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Pandemics, State-Building, and British-Argentine Connections in the 19th Century

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Abstract

In the second half of the nineteenth century, several epidemics broke out in Argentina. They were not part of an isolated phenomenon. In this period, cholera became a global pandemic that deeply affected the lives of people from India to Europe and throughout the Americas. Being an important South Atlantic port, Buenos Aires was particularly vulnerable to the introduction of the disease and to be a gateway for its transmission to the interior. In the nineteenth century Argentina also witnessed the development of a strong British community. Although the origins of the British presence in the Rio de la Plata can be traced to the colonial period, after the wars of independence people from the British Isles settled consistently in the new country in the context of Britain's global expansion following the Napoleonic wars. The British in Argentina became very active through educational and health institutions, setting up robust organisations such as the *Hospital Británico* established in Buenos Aires in 1844. This paper explores some aspects of the contribution of the Anglo-Argentine community and the transnational connections that made that possible. It does this by looking at their health and charitable institutions, the impact disease had among foreign residents, and the role of key individuals. Focus is placed on the role of the Wilde family, in particular Jose Antonio and Eduardo Wilde, leading Anglo-Argentine physicians and politicians.

Keywords: State-building, Pandemics, Anglo-Argentines, Public Health

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, several epidemics broke out in Argentina. They were not part of an isolated phenomenon. In this period, cholera became a global pandemic that deeply affected the lives of people from India to Europe and throughout the Americas. Being an important South Atlantic port, Buenos Aires was particularly vulnerable to the introduction of the disease and to be a gateway for its transmission to the interior. In the nineteenth century Argentina also witnessed the development of a strong British community. Although the origins of the British presence in the Rio de la Plata can be traced to the colonial period, after the wars of independence people from the British Isles settled consistently in the new country in the context of Britain's global expansion following the Napoleonic wars. The British in Argentina became very active through educational and health institutions, setting up robust organisations such as the *Hospital Británico* established in Buenos Aires in 1844. This paper explores some aspects of the contribution of the Anglo-Argentine community and the transnational connections that made that possible. It does this by looking at their health and charitable institutions, the impact disease had among foreign residents, and the role of key individuals. Focus is placed on the role of the Wilde family, in particular Jose Antonio and Eduardo Wilde, leading Anglo-Argentine physicians and politicians.

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During the second half of the 19th century several waves of pandemic diseases hit Argentina, in particular severe outbreaks of cholera and yellow fever.[1] It was an era of national unification and state-building as the civil wars of the previous decades came to a close. It was also a period in which the country's capitalist economy developed and strengthened its ties with economic metropoles such as London. A significant influx of European immigrants arrived in the new republic, encouraged by the state, in an attempt to solve one of its persistent problems: a structural lack of available labour force. Those immigrants, coming from Southern and Eastern Europe joined a foreigner community that had settled early on. Since the

[1] Héctor Recalde, *Las epidemias de cólera: salud y sociedad en la Argentina oligárquica* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1993); Miguel Ángel Scenna, *Cuando Murió Buenos Aires, 1871* (Buenos Aires: Cántaro, 2009).

independence of the Provinces of the Rio de la Plata in the 1810s and 1820s immigrants from the British Isles became the largest overseas group. They were represented by individuals and families from a variety of social backgrounds: merchants, professionals, artisans, farmers, rural workers, and churchmen. Their influence grew as did the presence of British diplomacy and British involvement in business and economy.[2]

This paper will show some of the initial results of a work in progress that looks at British-Argentine connections in relation to the pandemics of the 19th century, especially in the city of Buenos Aires. Future research will aim at reconstructing the role of British communities during pandemic outbreaks, but this paper will focus on the impact of pandemics in the state-building process. As the historian Carlos Dimas has recently argued in a study of cholera in the Argentine province of Tucumán, pandemics were highly disruptive events that obliged governments and state builders to devise quick responses and to find ways of adjusting to what became a chronic problem.[3]

Members of the British community in Buenos Aires and their descendants played a leading role in the debates around the role of states during pandemics – or, as they themselves called them, 'epidemics'. British antecedents influenced local discussions and British experts were involved in public health infrastructure projects. It will be argued here that global connections informed three central aspects of 19-century state-building: public health, the management of maritime borders, and the improvement of water supply. Solutions to the problem of epidemics, which could have devastating effects, were not easy. There were no established procedures nor clearly designated authorities to manage a crisis or to implement public health measures, and there was a persistent tension between the need to maintain fluid international links and the realities of local conditions on the ground.

