

William Henry Hudson: Imaginary pampas far away and long ago

Hudson is a true Anglo-Argentine in the narrow and most usual sense of the term, as he was born in Argentina to Anglo-American parents. He was born on August 4, 1841, near Quilmes, province of Buenos Aires, where his parents had an estancia¹. In *Far Away and Long Ago*, the memoir of his life in Argentina which he wrote in London in his old age, Hudson tells us that the estancia was

quaintly named Los Veinte y cinco (*sic*) Ombúes. Which means “The Twenty-five Ombú Trees,” there being just twenty-five of these indigenous trees – gigantic in size, and standing wide apart in a row about 400 yards long.

[...]

before other trees had been planted the antiquated and grand-looking ombú had its uses; it served as a gigantic landmark to the traveler on the great monotonous plains, and also afforded refreshing shade to man and horse in summer... Our trees were about a century old and very large, and, as they stood on an elevation, they could easily be seen at a distance of ten miles. (4-5)

When William was five years old, the Hudsons moved to Las Acacias, an estancia near Chascomús, about 100 km. away from his birthplace. Ten years later, his father was forced to sell the land and they went back to Quilmes, where they opened a store and were always on the verge of bankruptcy.

In spite of being weakened by a bout of typhus when he was 14 years old and by rheumatic fever a few years later, Hudson spent much time alone wandering the pampas, observing the wildlife. He developed the powers of observation and passion for wildlife that turned him into a naturalist, professional ornithologist and bird collector. He travelled on horseback to Brazil, Uruguay and Patagonia, collecting specimens for museums. He wrote

¹ The house where Hudson was born and the estancia can be visited today, turned into a museum and ecological park: ‘Casa Museo y Parque Ecológico Hudson’. Only three ombú trees remain. A nearby town and railway station are named after the writer

accounts of his travels and observations and gained the respect of many naturalists, including Darwin, for his work.

In 1874², Hudson emigrated to London, where he married Emily Wingrave, who was 20 years his senior. They ran a boarding house in Bayswater. He lived many hard years in poverty, but with the help of his friend, Robert B. Cunninghame Graham, whom Hudson met in 1890 and with whom he continued a fruitful correspondence until he died, he started working on his journals and recording his South American experiences. As a result, from 1885 until his death in 1922, he published about thirty works which have been classified as ornithological studies, including *Argentine Ornithology* (1888-1899) and *The Naturalist in La Plata* (1892), autobiography, essays, romances, memoirs and travel books.

His many books on ornithology procured Hudson a state pension in 1901, a year after becoming a British subject. He died in London on August 18, 1922.

The works by Hudson which are relevant to the study of the construction of self and other are:

- (1885/1911) *The Purple Land That England Lost*
- (1893) *Idle Days in Patagonia*
- (1902) *El Ombú and Other Stories*
- (1918 / 1991) *Far Away and Long Ago - A childhood in Argentina*
- (1921) *A Traveller in Little Things*

The Purple Land That England Lost is the first book he published. Although it is about the Banda Oriental (modern Uruguay), it can be included within the “Anglo-Argentine” corpus because of generic and thematic considerations. Jorge Luis Borges (1952: 112)

² According to Walker, as other biographers think he left for the UK on his return from Patagonia in 1872 or even earlier.

described it as perhaps the best work of gaucho literature³. The novel tells the story of Richard Lamb, a young Englishman who elopes with an Argentine teenage girl, Paquita, to Montevideo, Uruguay. Lamb leaves his young wife with a relative to find work for himself in eastern Uruguay. He soon becomes involved in adventures with the Uruguayan Gauchos and in romances with local women until he and Paquita are forced to go back to Buenos Aires to escape from government persecution.

