Irish Roots in Graciela Cabal's Story "Gualicho"

Viviana P. Keegan

Abstract: Graciela Cabal (1939-2004) was an Argentine children's writer and an important and active figure in the consolidation of a youth literature in Argentina in the 1980s. She descended from two large Irish families who settled in Suipacha (Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina). Cabal lends her marvelous literary voice to those sheep raisers in the short story “Gualicho”, about a failed wedding and a bewitched groom in the Irish community around 1850, in which even Father Fahey is present to bless the ceremony. What at first sight appears as a beautiful children's story turns into a narrative of migration with intertexts from Jorge Luis Borges and from Argentina's national poem Martín Fierro. Cabal's “Irishness” (also present in Secretos de Familia, her autobiographical novel) has never been studied and her texts are probably the only ones in Argentine children's fiction which make reference to the early Irish community.

Keywords: Graciela Cabal; Argentine children's fiction; Irish childhood; Irish in Argentina

This article revolves around Argentine writer Graciela Cabal and her short story “Gualicho”, included in Cuentos de miedo, de amor y de risa (1991), written for children, which deals with a wedding and a bewitched groom in the Irish community in the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina) around 1850 during the early days of the leadership of Father Fahey.

Graciela Cabal was a prolific children's writer and an important and active figure in the consolidation of a youth literature in Argentina in the 1980s.1 Born in Buenos Aires in 1939, she was an Irish descendant on her mother's side. A school teacher with an MA in Literature from the University of Buenos Aires, Graciela was the author of many novels and short stories for children (Papamuel, Barbapedro y otras personas, Tomásito's series, Jacinto, Miedo, La pandilla del ángel, etc.) and a few for adults (Secretos de familia, Las cenizas de papá), as well as primary school readers and academic papers. She was also responsible for several children's collections on human rights, the law and ecology published by Centro Editor de América Latina, a large and important publishing house during the 1970s. In the 1990s she co-founded and co-directed La Mancha, an Argentine magazine on children's literature research on key issues of the field, similar in its contents to Inis Magazine in Ireland.

At a turning point in the consolidation of a national children's literature, she took active part in the organization of conferences. Some of her essays were leading in areas like gender and the formation of young readers (Mujercitas ¿eran las de antes?, La emoción más antigua). She wrote about issues which at the time were considered thorny - like the role of women (La señora Planchita) and disabled children (Toby). She was part of the Plan Nacional de Lectura (National Program for Reading) established in 1984 with the return to democracy under President Alfonsín. During her two years as president of the Argentine Association of Children's
Literature (ALIJA), more than forty children's libraries were founded in schools around the country. “It is from childhood that I write, not for childhood”, she declared.² Deeply concerned with the promotion of reading for all children, her poetics are built on a deep respect for the child and his/her universe, and the conviction that children's literature should be above all and always literature, pure literature, one that should fight stereotypes, clichés and entrenched models. She died in Buenos Aires in 2004.³

Cabal’s “Irishness” has never been studied and her texts are probably the only ones in Argentine children's fiction which make reference to the early Irish-Argentine community. She had Irish origins on her mother's side: she descended from two large Irish families, the Mulleadys and the Kellys, who settled in Suipacha (Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina) in 1841 in the early years of the community. All of Cabal's fiction works (more than sixty books), full of wit and irony, are intertwined with her family life and there are some nods to her Irish roots and her ancestors. Cabal refers to the Irish in three particular works: Secretos de familia (Family Secrets), her autobiographical novel, winner of prestigious Premio Ricardo Rojas 1999, “El ciprés funerario” (The Funerary Cypress), a hilarious fantasy about her own funeral and “Gualicho” (Evil Spell).

“Gualicho”

The title of the story, "Gualicho", can be translated as "Evil Spell". "Gualicho" means a "magic spell" or an "evil spell" in the language of the mapuches (the indigenous inhabitants of south-central Chile and southwestern Argentina) and it is a word commonly used in Spanish in Argentina. In Mapuche it may also mean devil, an evil spirit.