At some point during June 1871, an English-language pamphlet straightforwardly entitled 'The Plague of 1871' appeared in the city of Buenos Aires.[4] It was signed by Reverend T. E. Ash, chaplain of the British legation, and published in the workshop of the local newspaper *The Standard* - the only English-language paper at the time. In reality, the pamphlet can be regarded as an extraordinary issue of the then discontinued periodical. The impact of the epidemic of yellow fever that hit the city between February/March and June that year had

[2] Henry Ferns, *Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxofrd: The Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 76-77 ; David Rock, *The British in Argentina: Commerce, Settlers and Power, 1800-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2019), pp. 58-64.
[3] Carlos S. Dimas, *Poisoned Eden: Cholera Epidemics, State-Building, and the Problem of Public Health in Tucumán, Argentina, 1865-1908* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), pp. 3-8.
[4] T. E. Ash, *The Plague of 1871* (Buenos Aires: The Standard Office, 1871).

been so disrupting that at least a third of the 200,000 inhabitants fled to the countryside. Records investigated recently have resulted into an estimate of seven per cent dead (i.e. around 14.000 people passed away).[5] Although the exact figure is uncertain, numbers of displacement, morbidity, and mortality were staggering by all accounts. In those circumstances, many of the local periodical papers naturally ceased to be able to function. *The Standard* itself tenaciously carried on publishing as long as was humanly possible.[6]

Reverend Ash did not have kind words neither for the governmental officials that ran the city nor for the local press. To put things in perspective, however, he placed the plague of 1871 in a wider context. To him, it resembled the worst epidemics that could be remembered: the London plague of 1665, the more recent yellow fever epidemics of Mauritius, Barcelona, Peru, and Montevideo, and the dreadful 1850 outbreak in New Orleans, in North America. Among previous experiences at home, in Buenos Aires, he could cite the outbreak of yellow fever of 1858 and the severe cholera epidemic of 1867-68.[7] These last ones, harsh as they had been, paled in comparison to the recent plague. Ash wanted to answer how could that have happened in a location whose climate, air and soil were generally regarded as among the healthiest in the world. He found the main causes in the 'abominable filth of the city and its surroundings'.[8] The intense heat of the summer and the nauseous stench of the river, combined with the undisposed rubbish around Buenos Aires to make an untenable repulsive environment. This meant that when the plague arrived from abroad - brought by soldiers of the war against Paraguay and by European immigrants - in Ash's words: it 'found a place ripe for destruction'.[9]

According to Ash, men of the press were also somewhat responsible, since their initial indifferent approach and unwillingness to acknowledge the problem had hampered the implementation of effective measures. An example of their lack of good judgment was that the Carnival festivities were encouraged to go ahead uninterrupted.[10] And yet, it was the reaction of the press that eventually made it possible to set up a coherent response. On the 10 March a meeting took place in the house of one of the leading journalists, and all the main personalities of the local press attended. Among them was Edward Mulhall, an Irishman owner and editor of *The Standard.* That day they decided on a joint declaration published simultaneously in all the periodicals of Buenos Aires, inviting the people of the city to assemble on the 13 March in

[5] Federico Pérgola, *Historia de la Medicina en Argentina: Desde la época de la dominación hispánica hasta la actualidad* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2014), p. 320.
[6] Ash, p. 20.
[7] Ash, p. 4-5.
[8] Ash, p. 5.
[9] Ash, p. 6.
[10] Ash, p. 8.