Borges (1957: 112) sees the novel as the story of Richard Lamb's gradual 'acriollamiento' (creolisation)⁴. Early in the novel, Richard despises the disorganised political system and lack of law and order of the Banda Oriental and voices what can be considered an imperialist manifesto:

"... Oh, for a thousand young men of Devon and Somerset here with me, every one of them with a brain on fire with thoughts like mine! What a glorious deed would be done for humanity! What a mighty cheer we would raise for the glory of the old England that is passing away! Blood would flow in yon streets as it never flowed before, or, I should say, as it only flowed in them once, and that was when they were swept clean by British bayonets. And afterwards there would be peace, and the grass would be greener and the flowers brighter for that crimson shower.

"Is it not then bitter as wormwood and gall to think that over these domes and towers beneath my feet, no longer than half a century ago, fluttered the holy cross of St. George! For never was there a holier crusade undertaken, never a nobler conquest planned, than that which had for its object the wresting of this fair country from unworthy hands, to make it for all time part of the mighty English kingdom. What would it have been now –this bright, winterless land, and this city commanding the entrance to the greatest river in the world? And to think that it was won for England, not treacherously, or bought with gold, but in the old Saxon fashion with hard blows, and climbing over heaps of slain defenders; and after it was thus won, to think that it was lost –will it be believed? –not fighting, but yielded up without a stroke by craven wretches unworthy of the name of Britons! Here, sitting alone on this mountain, my face burns like fire when I think of it –this glorious opportunity lost for ever! 'We offer you your laws, your religion, and property under the protection of the British Government,' loftily proclaimed the invaders –Generals Beresford, Achmuty, Whitelocke, and their companions; and presently, after suffering

³ 'Quizá ninguna de las obras de la literatura gauchesca aventaje a *The Purple Land*'.

⁴ 'El venturoso acriollamiento de Lamb'

one reverse, they (or one of them) lost heart and exchanged the country they had drenched in blood, and had conquered, for a couple of thousand British soldiers made prisoners in Buenos Ayres across the water; then, getting into their ships once more, they sailed away from the Plata for ever! This transaction, which must have made the bones of our Viking ancestors rattle with indignation in their graves, was forgotten later on when we seized the rich Falklands.. [...] We left the sunny mainland to capture the desolate haunt of seals and penguins; and now let all those who in this quarter of the globe aspire to live under that 'British Protection' of which Achmuty preached so loudly at the gates of yon capital, transport themselves to those lonely antarctic islands to listen to the thunder of the waves on the grey shores and shiver in the bleak winds that blow from the frozen south!" (12 - 14)

However, according to Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (1951) quoted by Borges, the final pages of the novel contain 'the supreme justification of America compared with Western civilisation':

It is not an exclusively British characteristic to regard the people of other nationalities with a certain amount of contempt, but with us, perhaps, the feeling is stronger than with others, or else expressed with less reserve. Let me now at last rid myself of this error [...] I cannot believe that if this country had been conquered and re-colonised by England, and all that is crooked in it made straight according to our notions, my intercourse with the people would have had the wild, delightful flavour I have found in it. And if that distinctive flavour cannot be had along with the material prosperity resulting from Anglo-Saxon energy, I must breathe the wish that this land may never know such prosperity. [...]

We do not live by bread alone, and British occupation does not give to the heart all the things for which it craves. [...] Even in our ultra-civilised condition at home we do periodically escape back to nature; and, breathing the fresh mountain air and gazing over vast expanses of ocean and land, we find that she is still very much to us. It is something more than these bodily sensations we experience when first mingling with our fellow-creatures, where all men are absolutely free and equal as here. [...] Here the lord of many leagues of land and of herds unnumbered sits down to talk with the hired shepherd, a poor, bare-footed fellow in his smoky rancho, and no class or caste difference divides them, no consciousness of their widely different positions chills the warm current of sympathy between two human hearts. How refreshing it is to meet with this perfect freedom of intercourse, tempered only by that innate courtesy and native grace of manner peculiar to Spanish Americans! [...] If this absolute equality is inconsistent with perfect political order, I for one should grieve to see such order established. (333 - 335)

It is hard to read that there is ‘absolute equality’ between ‘the lord of many leagues of land and of herds unnumbered’ and ‘the hired shepherd’ without considering such a statement an idealised generalisation, one which veils the connection between the political unrest the speaker does resent and social inequality. The text presents a romantic notion of primitivism which inverts the polarity of the binary ‘civilisation vs. barbarism’ and replaces it with ‘American nature vs. European civilisation’, where ‘nature’ is the positive term, as in Cunninghame Graham.