As mentioned, Cabal included "Gualicho" in Cuentos de miedo, de amor y de risa (1991) (Tales of fear, love and laughter), a book of short stories suggested for young teenage readers (from eleven years old on). The title is a nod to Horacio Quiroga's famous book Cuentos de amor, de locura y muerte (Tales of love, madness and death). As Cabal states her intention to pass the story on to a larger audience, it is interesting to note that here the paratext - always relevant in children’s books (illustrations, typography, design, colour) - includes a short introduction and a glossary that serve to inform the young readers about the Irish, their culture and arrival in Argentina (the entries comment on Saint Patrick, Father Fahey, the Great Famine, the Irish sheep raisers in Argentina and why they had to leave Ireland).

In the introduction, Cabal anticipates that this is a family narrative, that is, a story of her family she used to listen from her mother's and grandmother's lips (who had heard it from her grandmother, who had heard it from her mother) and, as it sometimes happens with children, although the story of the bewitched groom always made her afraid, she wanted to hear it over and over again. But it is also a family narrative in the sense that the very characters of this story were actually members of her maternal family (the Kellys and the Mulleadys) who had emigrated from Ireland and settled in Suipacha in 1841. Her great-great-grandmother, Marcella Kelly, Doña Marcela, was part of the story herself. In a similar way, in Historia del guerrero y la cautiva (1949), Jorge Luis Borges frames the story of the English woman kidnapped by Indians:

"(...) era un relato que le oí alguna vez a mi abuela inglesa, que ha muerto". p.558.⁴
Most probably, Cabal had Borges's story in mind since she was a reader and admirer of his work and, as her student at the UBA, she was part of the lucky group who had long talks with him after class.5

From Coghlan's genealogy book, we learn that two brothers Mulleady (Thomas and Patrick) married two Kelly sisters (Marcella and Elizabeth). Thomas Mulleady and Marcella Kelly (both from Longford) arrived in Buenos Aires in 1841. Thomas and Marcella had seven children, the last five were born in Buenos Aires in the house that had belonged to Virrey Cisneros (the last representative of the Spanish King in the Río de la Plata), where they lived.

Patricio, the protagonist of the story “Gualicho”, was their first son and he was born in Ballinacarrig, Ireland, in 1839. Ricardo Mulleady, born in BA in 1849, was the fifth child of Thomas Mulleady and Doña Marcela Kelly so Patricio, the bewitched groom, was his eldest brother. Ricardo joined the Argentine army and became a general, “un general de la Nación”. We will talk about him later.

It is to note that since “Gualicho” is a very old story from an Irish family, typically passed on by the women from one generation to the other in the tradition of those immigrant families, it is an authentic Irish story, which, on the other hand, deals with real members of the Irish-Argentine community and which Cabal rescues from oblivion through her fiction. The point is that Cabal does not make up a story about the Irish, she rewrites or fictionalizes this story which is her story, in fact, a common resource in her productions. It is also an oral narrative, which she most certainly heard in Spanish, since she did not speak English and she regretted.

It is by placing herself as a transmitter that Cabal pays homage to her family and links their story to a larger one, that of the Irish sheep raisers in the Province of Buenos Aires and of all other communities of immigrants to Argentina. Because, as she says, all those who knew the story of the bewitched groom are now dead.

Por suerte quedo yo que ya se la conté a mis hijos, que se la contaré a mi nieta (cualquiera ella sea un poco más alta) y que ahora se la cuento a ustedes, por escrito y con adornos. porque sería una verdadera lástima que se perdiera para siempre.6

(Cabal, 54)

It is worth noting that children's literature is hardly ever considered a source of interest in migration studies. On the contrary, studies on childhood are multidisciplinary and draw on many fields such as sociology, history, law, pediatrics, mental health, education, pedagogy.7

