

BOOK REVIEW

Irina Podgorny, *Florentino Ameghino y hermanos*

**Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2021. Pp. 346. ISBN 978-987-628-598-8.
AR\$9,150.00 (softcover)**

Irina Podgorny, *Los Argentinos vienen de los peces: Ensayo de filogenia nacional*

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AR\$3,978.00 (softcover).**

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The history of the natural sciences in South America is currently one of the most dynamic areas in the history of science, with a range of works showing the immense importance of scientific research on the continent in the early modern and modern periods, both locally and globally. Some of the most notable instances of such researches were in palaeontology, where South American fossils, such as the bones of the *Megatherium* found in Luján in 1787, were some of the earliest to be discovered and interpreted, and were worked into worldwide histories of life, while being connected with the continent's natural history and scientific institutions. And one figure looms particularly large in histories of palaeontology in South America: Florentino Ameghino, an Argentinian scholar of Genoese origins who worked within informal and formal scientific structures and used wide-ranging collecting practices and international links to build up huge collections of fossils and novel theoretical approaches, arguing that the earliest mammals and possibly humanity itself originated in southern landmasses. This idea generated considerable interest: seriously (if critically) engaged with by scholars around the world at the turn of the twentieth century; belittled in northern contexts as a faintly ridiculous nationalist excess in the twentieth century; and more recently cited by historians as a southern alternative to the 'northern-centric' visions of natural history predominant in the modern period. In the Argentinian context, Ameghino became a scientific hero after his death, especially among socialists, anticlericals and scientists (and indeed, one of the major journals of southern hemisphere palaeontology, *Ameghiniana*, retains the name).

These two books by Irina Podgorny examine similar topics – the development and implications of the sciences of antiquity in modern Argentina, through a focus on Florentino Ameghino, and his brothers Carlos and Juan. Podgorny, a wide-ranging historian of the sciences of nature and antiquity in South America, is ideally placed to write these texts, and in many respects they are a capstone to much of her recent historical work. *Florentino Ameghino y hermanos* is a more conventional study in the history of science, while *Los Argentinos vienen de los peces* is a much more lyrical piece, thinking about science, nationality and nature through reflecting on a controversy over a catfish

early in Ameghino's career. The books go beyond the strictly biographical, using Ameghino as an entry point into the role of science in Argentina, and the implications of the deep-time sciences more generally.

Both books can be read on multiple levels. In *Florentino Ameghino y hermanos*, we see the work of the Ameghino brothers develop as a story of opportunism and career building, as they drew together strands from Argentinian society and the broader international context of palaeontology to build up a very strong position (albeit an often contested one). Podgorny tracks them from their early lives in Luján, to Florentino's formative years in Paris, to their extensive work on Patagonian fossils in the 1890s and 1900s, with fieldwork led by Carlos and published research by Florentino – funded through commercial efforts, and centred around a bookshop named *El Glyptodón* – and finally explores the nationalist myth making built around Florentino from the 1900s.

However, the book does more than that. Following the schema in its introduction, the work aims to think about the nature of biography itself, and how we can approach figures in the past. The book almost serves as an anti-biography, examining how the tropes of Florentino Ameghino as a great Argentinian scientific hero were themselves constructed, and presenting numerous alternative interpretations. The Ameghinos are constantly referred to by their Italian origins, emphasized by a reproduced letter from Florentino to the Italian palaeontologist Giovanni Capellini, where he noted he was liable for military service if he entered Italy, having been born there. The final chapter discusses the role of Florentino Ameghino as the archetypal national scholar in the years after his death – which elided how important international connections were to his formation and career building. The focus as much on Florentino's brothers Carlos and Juan goes against narratives of the lone scientific hero. The furious disputes between the Ameghinos and their contemporaries, most notably Francisco Moreno at the La Plata Museum, and the publication of core texts like *Filogenia* (1884), are presented not solely in terms of scientific debate, but also in terms of the structures of the press. And the confident pronouncements of late nineteenth-century palaeontology are shown to have fed into modernizing drives for progress and improvement, but also feelings of threat and concern.

Los Argentinos vienen de los peces approaches these issues from another angle, and with quite a different stylistic verve. The story that structures the book is how 'in 1868, according to some, or in 1874, according to others' (p. 21, setting up a tone of unverifiability and contingency which continues across the book), the young Florentino Ameghino, then a schoolteacher in Mercedes, took a specimen of a catfish from Luján to Hermann Burmeister, the German-born director of the Museo Público in Buenos Aires, which he proudly named as a new species, *Typupiscis lujanensis*. This was flatly dismissed by Burmeister, who insisted it was instead a well-known and uninteresting species named *Hypostomus plecostomus*, drawing a clear boundary between 'amateur' and 'professional'. Podgorny follows how this initial speculation and rejection echoed down Ameghino's career – through his attempts to defend himself in the scholarly and popular press, his arguments for southern origins and the great antiquity of the Patagonian strata, the huge number of species of fossil animals he went on to name, and his eventually successful attempts to gain an established career in major scientific institutions, in the end taking Burmeister's old position as director of the Buenos Aires museum (by then renamed the Museo Nacional).

The story that emerges is much larger than the catfish, and becomes an extended meditation on the relations between autodidact and established scholars, how scientific personae and finds connect to national and local contexts, and the role of ascriptions of error, misidentification, speculation, authority and recognition in science – always extremely tense issues in natural history. These meditations are interwoven with stories and analyses of Luján itself – a place simultaneously important as a major site of Catholic

pilgrimage, the location where the bones of the first recognized *Megatherium* were excavated in the 1780s, and the adopted home town of the Ameghinos – illustrating the multiplicity and connectedness of these strands. The book is also stylistically novel, and provides an interesting example of a historical work by a leading scholar that treads a path beyond standard monograph writing. It is partly written in a fluid and extemporizing manner, very much in the author's own voice, but with many sections constructed, collage-like, from letters, newspaper articles and scholarly texts (including several sections on the history of naming and taxonomic issues around catfish). This allows the reader to follow the often complex and technical scientific debates over taxonomy and restoration, and provides a window onto historical documents, while also maintaining a highly engaging personal take and discussion both on the case and on its wider implications.

The specimen of Florentino's fish has now been lost, and only remains in texts describing the dispute and in a series of photographs (the latter of which, Podgorny states, made her realize the importance of the case study when she was working on a different project on early scientific photography in Argentina). This all goes to illustrate the varied and ephemeral nature of the debates being followed, the role of different media in approaching the past, and the serendipitous development of historical research. Indeed, comparing and reading these two books together – one book going beyond a biography of a major scientific figure to make broader points about the nature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century science, and a more reflective and varied account teasing out some core analytical strands – show some of the diverse ways in which historical scholarship can be conducted. Podgorny's books have already been very well received in Argentina, and it is hoped that these works will have an English translation soon. And fittingly enough, a research team have recently named a fossil catfish in recognition as *Sturisomatichthys podgorny*.