As Hudson lived in Argentina for thirty three years but spent the rest of his life in London, where he published all his works in English, it is a matter of controversy whether he should be considered an Argentine writer or not –a debate which is at the core of the Anglo-Argentine corpus. Walker (1983) quotes Alicia Jurado, who, ‘trying to write a counterbalance to the excessive claims of Martínez Estrada and other critics, ‘tends to play down the Argentine elements in Hudson’s work’. She considers Hudson’s longing for the pampas ‘from the London mists’ a legend:

Although it is true that Hudson expressed nostalgia for his native land many times, it is also true that he did not come back to our country because he did not want to do so, ...he was proud to call himself an Englishman –words published in one of his books– and loved passionately the English countryside to which he dedicated his best works. (Jurado 11 in Walker 1983: 336, my translation)

Martínez Estrada’s eulogistic study of Hudson’s work is called *El mundo maravilloso de Guillermo Enrique Hudson*. Walker notices ‘Hudson is even given the Spanish form of his name which he was never called’. Although this can be considered an idealistic appropriation of Hudson’s name and works to incorporate them to the Argentine literary canon, according to Walker (1983:334), Martínez Estrada and other critics ‘rightly stress

Hudson's position within the framework of gauchesque *costumbrismo*... as a painter of pampa expression and a guardian of gauchesque values'. Cunninghame Graham, in his introduction to the 1931 Dent edition of *The Purple Land* writes that 'he was at heart an old-time gaucho of the plains' (ix). But According to Graham-Yooll, based on an article by Carlos Leumann⁵,

Hudson was unheard of in Argentina. The intellectual community in Buenos Aires learned of his existence when Rabindranath Tagore visited the city in 1924 and asked to be told about Hudson.

(1999: 194)

In the words of Matilde Sánchez (1985: 3, my translation), Hudson's texts question 'the categories of nationality and belongingness' as well as the possibility of creating 'a realistic effect in a certain language –with its structures, its character, its sounds and cosmovision– when its referent happened in another, and worse still long ago'. It is my contention that Hudson's texts have been appropriated by Argentine literary academia precisely because of the complex nature of his cultural affiliation, which in many ways resembles the multiple identities of the Argentinian to this very day: a set of allegiances in tension, torn between the native land, its values, beauty and traditions and a model of a European ('first world') civilisation which always remains an unreachable aim. Hudson's Anglo-Argentine works are an example of a literature of third places, neither Argentine nor English but hybrid in its allegiances and representations of self and other.

The collection *El Ombú and Other Stories*, with its blend of Argentine legends, myths and superstition, presents frontier narratives in which hybridity is foregrounded. The collection includes 'El Ombu', 'Story of a Piebald Horse' (originally included with *The Purple Land*),

⁵ La Prensa, Buenos Aires, August 1941

‘El Niño Diablo’ and ‘Marta Riquelme’. The American edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916) includes a story written in 1883, ‘Pelino Viera’s Confession’ and ‘Tecla and the Little Men’, a rhymed legend.

Hamilton (1946: 60) considers ‘El Ombú’ and ‘Marta Riquelme’ ‘perfect examples of the long short story. Tragedy of the most stark and terrible kind dominates them’. This tragedy, expressed in English in a European narrative genre, is unmistakably South American in spirit.