Gualicho” opens with a first reference to Cabal's Irish roots: it is in fact dedicated to the memory of Cabal's Irish ancestors, the Mulleady's, very close to her heart, particularly her grandmother, Camila Mulleady. It was through her that Graciela developed an Irish identity. Their story is told in Cabal's novel Secretos de Familia. Camila Mulleady, (or Muliádi, as she pronounced her name), was an extraordinary woman with whom Graciela spent her childhood, who exerted a great influence on her and who transmitted to her the love for Ireland and the story and secrets of her large family.8 "Gualicho" is also dedicated to Father Mulleady (her grandmother's cousin), who was a priest, a lazarist, a man of great kindness and faith, who - the family firmly believed- could perform small miracles and deserved canonization. In Secretos de Familia, Father Mulleady is frequently mentioned and his power invoked. So, this story has as its basis the life of the Mulleadys and the Kellys in Suipacha, though, as it will be shown, there
are some extraordinary, magical elements which link the story to the folk tale.

**The story**

“Gualicho” is the story of Patricio and Margarita, two young Irish teenagers who promise each other eternal love on the ship that brings them to the Río de la Plata with their families around 1841. During the following years they meet at masses, baptisms and funerals since, as Cabal points out, every meeting was a good opportunity for those who had escaped from hunger and persecution:

huyendo del hambre y las persecuciones, habían dejado atrás la verde Eire, isla Esmeralda.9 (Cabal, 58)

The setting is around 1850 in Suipacha,10 an Irish enclave and a rich area in the Province of Buenos Aires, where many Irish families, including Cabal's ancestors, are well established. The story offers an accurate and lively description of an Irish celebration in the “camp” in the early years of the community, not found in other texts in Argentine children's literature. There is music and dance, the lamb, the jacket potatoes and the wedding cake. Friends and relatives in their Sunday clothes admire Margarita’s red tresses. Cabal recreates the voices of those Irish. While Father Fahey listens to the confessions under the trees (the "paraísos"), the men in the family

talk about the shearing, the price of wool, the danger of the Indians, and of the hard times they have to endure; women talk about their children and grandchildren, of the beauty of geraniums, of childbirth in those vast solitudes.11 (Cabal, 59)

Patricio, the groom, prefers to ride alone to Margarita's on Donovan, his horse. Although he was born in Ireland, Patricio looks very much like a gaacho: he is wearing high boots, a short jacket, a chambrerjó (a hat) and a silk scarf on which he has fastened his precious gift for Margarita: a small brooch in gold and diamonds in the shape of a harp which had belonged to his Irish grandmother. But Patricio is late and his mother, Doña Marcela Kelly, worries. She feels "dry inside (...) as the day the ship left her land forever"12 (Cabal, 62).

In spite of Doña Marcela's prayers, Patricio never arrives. As he rides to the wedding house, he passes a spot where "the sisters" live. With a smile he recalls the many times his mother has warned him against "those women": " Keep away, son. People say things about them"13 (Cabal, 60). Like Margarita, the sisters also wear tresses but their hair is of a bluish black and they have a strange smile on their faces. We are never told who these women are nor do they talk in the story. What happens between them and Patricio will remain a mystery. Patricia is found under the galeria of the estancia, his eyes are like glass and there is a grimace on his face (the edition includes an illustration by Pablo Fernández which perfectly captures the moment). "Margarita" is the last word he is able to pronounce. Patricio will never be the same and he no longer has the power of words. Doña Marcela attempts an explanation: it was the sun, he had a heatstroke. But as in folklore tales, the old midwife declares Patricio has been bewitched by “those women”, “hijas del diablo”, (daughters of the devil) as they call them. As it
was said, “gualicho” is a name for the devil as well.

Interestingly, in the national poem Martín Fierro, José Hernández describes a scene that is specular to the one on Cabal's: in the poem, it is the Pampa Indians who shout “Cristiano echando gualicho”, (“a Christian casting a spell”), as they are killed by an epidemic of smallpox. They put the blame of the gualicho on a captive, a young immigrant man with blue eyes ”who was always talking about the ship” (Hernández, 130).

