



**Recollections of an Irish Born Doctor in Nineteenth-Century Argentina. Ed. Susan Wilkinson. Washington, England: The Memoir Club, 2015.**

This interesting book recounts the Memoirs of Dr. Arthur Pageitt Greene (1848-1933), a distant relative of the author.

Greene differs from most Irish emigrants to Argentina in that he was Anglo-Irish and not Catholic. He was born in Kildare in 1848. His mother was a member of a religion known as Separatists, apparently not too dissimilar to Quakers, and Greene was educated by various schoolmasters of that faith. At 17 he entered the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, earning his basic degree or Letters in 1870. Thence he went to Edinburgh's prestigious Royal College of Physicians, graduating as doctor in 1872. By this time both of his parents were dead, and most of Greene's male relatives were already in Argentina; two of these were practicing medicine. Arthur joined them in 1872. Unable to speak Spanish, he was precluded from gaining certification as a doctor and spent two years in the countryside before going to Buenos Aires to finish the requisites to practice medicine in Argentina.

For the following forty years or so he practiced general medicine, the majority of his time in Mercedes. The Mercedes hospital served outlying areas, some of them of significant Irish population, such as Suipacha and San Antonio de Areco, and there are many references to Greene's dealings with these Irish communities. He also spent a fairly long period at the British Hospital in Buenos Aires. Here he was colleague of fellow-Irishmen Drs Arthur Leeson and John O'Conor.

Greene retired in 1916, aged sixty-eight, and thereafter sailed for England. It was while in retirement in England that he wrote the papers which form the core of Wilkinson's book. It might have been expected that Greene would have been content to live out his life in the quiet and orderly suburban comfort of Kent. Rather strikingly, however, after some years in England he again felt the call of the pampa and decided to return, now in his mid-seventies, to the country where he had spent most of his life. He died a decade later and is buried in the British Cemetery in Buenos Aires.

Wilkinson's book is a collection of anecdotes taken from Greene's papers. They constitute a lively portrait of rural Argentine life in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is a place where death can come in many forms, suddenly or after drawn-out illnesses, be it by murder or revolution or by minor accidents which produce fatal complications. Cholera and smallpox are rife--there is a striking description of gauchos, fearing infection, lassoing a dead cholera victim and dragging the remains to the grave.

Diseases such as anthrax and rabies are common and poorly controlled. Probably typical of a retired doctor, Greene likes to reminisce about the interesting cases he encountered over the decades, or describe his perceptive diagnoses and the innovative treatments he carried out. There are also comic interludes. One such is the case of a local policeman who wished to have a pregnancy test carried out for his wife. To this end he sent a soldier to a local *curandera*, bearing a bottle of the wife's urine. On the way the contents of the bottle spilled. The soldier, fearing retribution, filled the bottle with his own contribution and brought it to the curandera. Her verdict was that the urine had definitely come from someone who was three months pregnant.

Greene in fact despised the hold that curanderos maintained on the people of the pampa. He also condemned popular superstitions, such as the use of Holy Water as a 'vaccination' against such diseases as smallpox. "*Hanging over the bedstead of all Irish patients of the Roman Catholic Church will be found a small bottle half filled with water which they call holy water because the priest has said some words in Latin over it and then made the sign of the Cross.*" He mentions the popular belief in the curative power of what the people called "the powder from Knock" which was "*the mortar from between the stones of the wall surrounding the Holy Chapel at Knock*". As a man of science Greene regretted the people's reliance on what might today be thought of as alternative medicine, finding it "*disheartening to think that in this day men of such ignorance have such influence*". Nevertheless, he lived easily in the Catholic environment of Argentina. He married an English Catholic, Maria Latham, in 1877. The couple were married by Father Patrick Joseph Dillon, founder of The Southern Cross. Greene, never a Protestant in any traditional sense, by adulthood had become an agnostic. Nevertheless, he accepted his wife's Catholicism and indeed reared his daughters in that religion.

As was evident from *Sebastian's Pride*, probably her most successful publication till now, Susan Wilkinson possesses a fine knowledge and understanding of 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina. Her notes to Greene's memoirs are particularly useful and expansive. Her description of mid-nineteenth century Argentina, "The Land to Which He Went" is vivid, while she also places Greene within the long medical tradition of Ireland in a very worthwhile chapter titled "Early Medical Education in Ireland".

Aside from its merit for those interested in the Irish presence in Latin America, this book would make an excellent gift to any friend or family member who is professionally involved in medicine. Indeed, since the book is full of humanity, humour and an eye for narration and description, it would be a fine gift for anyone who appreciates good stories well told. Since the structure of the *Recollections* is of a series of discrete anecdotes and observations, it is the kind of book which can be picked up, leafed through, and then set down to be picked up again later.

Anyone studying Irish emigration to Latin America will be struck by the trajectory of the many Irish doctors and other medical personnel who served that continent. There were Irish doctors working in the eighteenth-century Spanish colonial administration. Many more arrived during the Independence period. As early as 1823 William Duane

described coming across several Irish doctors in his “*Journey Through Colombia*” and the following decades saw the arrival of a number of subsequently successful Irish medical immigrants to various Latin American countries. There is surely a book to be written which will chronicle the story of Irish medical men (and a few women) throughout Latin America. The author of any such book will undoubtedly be grateful to Susan Wilkinson for her publication of Arthur Greene’s “*Recollections*”.

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