‘El Ombú’ opens with an ominous note:

They say that sorrow and at last ruin comes upon the house on whose roof the shadow of the ombú tree falls; and on that house which now is not, the shadow of this tree came every summer day when the sun was low. They say, too, that those who sit much in the ombú shade become crazed. Perhaps, sir, the bone of my skull is thicker than in most men, since I have been accustomed to sit there all my life, and though now an old man I have not yet lost my reason. (595 - 596)

Cunninghame Graham also refers to this superstition in his sketch ‘La pampa’:

There were few landmarks, but in the Southern and middle districts a dark ombú, standing beside some lone tapera [poor house] and whose shade fell on some rancho or estancia, although the proverb said, “The house shall never prosper upon whose roof is thrown the shade of the ombú”. (*Charity*, 1912: 238)

Past middle age at the time of writing and looking back on his childhood among ombú trees, Hudson could be telling the story in his own voice, but the narrator is an old gaucho, Nicandro, and an appendix gives evidence to prove that ‘El Ombú’ is ‘mostly a true story’:

The incidents relating to the English invasion of June and July 1807, is (*sic*) told pretty much as I had it from the old gaucho called Nicandro in the narrative. That was in the sixties. The undated notes which I made of my talks with the old man, containing numerous anecdotes of Santos Ugarte and the whole history of El Ombú, were written, I think in 1868 —the year of the great dust storm. (639)

Hudson is then the listener addressed as 'sir', and this allows him to have the defamiliarising gaze he will share with his English readers, one that finds the events by the lake of Chascomús exotic and extraordinary. However, he creates a narrator whose voice is in many ways that of a Gaucho, though the narrative is in English. Hudson shows first-hand knowledge of the world he describes and uses recurrent features of orality to put the reader in the position of a listener too:

Look, señor, where I am pointing, twenty yards or so from the edge of the shadow of the ombú... It was just there, on the very spot where the yellow flower is, that poor Meliton fell. (608 - 609)

As is the case with many of Cunningham Graham's sketches, 'El Ombú' is a frontier narrative, one in which black former slaves like Meliton, Gauchos and original inhabitants meet, a world of fortresses advancing into Indian territory, a permeable frontier line where the Gauchos fear Indian incursions and the original peoples fear the advance of white criollos and Gauchos. In Livon-Grosman's words,

... already in the very idea of the frontier there are two sides, a double narrative, a reality order that is different on each side of this dividing line. And each of these confirm other stories which in turn branch off or are cut short and still leave a starting point for the next narrative. They weave a web which, the more it strives to establish a division between the indigenous and the European, as in the case of the narratives of the Conquest of the Desert, the more it reinforces this connection.

(2001: 3, my translation)

'Marta Riquelme', whose setting is Jujuy, in the North-west end of the country, shares this meeting of 'travelling cultures': the narrator is a Jesuit among indolent Quichua-speaking natives who feels attracted to Marta, a native woman. Though of Indian blood herself, she is a Christian and is captured by Indians when she travels South in search of her husband. The Indian who is 'her owner' treats her so cruelly that when she finally manages to escape and her husband sees how suffering has marred her beauty, he denies her. The woman,

‘overcome with despair’ (696) is turned into a bird, the Kakué, who produces a sound the narrator describes as ‘shriek, the most terrible it has ever fallen to the lot of any human being to hear’ (682). In his efforts to reject such stories as primitive superstitions, the narrator is as unsuccessful as he is in forgetting Marta. Torn between his religion and his feelings, his learning and the voices of the forest, the Jesuit priest is a man in the ‘contact zone’ (Pratt), standing in a third place where transculturation is unavoidable:

Day and night I pray for that soul still wondering lost in the wilderness; and no voice rebukes my hope or tells me that my prayer is unlawful. (710)

The legend of the ‘Niño Diablo’ (the Devil Child) is also a story from the contact zone:

Product of both the gaucho and his half-brother the Indian, later driven to the frontier and eliminated by this very gaucho who was himself to be civilised out of existence by the advance of progress, Niño Diablo reflects the two strains which are fused in the story. Though treating of matters gauchesque, ‘Niño Diablo’ is not devoid of the Indian side of the pampa expression. The Indian element [...] is manifested in the all-pervading presence and fear of the marauding Indians, their *malones*, their fear-bearing lances, and their bestial celebrations. With a panache equal to Echeverría (‘La Cautiva’) or his kindred spirit Cunninghame Graham (‘The Captive’, ‘Los Indios’) Hudson depicts something of the Indian way of life, also long disappeared.