“Gualicho” is a lively and attractive story for children, a possible instrument to introduce them, at home or at school, to Irish identity and the history of the community. But as a story originated in the Irish community there are some interesting aspects to underline about the experience of migration.

In her autobiographical novel Secretos de familia, Cabal expands the story of the Mulleady family and the Kellys and as she tells the story of her family, she is in a way telling the story of how the Irish became “argentines”, what their experience of migration was like. As Borges himself did, she is also building her own mythology.15

Who was Patricio, the bewitched groom? What was his experience of migration? How did he fit in? Did he fit in? As I was researching Cabal's works, her son Pablo generously sent me some valuable material which included Graciela's intimate and personal account of the story of her family. There I read about Patricio Mulready's real life: he became insane and never recovered. Cabal also states that "Gualicho" tells Patricio’s story. In the story, something strange and mysterious, inexplicable, linked to the dark forces of nature, comes between him and Margarita. Patricio seemed to have found his place in the new land. He dressed and rode as a gaucho and he was gifted with horses. But he crossed a line he never should have crossed- the frontier - and clashed with something linked to taboo, and most importantly, something unknown to him, different from his culture. The evil spell, the “gualicho”, an element of magic and mystery, brings the text near a folk tale in the tradition of the Irish folklore literature. The ingredients of the spell, of course, remain a secret. As with the sirens in the Odyssey, Patricio succumbs to the inevitable attraction the girls exert on him. But after all, were the two women to blame for Patricio’s curse and unhappiness?

Leonardo Pantaleo rightly underlines the tensions in this story between a new foreign community in the vast pampas and the old inhabitants: the Irish, gathered around institutions, celebrations and religion, as well as the non-Irish, in the wilderness, beyond the frontier. But Pantaleo links the gualicho to the Indian community while Cabal never mentions this, although it may be suggested in the text. (In Secretos de Familia she states a clear position towards Aboriginal Peoples’ rights).16 I believe Cabal intended to mean something deeper in the story.

The real Patricio also had a fight with dark forces in real life and he lost: he died insane. Madness is something difficult to account for. To be able to name what is unspeakable, you need more than words. In the Mulleady's case, the facts in Patricio's story were fictionalized and they became symbolic. They were turned into a story, a metaphor of an experience of migration. A story the members of the family tell to themselves over and over again to every new generation.

In their book about psychoanalysis and migration, León and Rebecca Grinberg state that migration can be a traumatic experience and a threat to mental health.17 Helplessness and the complete loss of familiar objects - language in especial- may undermine someone’s identity and awaken a number of psychological disorders and psychiatric conditions. An immigrant may
develop an intense feeling of "not belonging to anywhere", neither the land from where they migrated nor the new land that received them. As if in a migration experience there would always be something out of place and out of control, something inevitable, Patricio belongs nowhere because he doesn't belong to the world of words and reason anymore. However, the family narrative, whose tradition Cabal continues and expands to larger audiences, somehow turns Patricio into a protagonist, a hero: the bewitched groom in the story. It is through this literary operation, through the family words, that he fits in and is recalled by generations to come.

Experiences of migration: Ricardo Mulleady Kelly and Father Mulleady

It should be remembered that Patricio had a brother named Ricardo. Ricardo Mulleady Kelly, born in Buenos Aires in 1849, was the fifth child of Thomas Mulleady and Doña Marcela Kelly. As mentioned, he joined the Argentine army and became a general, who fought the Indians in Río Negro during the "Campana del desierto" along with General Roca to eradicate the presence of the aboriginals from the Patagonian lands.18 Is it a paradox, an irony or a personal decision that he should have fought those who were blamed for his brother's curse? Was the army just one of the few ways in which an immigrant could fit in?

It is also relevant to allude to Father Mulleady, to whom the story "Gualicho" is dedicated. His portrait appears in Secretos de familia. Patricio José Mulleady Molloy, a lazarist, was also worshipped by the family as a hero. The family considered him a real saint with powers to redeem the pains of the world and perform small miracles. In times of trouble they invoked him with a personal prayer and left messages for him behind his picture, an attitude that may be linked to Irish popular devotion.