the *Plaza de la Victoria* – the main square now called *Plaza de Mayo* – and requesting the establishment of a *Comisión Popular de Salud Pública* – a 'Popular Commission for Public Health'. Several prominent British residents became members of the *Comisión Popular*, including Mulhall and his brother Michael George, co-editor of *The Standard.*[11]

But once the worse of the crisis was over by June, there were important differences in the estimates of mortality given in the press, which, for all its disagreements, was in a better position than the authorities to produce such information. Reverend Ash reported above 22,000 deaths, causing indignation among his Argentine peers for what they considered an inflated figure.[12] The *Revista Médico-Quirúrgica* reckoned 13,600 deaths, while other reports yielded 14,500 and 17,000 deceased.[13] Statistics had become another issue of contention among those involved in public health.

The physicians that worked on what we now know as 'public health' are identified in the historiography as the *higienistas*, a term that they themselves would have recognised.[14] One of the pioneers in this area was Guillermo Rawson, son of a physician from the United States who was descendent of an early British settler in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.[15] In 1872, Rawson established the chair of *Public Hygiene* at the University of Buenos Aires, doubtless as a result of the pandemic experiences of the previous decade. Some years later, in 1876, Rawson travelled to Philadelphia to take part in the International Medical Congress. There he presented his work 'Statistics of the City of Buenos Aires' – or *Estadística Vital de la Ciudad de Buenos Aire*s.[16] Rawson recognised that statistics was an unavoidable tool for the correct management of Public Hygiene.

As Reverend Ash had done in 1871, Rawson wanted to understand why despite Buenos Aires' good natural environmental conditions, it suffered so much from the impact of epidemics. He agreed with the general observation about weak sanitation and pointed out to the drainage and sewer projects underway. But for Rawson, the high numbers of immigrant arrivals and their poor living conditions were as important, if not more. His Congress presentation made a detailed description of the population of Buenos Aires and, crucially, an

[11] Scenna, *Cuando Murió Buenos Aires*, pp. 227-233.
[12] Ash, p. 28.
[13] Pérgola, p. 321.
[14] Isabel Norma Sánchez, *La higiene y los higienistas en la Argentina, 1880-1943* (Buenos Aires: Sociedad Científica Argentina, 2007).
[15] Pérgola, pp. 504-506.
[16] Guillermo Rawson, 'Estadística Vital de Buenos Aries', in Alberto B. Martínez (ed.), *Escritos y Discursos del Doctor Guillermo Rawson*, vol. I (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1891), pp. 37-103.

analysis of its mortality. He did not hesitate to establish comparisons with European and North American cities, in particular with New York.

Contemporaries distinguished between 'private hygiene', which referred to the health of the individual, and 'public hygiene', which referred to collective health.[17] To this, Rawson added 'international hygiene', by which he meant the common regulations between nations to defend themselves from the propagation of epidemics and the preservation of commerce and exchange.[18] In a text devoted to this issue, Rawson made a case against the quarantine of overseas arrivals. In his view, quarantines had two fundamental flaws: firstly, they were ineffective because it was not logistically possible to enforce them; and second, they were not 'humane' (his term), in the sense that they went against the right of circulation and commerce between countries. As an alternative, Rawson supported the establishment of international conventions based on scientific enquiry to work out the best measures appropriate in a given locality to prevent the emergence of epidemics. His main model for this was England and its international commerce regulations.

But Rawson's views were questioned by Eduardo Wilde, a young physician who had been his student at the University of Buenos Aires. He came from a family of English emigrants and his uncle was José Antonio Wilde, an early practitioner of public hygiene. Also a veteran of the epidemics of cholera and yellow fever, Eduardo Wilde had been appointed health inspector of the port of Buenos Aires.[19] In this capacity he was frequently confronted with the challenges of managing the arrival of vessels, and to respond to the demands of a variety of national, provincial, and municipal authorities, each with its own conflicting interests and jurisdictions. On some occasions this led to direct confrontation with governmental officials. Eduardo Wilde was also a man of the press, often engaging in polemics from his publications in the main periodicals of this time.