(Walker 1983: 356)

Hudson also revisits the theme of the captive who crosses the border into a different culture in his fictional account of the legend of the White Indian: ‘A Second Story of two Brothers’, the only ‘Argentine’ story in *A Traveller in Little Things* (chapter VI).

But the work that the Argentine canon has made its own in translation is *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918), Hudson’s autobiographical memoir about his early life in Argentina,

Written in old age about his childhood, composed in England about Argentina, describing the past in terms of the present, through the miracle of art, Hudson makes a last-ditch effort to unite his two worlds and his two ages, though an artistic fusion, a synthesis that is a deliberate attempt to pull together what was and what is.

(Walker 1983: 372)

The author refers to his native land as ‘that strange world where I first saw the light’ (4). It is evident that the text is meant for an English reading public for whom such world will be ‘strange’. His gaze is that of a man looking back on his early years as he lies in bed for six weeks in London ‘feeling weak and depressed’, someone who feels ‘not properly alive’ when ‘out of sight of living, growing grass, and out of sound of birds’ voices’ and finds comfort in reminiscing the days when he was in contact with nature, horse-riding and bird-watching (3). But however nostalgic and idealised the images of memory can be, Hudson looks back on the pampas from London: ‘here in England, in the very center and mind of the world, many thousands of miles from my rude wilderness’ (311). What must have been familiar in his childhood is now remembered from a standpoint which reinforces the civilisation - barbarism binary and the notion of British superiority (the ‘centre of the world’ as opposed to the ‘rude wilderness’) but he is still attracted to what is wild in the land left behind, which he would find very much changed if he was to return:

.. this very absence, this isolation (both geographical and chronological) ... is at the root of his artistry, i.e., aesthetic distancing. Gradually the pampa of his native country becomes a dream land, a fantasy world, so beautiful that he preferred to keep it in his memory rather than return to find it changed by civilization, progress and commerce, the triple-headed monster constantly lambasted by Cunnighame Graham in his sketches written after his return in 1914 to an Argentina different from the open and free lands he had frequented in the 1870s. It is an interesting coincidence that Hudson was leaving Argentina just as Graham was arriving, and, as one remembers, Hernández was publishing *Martín Fierro*.

(Walker 1983: 336)

Here again, the fact that Hudson writes in English and is published in England puts a distance between his gaze and the far-away pampas –a geographical, temporal and linguistic distancing that allows the writer to approach his object from outside, defamiliarising it the way travel writing does. In his memories of the trip across the pampas

from his native estancia to Las Acacias, his perceptions of the flat land echo those of Humboldt and many other travelers:

The undulating country had been left behind; before us and on both sides the land, as far as one could see, was absolutely flat, everywhere green with the winter grass, but flowerless at that season, and with the gleam of water over the whole expanse. It had been a season of great rains, and much of the flat country had been turned into shallow lakes. That was all there was to see, except the herds of cattle and horses and an occasional horseman galloping over the plain, and the sight at long distances of a grove or small plantation of trees, marking the site of an estancia, or sheep and cattle farm, these groves appearing like islands on the sea-like flat country.

But Hudson is not a traveller in the pampas: he is a native of the land who speaks two languages, shares life with both ‘English neighbours’ and Gaucho children and explores the country as a local, fascinated with the fauna –the personal experience that will allow him to write *El Ombú and Other Stories*. He grows up immersed in the political turmoil of the ‘caudillo’ years, and witnesses the fall of Rosas.