El Santo que más nos protege es primo de Gran Mamá, se llama Padre Mulleady y todavía no es Santo de Iglesia pero ya lo va a ser, ya lo va a ser... Irlandés era, de ojos claritos, pelo claro y cara colorada, como lo pintó Gran Mamá en el cuadro.19 (Cabal, 85).

Father Mulleady also had a great love and knowledge of Irish culture, and in a journey to Ireland he traced and found the family places, a path that Graciela followed as an adult on her trip to the Island.

Thus, the family had two male heroes: Ricardo Mulleady Kelly, a general, and Father Mulleady Molloy, a priest considered a saint. Now these two characters - the warrior and the saint - are very powerful images, particularly significant to Irish history and the Irish collective imaginary, present in many Irish families. Both heroes, the warrior and the saint, seem to have fitted in, in their family as well as in Argentine society. On the contrary, Patricio's experience with migration seems to have been negative. But as already referred to, it is the family narrative, a literary operation, which somehow turns him into a hero as well, a literary hero, no longer wordless, saved from oblivion and perpetuated through the words of a children's story for every new generation.

In her novel Lessico famigliare (Family Sayings) Italian author Natalia Ginzburg, who also dealt with questions of memory and identity, collects recurrent phrases pronounced by her
parents and siblings, words which identified them as a family (my translation):

Those phrases are our Latin, the vocabulary of our gone days, they are like Egyptian or Babylonian hieroglyphs, the testimony of a vital nucleus which no longer exists but which survives in its texts, safe from the fury of waters, from corruption of time.20 (Ginzburg, 22).

Cabal takes a story originated among the Irish and passed on along generations ("her family's Latin"), giving a picture of Irish life in the Province of Buenos Aires in the early days, a topic that had not been dealt with in Argentina children's literature. It is through her literary writings (tales and novel) that she affirms her identity as an Irish descendant, offering rich material to reflect on the experiences of Irish migration that had been only hinted at in this paper.

Notes
1 Argentine children's literature has a large tradition and a well-earned international recognition, especially in the Spanish-speaking world (Horacio Quiroga, María Elena Walsh, Graciela Montes, Laura Devetach, Gustavo Roldán, Liliana Bodoc, etc) and it is now slowly being translated into different languages. The 1960s brought new constructions of childhood to Argentine children's literature and a new market approach: Bolsillos, a collection sold at the newsstands, with good texts and illustrations, saw a success. In the 1970s University of Córdoba held the first scholarly seminars on the subject to debate the main issues of a national literature for the youth. Centro Editor de América Latina offered children's books from old and new authors at low prices encouraging their presence in every home. This rich academic and publishing development was interrupted by the military government (1976-1983) but the return to democracy (1984) brought about a renaissance of authors, illustrators and publishers and the presence of children's fiction in the academic world. Graciela Cabal had an active role in the promotion of children's literature. In 2012 Argentine writer María Teresa Andruetto won the prestigious H.C.Andersen Prize, awarded by IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) which has branches in many countries, including Argentina (ALIJA). The field had a soaring growth: in 2017 children's fiction represented 13% of the Argentine publishing market.


3 For further reading on Graciela Cabal see: http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/graciela_cabal/ and: http://www.graciela cabal.com/ (includes texts, videos and photographs)


6 "Luckily, there is still me and I have told it to my children and will pass it on to my granddaughter (when she grows taller). And I am telling it to you now, in black and white and embellished, for it will be a pity if it were to be lost forever" p.54. All translations of the fragments of "Gualicho" and Secretos de familia are mine. All quotes from the story are from Ed. Norma, 1st edition, 2008, Bs. As

