trench/Haines in *Ulysses*], another was reading for a Trinity degree, and assiduously wooing the muses [Oliver St John Gogarty/Buck Mulligan], and another was a singer of songs which spring from the deepest currents of life [James Joyce/Stephen Dedalus]. (Bulfin 1907: 322-324; Mottolese 2008: 91-92)



Fig. 11: Sandy Cove tower, Co. Dublin (an old postcard).

When Joyce later lived in Italy he was a regular reader of *Sinn Féin*, which he arranged to have sent to him, and thus had a chance to read Bulfin in that paper. Writing from Rome during 1906 and 1907 he mentions “that Southern X [*Southern Cross*] chap, Señor Bulfin, who is I am assured an Irishman.” This Spanish form of address was used for Bulfin in Ireland (e.g. *Irish Independent* 23 Sept. 1907 and 2 Feb. 1910). Joyce was amused by Bulfin’s observations on modes of upper class speech at a “Union Jack regatta” in Galway, and noted how “Che Buono ... sneers” at an English tourist’s pronunciation of English while forgetting the peculiarities of Hiberno-English. Joyce himself describes “the American accent” as “really bloody fearful”, and it is unclear why these references to Bulfin have been thought “scathing” (Joyce 1975: 129, 145; Attridge and Howes 2000: 175).

Bulfin was a newspaperman who believed that he had more than one book in him. If journalism is literature in a hurry, as an old adage has it, Bulfin found time to write also a more conventional form of literature. Any journalism that Joyce wrote, on the other hand, was entirely incidental to his literary ambitions. Joyce was to spend years forging the style and content of his great novel *Ulysses* from the language and life of Dubliners whom he encountered in newspaper offices and other everyday locations.

The emerging modern style of James Joyce was very different from the romantic prose of William Bulfin. He visited New York in 1904 and 1909, meeting friends and speaking at Carnegie Hall. Before leaving for America in late 1904 he and Michael Davitt (1846-1906), the radical nationalist and leading Irish land agitator of the nineteenth century, “went to Bray [Co. Wicklow] and had lunch together and had a fine old chat.” Davitt gave him letters of introduction, including one to Patrick Egan, former US minister to Chile, and another to Patrick Ford, well-known editor of the *Irish World* newspaper in New York. Bulfin later wrote of these, “Never used any of them. Did meet Ford and Egan. *Did not* like either. I liked Davitt *much*.” (MS 13,810 (9), underlined by Bulfin in the original).

At Carnegie Hall in 1904 he spoke on Irish nationality: “The meeting was held at the invitation of the Gaelic League of the State of New York, and was characteristic of the intellectual movement which is being fostered at home and abroad by the best of the Irish...”, wrote one local observer. John Devoy, the old Fenian rebel requested a copy of his lecture for the *Gaelic American* and Bulfin sent him his notes. Bulfin had been hoping to undertake a more extensive lecture tour of North America in 1909, having rejected a suggestion that he apply for a chair of Spanish that was vacant in Dublin or take up the editorship of *An Claidheamh Solais* which had been edited by Patrick Pearse, or assume a leadership position in Sinn Féin. John Quinn, New York lawyer and great patron of the arts told him “Ireland needs men like you (Anon 1904: 4; MSS 13810 (9, 23, 28), 13,811 (1)). Returning to Ireland from New York William Bulfin fell ill and, “altogether unexpected” died of pneumonia (*Irish Independent*, 2 Feb. 1910). No discrete biography of Bulfin has been published, and his *Southern Cross* newspaper awaits a full study. The title is still being published today, although now mainly in Spanish (Farley 2014: 54).

The William Bulfin Papers in the National Library of Ireland include a portion of his address at St Enda’s School, Dublin, and a typescript of his unfinished novel “Rose of the Eskar” that he set in Ireland and wrote in a conversational style (MS 13807). Here too among other documents are lectures and speeches delivered in Argentina on heraldry, the Gaelic genius, Ireland, old Irish romantic or heroic tales, Irishmen in foreign armies, slavery and servility, patriotism, the nature of men and women, Argentina and its capital, Latin America’s relationship with Spain, the Latin American church (including Irish clergy) and a sour essay about the fashion for opera in Buenos Aires. Bulfin was a cultural activist and an active author, an anti-colonialist who nevertheless was proud of the role played by Irish Catholic missionaries in Latin America. His inclinations were both literary and journalistic and the extent to which his work in either of these genres was distinct is perhaps less interesting than the fact that he deployed his talents in complementary ways to write about societies that were in transition.

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