He was abhorred by many, perhaps by most; others were on his side even for years after he had vanished from their ken, and among these were most of the English residents of the country, my father among them. (126)

According to Stewart,

In the eyes of the foreign settlers ... Rosas’s draconian rule was the single check upon the inherent savageness of the common creole. Hudson, whilst clearly not condoning the worst brutality of the regime, considered Rosas’s more heinous deeds the product of either ‘sudden fits of passion or petulance’, ‘a peculiar, sardonic and somewhat primitive sense of humour’, or the socio-cultural milieu, the latter resonating the type of environmental determinism prevalent in the ideology of the dictator’s liberal opponents (pp. 130-131).
(Stewart 2000: 19)

Hudson’s ambiguous position is revealed when, in the same chapter whose title refers to Rosas as a ‘tyrant’ (Chapter VIII: ‘The Tyrant’s Fall’) he describes him as ‘certainly the greatest and most interesting of all the South American caudillos’ (130). He explains his allegiance in terms of the mythical status Rosas had acquired:

Another thing about Rosas which made me ready to fall in with my father's high opinion of him was the number of stories about him which appealed to my childish imagination. Many of these related to his adventures when he would disguise himself as a person of humble status and prowl about the city by night, especially in the squalid quarters, where he would make the acquaintance of the very poor in their hovels. Most of these stories were probably inventions and need not be told here. (124 - 127)

John Masefield, English poet Laureate from 1930 until his death in 1967, also presents the governor as a mythical figure in the long poem named after him (1918):

He had mad eyes which glittered and were grim;
Even as a child men were afraid of him.

...

An old man called the child and touched his hair,
And watched the wild thing trapping in his eye,
Then bade the child "Go play", and being gone
Wept bitter tears in sight of every one.

(I.2-3)

Commenting on the poem, the Argentine critic José Luis Muñoz Azpiri writes:

On examining our reality from Europe, and observing our continent from there, we realise that our country has promoted three myths in the world of poetry and fiction: one, geographic, the pampa; another, human, the gaucho, and a third, historical: Rosas. He often condenses the three: Rosas is the caudillo and leader of the pampa gauchos. 'Pampa', 'gaucho', 'Rosas' are international concepts.

(Muñoz Azpiri 1970: 8, my translation)

However, Masefield never visited Argentina and had no direct experience of the events he narrates. Hudson seems to have been the source of his interest in Rosas. According to

Muñoz Azpiri

In his youth Masefield met Hudson, 'who was loved and admired by his whole generation'. In his autobiographical work, *So Long to Learn*, the poet refers to his friendship with the Argentine writer and how he mesmerised his audience when 'he started to evoke... stories of gauchos and Indians, wild beheadings and captive women who rejected their earlier civilised life in the distant and nostalgic pampa. [...] It is not unlikely that the plot of [the poem 'Rosas'] should have been suggested by Hudson too or derived from conversations with him and memories of the master of life in the pampas'.

(Azpiri 1970: 15, my translation)

The poem tells the story of Camila O’Gorman, a member of the Anglo-Argentine community who eloped with a Catholic priest, Uladislao Gutiérrez. Rosas was advised to make an example of them, as his opponents, exiled in Chile and Montevideo, used this event to accuse Rosas of encouraging lewdness and depravity. Besides, Camila’s father asked that his daughter be punished for an ‘atrocious act unheard of in the country’ (Muñoz Azpiri 1970: 8, my translation). Rosas ordered their imprisonment. Antonino Reyes, in charge of the military garrison, received Rosas’s orders to execute them immediately. Reyes sent a message to Manuelita, Rosas’s daughter, who has become a historical legend as the only person capable of dissuading her father from committing cruel acts (Cf. Mac Cann p. 139). But although Manuelita was a friend of Camila’s and Reyes informed the governor that the woman was pregnant, it was all in vain.

Hudson also refers to the story in *Far Away and Long Ago*

... some of his [Rosas’s] acts were inexplicable, as for instance the public execution in the interests of religion and morality of a charming young lady of good family and her lover, the handsome young priest who had captivated the town with his eloquence. (130 - 131)

As time went by, the story grew in sentimental overtones to become one of the best known Argentine love stories. In Masfield’s poem, the refrain ‘Remember those poor lovers’ (VIII 104, 106) becomes the motto of the military uprising that finally put an end to the regime and stated a new era in Argentine political history.

For references, see <http://www.claudiaferradas.net/resources/bibliography>