8 In the interview Cabal regrets not being able to speak English. ("El tema es que yo soy irlandesa y cuando era chica me enviaron a un colegio inglés (vos sabes los irlandeses y los ingleses no se llevan bien) del cual mi papá era director (...)"). "The thing is I'm Irish and when I was a little girl they sent me to an English school (you know the Irish and the English do not get along well) where my father was the headmaster...". Cabal reproduces this hilarious situation in Secretos de Familia (chapter 14). Entrevista a Graciela Cabal: studylib.es/doc/344112/pido-permiso-a-los-lectores-para-iniciar-esta-nota-de-un
9 "escaping from hunger and persecution, (they) had left Green Eire, the Emerald Island, behind." p.58
10 Suipacha (126 km from the city of Buenos Aires) is still an Irish enclave and a place where the community gathers. In November 2017 the annual Irish-Argentine meeting was held there.
11 "(...) los hombres hablaban de la esquila, del precio de la lana, del peligro de los indios, de los duros tiempos que les había tocado vivir; las mujeres hablaban de los hijos, de los nietos, de la hermosura de los geranios, de los partos en esas soledades". p.59
12 "Pero le pareció que estaba seca por dentro, como el día aquel, ¿hacia ya cuánto tiempo? en que el barco se alejó para siempre de su tierra". p.62
13 "Manténgase alejado, hijo. Mire que de ellas se cuentan cosas..." p.60
14 "Había un gringuito cautivo / Que siempre hablaba del barco / - Y lo auguran en un charco / Por causante de la peste - / Tenía los ojos celestes / Como potrillolo zafiro" La vuelta de Martín Fierro, 6, in Hernández, José. Martín Fierro. Buenos Aires: Claridad, 2015, p.130.
15 See Cabal, G. Secretos de familia, in special chapters 19, 20 and 69.
16 The tensions between those original inhabitants and those who arrived later reappear in the novel Secretos de familia through the innocent but forceful narrative of young Graciélita, who in an effort to understand the miseries of those tensions concludes: "Twice were they (the Indians) killed. First the Spanish killed them and then Gran Mamá’s uncle and his friends, who were all Generals of the Nation, killed them. (...) God punished Grand Mamá’s uncle and he was left with no statue. But the Indians do have a statue: in Plaza Garay, next to the merry-go-round". ("Y los mataron. Dos veces los mataron. Primero los mataron los españoles, y después los mataron el tío de Gran mamá y los amigos de él, que eran todos Generales de la Nación. (...) Al tío de Gran Mamá Dios lo castigó y se quedó sin estatua. En cambio los indios sí tienen estatua: en la Plaza Garay, justo al lado de la calesita" (Cabal, Secretos de Familia, 83).
17 Grinberg, León and Rebeca Grinberg. Psicoanálisis de la migración y del exilio in special Chapter 2 "La migración como experiencia traumática y de crisis".
18 His biography states Mulready was "a slave of discipline and honour" and he was buried at a national army pantheon. The family worshipped him as a hero. He was well versed in Irish history and traditions. In 1921 he joined the Comité argentino pro libertad de Irlanda in Buenos Aires. See Yaben, Jacinto. Biografías argentinas y sudamericanas. Buenos Aires: Editorial Metrópolis. En: www.genealogiarlandesa.com/genealogia/M/Mulready/thomas.htm and Dermot Keogh's La independencia de Irlanda: la conexión argentina, Ed Universidad del Salvador, p.256
19 "The Saint that protect us most is Grandma’s cousin. His name is Father Mulready and he isn’t a Saint from the Church yet he will be, he will be... Irish he was, with light-coloured eyes, light-coloured hair and a red face, just as Gran Mamá had painted him in the picture (Cabal, 85)
20 "Quelle frasi sono il nostro latino, il vocabolario dei nostri giorni andati, sono come i geroglifici degli egiziani o degli assiro-babilonesi, la testimonianza d’un nucleo vitale che ha cessato di esistere, ma che sopravvive nei suoi testi, salvati dalla furia delle acque, dalla corrosione del tempo" (Ginzburg, 22) (my translation).
Works Cited
Accessed: Feb 2018