

The Gaucho Martín Fierro

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INTRODUCTION

El gaucho Martín Fierro is a poem of protest drawn from the life of the gaucho, who was forced to yield his freedom and individuality to the social and material changes that invaded his beloved pampas—a protest which arose from years of abuse and neglect suffered from landowners, militarists, and the Argentine political establishment.

This poem, composed and first published more than a century ago, could have been written today by spokesmen for other oppressed groups in other parts of the world. For this reason, perhaps, the poem has such universal appeal that it has been translated into nineteen languages, making it available to more than half of the world's people. But what makes *El gaucho Martín Fierro* unique in protest literature is its realistic, spontaneous, and evocative portrayal of the gaucho's plight. The poet José Hernández Pueyrredón spent half his life alongside the gauchos—in the pampas, on the frontier, and in the regular army brigades that took part in Argentina's civil wars during the mid-1800s. He saw the gaucho's land and livestock expropriated by the more favored classes and the gaucho pressed into military service to defend ideas not his own. He observed the effect of the ruling that the gaucho was presumed a vagrant if he lacked possessions, a permanent home, or proper employment documentation—characteristics typical of gaucho life. The tensions and sense of outrage that built up in Hernández through these experiences with the gauchos, together with his own self-imposed exile and the continued political ferment of the period, were released in his 2,316-line poem, *Martín Fierro*, which reached the reading public on 16 January 1873 (despite the 1872 publication date appearing on the first edition). On the following day *La Prensa* of Buenos Aires recorded the event as follows:

José Hernández / 1

Yesterday a book began circulating, written in gaucho-style verse by José Hernández, former publisher of *El Río de la Plata*, and former government official of Corrientes Province. This book is entitled *Martín Fierro*. It is not a simple story adorned in literary forms; it is the palpitating story of those who up to a short time ago inhabited the countryside, pursued daily by invading Indians and recruiters of army troops.¹

With the notable exception of the newspaper *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, founded by one of Hernández's political adversaries, General Bartolomé Mitre, president of Argentina from 1862-68, most of the significant periodicals of Buenos Aires and vicinity heralded the appearance of *El gaucho Martín Fierro* as noteworthy and extraordinary. *La Pampa* of Buenos Aires, for instance, even attempted to point up the superiority of this gaucho poem over previous ones: "I can assure you, without fear of falling into error, that *Martín Fierro* gallantly sustains comparison with any of the productions of *Aniceto el Gallo*, *Hidalgo* or *el Polo*. Compare them to convince yourselves."²

An early commentator, Mariano A. Pelliza, compared *El gaucho Martín Fierro* to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, since both works focus attention on oppression and injustice. Pelliza, a publisher and historian, drew this comparison in a letter to José Hernández on 27 March 1873:

If here we had people capable of vindicating the rights of man and of the citizen, the native inhabitant of the countryside, your book would have produced the marvellous effect obtained in North America by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, because both are the product of a sublime good will toward man. The lifting of a fallen race, reinstating civil and political conditions that were daringly snatched away through abuse, is the aim of both books. There, an attack was made on a legal institution; nevertheless, the cry of natural law triumphed, whereas here, the gaucho is scourged unjustifiably through the simple abuse of power.³

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However, unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the *Martín Fierro* was written too late to help the gaucho, who had all but disappeared.

Hernández's poem was an attempt to alert the government, and particularly the city dwellers, to the problems faced by the gaucho minority in adjusting to the new, unfamiliar culture imposed on them by the Central Government soon after the fall of the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852,⁴ under the slogan "Politics of Progress." Moreover, the poem supplied a historical link to the gauchos' contribution to the national development of Argentina, for the gaucho had performed a major role in the country's independence from Spain. They had also fought in the civil wars of Argentina and had cleared the pampas of marauding Indian bands that plagued the pastoral development of the region. According to Hernández they had been by turns abused, neglected, and finally dispersed, ultimately losing their identity as a social group.

