

Irina Podgorny, *Los argentinos vienen de los peces. Ensayo de filogenia nacional*, Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2021, 187 pp., ISBN: 9789508453990 and *Florentino Ameghino y hermanos. Empresa argentina de paleontología ilimitada*, Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2021, 348 pp., ISBN: 9789876285988

In August 1911, the Argentinian weekly magazine *Caras y caretas* covered its front page with a large cartoon of a crumbling museum room. Among debris and wooden boxes, ramshackle dinosaur skeletons kept polite conversation. “Here is going to be erected a statue to Dr Ameghino on a very, very high pedestal. – Can’t be so high, because the roof... – Oh! By the time they build it the roof will have long fallen in”.¹

Irina Podgorny’s two new books cast a similarly satirical eye over the life, work, collections, and posthumous commemoration of Florentino Ameghino (1853–1911) and add a thick layer of historical detail and context to their story. Born in Liguria and raised in Argentina from an early age, Ameghino rose to prominence due to bountiful fossil discoveries in the Pampas and Patagonia and fantastical theories regarding the South American origins of humanity. He gives Podgorny an opportunity to paint a vivid portrait of the earth sciences in *fin-de-siècle* Argentina. Naturalists emerge in it as a collective that is equal parts erudite and quarrelsome, whose scholarly operations were entwined with and often mimicked both commercial practices and the partisan tactics of social and political promotion that characterized the regime of the Conservative Republic (1880–1916).

Although both books tell the same story, each does so differently. *Los argentinos vienen de los peces. Ensayo de filogenia nacional* is a short piece that uses what is perhaps Ameghino’s most notorious blunder – his misinterpretation of a long- and well-known species of armored catfish as a new species – as a thread to tie together snippets of graphic and textual sources and provide an impressionistic account of Ameghino and his times. An entirely different approach is taken in *Florentino Ameghino y hermanos. Empresa argentina de paleontología ilimitada*, published in Edhasa’s collection of Argentinian biographies. Although the choice to do away with footnotes unnecessarily limits its utility to specialists, it bears witness to the author’s decades-long research into Ameghino and to the wealth of documentation she has unearthed along the way (including archives, newspapers, drawings, and the huge mass his fastidiously technical writings).

Podgorny’s originality in both books lies in her putting Ameghino’s highly glorified life and work in context, as they became “fashioned by the means he used to build his reputation, means which should be understood historically” (*Florentino Ameghino*, 13). One such means, Podgorny demonstrates, was trade, as the title of the second book suggests. She pays special attention to the commercial and financial operations involved in making, maintaining, and exchanging collections – which were supposed to be profitable for their owners not only intellectually, but also politically, socially, and economically. An immigrant who started his career as a school preceptor in the provincial town of Mercedes, Ameghino belonged to a generation of naturalists who were collectors above all and who,

¹ All translations are mine.

in Argentina, exploited the rich fossiliferous soils of their country to make a living within it and a reputation abroad. The Paris Universal Exposition of 1889 presented Ameghino and countless others with an opportunity to do business over bones and artifacts. Someone exhorted Ameghino to “get rid of all and turn it into money” (48) if what he wanted was to make a name for himself in the natural sciences. One way or another, collecting was often a commercial affair in his hands, as when he conditioned his naming as deputy director of La Plata Museum to the acquisition of his collections by the provincial government. After all, Ameghino was a tradesman for most of his life. He ran a bookstore in La Plata, then in Buenos Aires (“El Glyptodón”), that he set up as a family business employing (without salaries) wife, mother, and one brother behind the counter, as well as another brother as a collector in Luján, Chaco, and Patagonia.

There were other crucial ways in which his career and name was made. For example, through the press, Podgorny’s main source for her research. A dizzying number of periodicals mushroomed in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Argentina: they provided naturalists like Ameghino with a medium for publicizing both their discoveries and their acrimonious disputes – and thus also with a tool for building their reputations. As Podgorny shows, the “logics of scandal, confrontation, fragmentation, and political partisanship” (*Ameghino y hermanos*, 13) that prevailed in newspapers and magazines shaped the social dynamics of scholarly work in the earth sciences. Ameghino’s rise was largely due to his successfully hopping through various groups of political influence that opened for him the doors of cultural institutions like the university of Córdoba, the La Plata Museum, and the Museo Nacional. There is nothing new in that. What seems exceptional is the degree to which the political and scientific favor-carrying, bickering, and tantrum-throwing of earth scientists unfolded publicly through periodicals.

The press and the “framework of [personal and political] jealousies, resentments, and obsessions” over prehistory and paleontology that it sustained largely account for the ascent of Ameghino and his work as a political symbol in Argentina past and present. (Today, he lends his name to parks, gardens, schools, a canal, a dam, and a handful of towns and cities in the province of Buenos Aires alone, not to speak of a shelter in the Argentinian base in Antarctica). Various currents of laicism, socialism, and nationalism ended up converging to rise Ameghino as the patron saint of teachers, the founder of South American paleontology and prehistory, and the *sabio nacional* (the national scholar or wise man), inflating along the way his autodidactic background, his marginality in his country, his reputation abroad, and in sum: his Argentineness.

The story of Ameghino and his work has been told many times, but probably not in the same way that Podgorny does in her two books: one marked by an uncompromising consideration to context and, like the cartoon of *Caras y caretas* published soon after Ameghino’s death, a good dose of amused irony.

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