Wilde agreed with Rawson on the necessity of dealing with the spread of epidemics in a humane manner. When he opposed municipal authorities that were unhappy with his intervention in the management of maritime borders, he argued that poverty and lack of jobs were the origins of epidemics, and that if Argentina were to isolate itself from the rest of the world because of the implementations of quarantines, its inhabitants would suffer misery and

[17] José Antonio Wilde, *Compendio de Hijiene Pública y Privada,* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta, Litografía y Fundición de Tipos a Vapor, [1869] 1872), p. 27.
[18] Guillermo Rawson, 'Observaciones sobre la Higiene Internacional, in Martínez, pp. 181-226.
[19] Norberto Acerbi, *Vida y Obra del Dr. Eduardo Wilde: la construcción del estado nacional roquista* (Buenos Aires: Original & Copia, 1995), pp. 29-32; Maxine Hanon, *Eduardo Wilde: una historia argentina*, vol. 1,. (Buenos Aires: Klameen, 2013), pp. 193-218.

unemployment.[20] It was not a circular argument, but a fine observation about the causes of epidemics. His humane views can be seen in the following passage:

> The true philosophical prophylaxis does not reside in preventing an epidemic from going between two points of the earth, but in making impossible its emergence in the surface of the globe in which we live. Man is cosmopolitan and he cannot wish only for the health of his nation, but for the preservation of the human race [21]

However, unlike Rawson, Wilde was not prepared to directly argue against quarantines. As he explained, his views on 'philosophical prophylaxis' were a long term objective, whereas the requirements of public health were imperative. The practical solution for him was to frame a new national sanitary law based on the criteria of qualified physicians. In the approaches of both Rawson and Wilde, the contradiction was obvious: in order to achieve workable international humane regulations, it was necessary to make interventions that varied from place to place. As Wilde himself put it, there were two set of elements that had to be taken into account: 'the necessity of uniformed sanitary measures'; and the 'exigencies of local interests.'[22]

Both Rawson and Wilde went on to combine their medical careers with political appointments. Rawson became a prominent member of parliament both as deputy and national senator. Wilde, for his part, held national executive positions after a period in the legislature of the city of Buenos Aires. During his political career, Wilde was heavily involved in sanitation and public health projects that built the city's water supply system. At different times he was also a member of the Commission for Running Water and Drainage and was the head of the National Department of Hygiene, a central institution that unified several dispersed public health agencies.[23]

Later in his life he declared himself to be especially proud of his role in the project for a water supply system. It was a troubled story that had begun in 1867 as a response to the cholera epidemic and was completed in 1894 with the inauguration of the *Palacio de las Aguas*, a major centre for water purification that served the whole city.[24] During those almost 30 years the projects were interrupted, partially completed, and resumed in the middle of political controversy, not least due to disagreements in the allocation of contracts. British engineers and

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[20] Eduardo Wilde, *Obras Completas*, vol. VI (Paris: Imp. Crété, [c.1914]), p. 55.
[21] Wilde, p. 62. The translation is by the author of this essay.
[22] Wilde, pp. 68-9.
[23] Ángel G. Prignano, *Buenos Aires Higiénica: aguas y cloacas: entre la realidad y la ficción* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Centro Integral Comunicación, Cultura y Sociedad, 2010), pp. 89-91
[24] The following account on the Buenos Aires water system draws heavily from Prignano, pp. 26-35.

firms were fundamental to the progress of the works. The initial projects were designed and led by John Coghlan, a British resident in Buenos Aires. Later on, they were taken over by the British engineer John Bateman. Although Bateman lived in London, he operated with two other English engineers residents in Buenos Aires as his agents. The long road to a proper water system was complex, but Eduardo Wilde kept committed. His political activities were always combined with his publishing in the periodical press, a practice that annoyed both his political opponents and his associates. From the pages of the press,[25] Wilde promoted the water supply projects because his concerns remained consistent: international hygiene could only be guaranteed if the city was able to build its own defences against epidemics – those dreadful plagues – in the first place.

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[25] Wilde, *Obras Completas*, p. 128-133.