

Philip McAllister

The Argentine McAllisters



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We always knew in some hazy way that we M^cAllisters had people all over the shop. There were the brothers who had gone to America, the great-uncle who ended up in Australia, the few lost to England after The Rising and then the mystery of the post-famine emigrés gone to far-off Argentina. Shared stories handed down, more diluted each time, less forceful, less dramatic yet more fanciful as the picture faded and no first-handers remained. And that was almost the end of it, all too familiar for many an Irish family.

In the early 2000s I was on one of my self-funded overland journeys, backpacking, connecting worlds, asking questions and looking for answers, travelling for inspiration, for learning, channeling Kerouac and the Beat Generation. The plan was to go overland from Los Angeles to Buenos Aires by any means available. This was my Pan-American trip, solo, beginning in the new world, the known world, the US of A, and heading into the depths of Latin America and in a small way in search of that branch of us who had ended up down at the end of that far off continent. With zero realistic expectations or plans for actually unearthing my kin, I was unaware that the world was already plotting behind my back regarding the matter.

Word reached me in Guatemala that contact had been made with the lost M^cAllisters of Argentina. In what was a fabulous stroke of luck my Uncle Frank in Donabate happened to see a photo in the Independent newspaper of Minister for Foreign Affairs Dick Spring on a visit to Buenos Aires. In the photo, taken at the Hurlingham Rugby Club on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, were pictured members of the Board and Captains, primary amongst them a Mr Dickie M^cAllister.



Frank got straight to writing some letters, first to the Department of Foreign Affairs for details of this meeting and then with an address in hand he set to writing to Dickie directly with some burning questions, first amongst them *'Do the M^cAllisters of Hurlingham know anything of their Irish ancestry?'*

Weeks passed but in due time a response by letter arrived, with a photo enclosed of the house where Dickie's great-grandfather had lived until leaving during hard times in 1879 to seek a new life elsewhere. That photo, a cherished family heirloom for the M^cAllisters of Hurlingham, was of the M^cAllister family homestead in Donabate, County Dublin, where my father and his brothers grew up and many before them and where I spent summer holidays with my Gran on the farm. More letters were shared and a friendship ignited between Frank & Dickie. The door had been flung open and word reached the M^cAllisters in Hurlingham that I was en route, finally with a firm end point and destination to my journey. First contact was just around the corner.

This was a time of travel before mobile phones yet with the help of internet cafés in capital cities along my route, from Panama across the Darien Gap to Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia to Argentina, I kept in contact and was in possession of an address in Hurlingham. Not being of a shy disposition, an address was more than enough and one August morning I arrived to the front door of a house in the suburbs and knocked.

Incredibly this door had been metaphorically shut for over 127 years, but when it was opened a man came out to greet me who not only looked but sounded like my own father.



The English learnt had been taught from father and mother to son and daughter and the accent was still there, undeniable and beautiful, north county Dub. The clues added up and pointed to the reality that indeed these were our stock but nothing prepared me for such a definite sense of family when I met the clan that night. They were us, it was family, sure to be sure.

I was paraded around and introduced like the prodigal son, never left long without a drink in hand and the famous Argentinian *'Parrilla'* or BBQ on the go, seemingly constantly. It was overwhelming, and overwhelmingly beautiful and pure, humans at their best, family at its best. There were Eileens, Seans and Pats but also Montserrat and Pablo and Fernando M^cAllister.

They had intermarried across cultural lines of course and were of Irish-Latin stock now too but they had always held strong to their roots or just the idea of them, until now. They played hurling and rugby, celebrated St.Patrick's Day and knew the history of the family and their journey well, although nobody had ever returned to Ireland or managed to make contact in over a century. Tattoos of the clan crest were also displayed to me with pride amongst the younger lads.

I was privileged to spend three months within the families, being treated like a king. I could feel the sense of relief and excitement amongst the younger generations, of *'It's true, we are from there, that is who we are'*. As time goes on without a connection to your former home, of course humans make their new home everything and I feel if we hadn't made this contact, within one generation their Irishness would have been in name only. We really found each other in the nick of time.



And it transpired that there was more than one branch of the family and this reunion brought them together too, across the almost uncrossable football and city divide of River Plate and Boca Juniors I might add, think United vs. City in Manchester. I met the older generation, the holders of the stories, the histories, who felt profound satisfaction that contact had been re-established and with great eagerness and urgency a family reunion was organised the following year.

I flew down with my Mum & Dad and my uncles, including Frank himself, and we united at the Hurling Club in Hurlingham for what will be a trip none of us will ever forget. Many of the older members of the family were dead within a few years of this meeting and I feel that many left this world happier for having been reunited with their old family in Ireland.

Many more visits have been made, family members from there have moved to Ireland for work, the bridge is up and it's not coming down again. It's a beautiful thing and something I feel proud and honoured to have been part of. It remains the most emotional experience of my life thus far, connecting two worlds, putting up a bridge.



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*Born and bred in Ireland, **Philip McAllister** has spent half his life working and living elsewhere, such is his curiosity and fondness for our world beyond his native land. An experienced professional in both Advertising and International Development his travels have taken him to over 100 countries across five continents. While not leading tours, Philip can be found house sitting in exotic locations or running around Madrid discovering hidden corners of his current home.*
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