In addition to documenting the historical significance of the gaucho, the poem depicts abuse still being committed against the *paisanos* or country dwellers. Compare, for instance, *Martín Fierro's* military experiences with those of the recruits mentioned in an article appearing in *La Nación* soon after the poem was published:

Two years ago 150 National Guardsmen were recruited from the countryside of Buenos Aires and sent to occupy the southern frontier coast of this province [Buenos Aires]. They were going only for a six-month hitch and Lieutenant Colonel Somoza, who received orders from the executive branch to recruit them turned them over with the clear idea that in six months they would be discharged.

It has been two years, as we have said; nevertheless, those unfortunate citizens continue to be the target of the greatest injustice. More than National Guardsmen, they are now line soldiers, with no chance of being discharged.

Since the contract for many of them expired a year and a half ago, despairing over the injustice and the vexation to which they were subjected, they threw down their guns and deserted. Some went out to earn their living elsewhere; others perhaps to live as outlaws, and still others went to join the savages [Indians] of the Río Negro region, against whom they had been fighting. . . .

Recently, an assistant militia inspector of the government of Buenos Aires visited the squadron. The soldiers surrounded him and asked if they were going to be discharged. He answered "no," though in fact he had done everything possible for them. Then several soldiers, with tears in their eyes, expressed themselves more or less in this fashion: "Sir, please see if they will discharge us. We do not want to desert like the others, sir, because we have children and family and we do not want to commit a crime in order to gain our freedom."

The government official returned to Buenos Aires. He presented himself before the provincial government and reported what had just transpired, the misery he had witnessed, and the need for those in power to carry out their promise, giving freedom to those who were suffering unjustly in what was nothing more than a prison.

The government did not resolve the matter, because the new constitution prohibits the recruitment of other citizens to replace those recruited two years ago, also because others are unwilling to accept service contracts.

In view of the fact that nothing could be obtained from the high powers of the province, an approach was made to the minister of war. There, a promise was made to send a note to the provincial government requesting 150 men to replace the ones mentioned above.

Because of the impossible situation in which the [provincial] government pretended to find itself, the note was considered objectionable and nothing was done.

This is something that stamps the spirit with profound compassion!

This country, whose governments declaim proudly that it goes forth in progress, has, nevertheless, public officials who claim that

they cannot do anything to restore to a considerable number of citizens their freedom and their rights.⁵

And as late as 1880 *La Prensa* took note of frequent articles on the subject: "Several morning newspapers refer almost daily to abuses they say are being committed against National Guardsmen, who were recruited during the last war."⁶

El gaucho Martín Fierro became an immediate success, perhaps not so much for its literary qualities as for its portrayal of real conditions. By 1878 the poem had gone through eleven printings, with more than 50,000 copies circulating both at home and abroad. No other Argentine publication had become so popular.⁷

Despite the earthiness of the poem and its seeming lack formal style, the literati of the day did not shun the *Martín Fierro*, as some more recent writers have asserted;⁸ nor was it appreciated only by rural readers. During Hernández's lifetime, a number of the most prominent literary critics of Argentina and elsewhere published detailed critical judgments about the poem, though not all were favorable. Many of these critical judgments were included as prologues in the early editions of the poem and were addressed directly to the author. Editors were quick to give preferential space to such critiques in their newspapers, which served as the literary reviews of the day. One of the early studies came from the honored Uruguayan literary critic Juan María Torres: "*Martín Fierro* is a true creation, of which the literature of your country should be proud, and which perhaps will not be understood nor appreciated for what it is worth, because its existence is not owed to an English, French, or Yankee name."⁹

Nor did the poem lack the recognition of Argentine intellectuals. Statements by Nicolás Avellaneda, Miguel Cané, "Lautaro," José Tomás Guido, Juana M. Gorrite, Adolfo Saldías, Mariano A. Pelliza (as noted above), Miguel Navarro Viola, Pablo della Costa—and even Bartolomé Mitre—as well as others, make clear that *El gaucho Martín Fierro* was by no means a