



A NATURALIST DEVOTED TO THE COMMON GOOD

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Francisco Pascasio Moreno was born in 1852, on the thirty-first day of the Month of the Homeland, or the Greatest Month, as May was referred to during the time immediately following the fight for Argentine independence. As Leopoldo Lugones would say, Moreno was born with “eyes more capable of envisioning the Homeland,” of recognizing what it ought to be, and he consequently dedicated himself to science, public education, and nature conservation. He believed that “the Republic must not remain stationary, nor content itself with its fame for wealth—a fame more or less well deserved.” It needed to go further, and it was toward these horizons that he aimed his efforts.

The story of a nation’s historical evolution will often feature, almost exclusively, military men and politicians as its protagonists, and it will tend to ignore or minimize the contributions of persons of culture or of science, whose work is often done quietly, though no less heroically. As Héctor Fasano put it, Moreno was a hero in a sense of the word that has almost been forgotten. In the word *hero* one hears an echo of the name Eros, the Greek god of love, and fittingly we are reminded that a hero is one who labors for the love of a noble cause, having been moved by a desire to support the common good.

Beginning in childhood, Moreno felt clearly called to the natural sciences. As he put it,

childish curiosity has not disappeared in the man, but rather lies sleeping, and it is awakened when he comes face to face with something unknown or unexpected; . . . thus, a fragment of bone or a shapeless stone . . . reveals to him things that he never dreamed of, things that feed his human imagination, the mother of all knowledge.

From an early age, Moreno collected natural objects during his explorations of both banks of the Río de la Plata, of the still rural landscapes of Palermo (in the Argentine capital), and along the coast near the Uruguay River and these allowed him to put together his own museum, in 1867. That same year, he met Karl Hermann Burmeister, whom Domingo Faustino Sarmiento had named to direct the public museum that became the “Bernardino Rivadavia” Argentine Museum of Natural Sciences. This wise Prussian encouraged the young man and guided him in his vocation. Upon identifying a fossilized armadillo jawbone which the young Moreno had found, the master classified it, giving it the name *Dasyopus moreni*, “because it is new to science and this lad deserves that it be named after him.”

The youngster had enjoyed an additional privilege: His honorary tutor had been that teacher of teachers, Sarmiento himself. In his old age, Moreno recalled that the illustrious son of San Juan would often gather a group of children around him, to instruct them in various subjects. At the end, he would hand out sweets and send the group home saying, “And now, boys, let’s all shout out: ‘Long live Argentina!’” It is easy to imagine the impact of those gatherings, to which were added the teachings of another great figure, Juan María Gutiérrez, one of the greatest promoters of Argentine culture, and head of the University of Buenos Aires. While visiting the family household, Gutiérrez encouraged young Moreno to study diverse aspects of the country. Judging by Moreno’s accomplishments, those teachings bore fruit.

What were Moreno’s accomplishments? To begin with, he donated the collections of his personal museum to found the Museum of Natural Science of La Plata, the largest in South America, in a city founded only two years before as the capital of Buenos Aires Province. The museum had existed in blueprints only! Although construction on the museum began in 1884, it was beset by economic difficulties that would have caused many a man to abandon the project, and meanwhile the new city grew around it. Suffice it to mention that shortly after starting work on the foundations, the project ground to a halt due to lack of public funds. Moreno then decided to sell some of his private landholdings to keep the project moving ahead. Shortly before construction was completed, the newspaper *La Nación* said of the museum: “This scientific institution is the sole work of Moreno,” to which Moreno responded by requesting publication of a letter (dated April 22, 1887) in which he recognized the provincial governor, Carlos D’Amico, for having offered assistance and financial support to the project. With disarming humility, he merely acknowledged that, “if at times I have made use of my own [funds], it has only been to move the project forward.” The museum opened on November 19, 1888, and it should be noted that the buildings did not follow the original plans signed by Henrik G. A. Aberg and Carl L. W. Heynemann. These plans envisioned a three-building complex, of which only one had been finished. Moreno had wanted to represent, in the sequence of rooms and exhibits, Darwin’s theory of evolution. Based on this plan, he had asserted with pride:

The Museum of La Plata will be the first to be designed in accordance with evolutionary theories of biology, having anticipated in this . . . the wishes expressed by the most notable scientists of the Old World, who will be surprised to learn that in this city so recently founded . . . an institution has been established, within the space of a year, responding to their wishes and constituting the most up-to-date expression of science.

Moreno served as the museum’s first director, from 1884 until 1906. He had to handle multiple tasks, from filling in for the curator to “mopping the floors on more than one occasion, all the while looking for the means to carry on his project, which was always on the verge of failing.” That is why one of our greatest naturalists and encyclopedists, the illustrious Eduardo L. Holmberg, said of Moreno that he “built a castle from which no one can dislodge him, though some towers and battlements may be knocked down if it is attacked.” Such an attack could be undertaken only by anachronistic critics who judge the past by today’s standards, with “next Monday’s paper” close at hand, fighting for causes which they rarely promote through their own example.

At around that same time, from 1896 to 1903, Moreno filled an honorary position on the commission to help establish Argentina’s international boundaries. In this role, Moreno would undertake a series of expeditions, including:

- From April 1873 (at the age of 19) until March of 1880, he travels continuously in Patagonia, with only two interruptions: one, very brief, in mid-1876 (a period which he devotes to studies in Santiago del Estero and Catamarca); and another between March of 1877 and October of 1879.
- He travels to Paris, where he receives various distinctions: The Geographic Society admits him as a member and awards him the Gold Medal; the Society for Commercial Geography gives him the Crevaux Medal; the Academy of France awards him the Palms.
- In 1882, he undertakes a series of trips to the region of Cuyo.
- Between 1892 and 1893 (from December to April), he crosses the Atacama Plateau in its entirety.
- Between 1893 and 1895, he explores the Plateau, from the border with Bolivia to the Department of San Rafael, in Mendoza Province.

- In 1896 (from January to June) he carries out another expedition, along with more than 20 professional and technical specialists from the Museum of Natural Science of La Plata; the goal is to survey an area of 65,000 square miles between San Rafael (Mendoza) and Lake Buenos Aires (Santa Cruz), with the purpose of developing a map with a scale of 1:400,000. The party traverses 4,500 miles on horseback and calculates 3 longitudes, 328 latitudes, and 201 azimuths; sets up 360 stations with theodolite and 180 with prismatic compass; carries out 271 trigonometric altitude readings, takes 960 photographic images, and gathers 6,250 rock and fossil specimens. The team draws the first map of Lake Nahuel Huapi and the 16 de Octubre Valley. (Based on this expedition, Moreno would later propose a railway line joining the Atlantic with the Andes.) At the end of the expedition, Moreno says with pride that it was “the most ambitious and fully realized mission ever undertaken.” (Its accomplishments remain unequaled and would be difficult to replicate.)

Bartolomé Mitre said of Francisco Moreno: “Exploring the unknown, he widened the field of science.” The most prestigious institutions of the era agreed and welcomed him as a member: the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences of Philadelphia (1898), the Royal Geographical Society of London (1898), the Geographical Society of Belgium (1902), the Italian Geographical Society (1904), and the American Geographical Society, which awarded him its Columbus Gold Medal (1909). In 1899, the Royal Geographical Society invited him to give a conference at its headquarters, which he did with the help of 65 photographic projections and an English text read aloud by the Secretary of the Society, who happened to be Charles Darwin’s son.

In 1902, King Edward VII of England signed the arbitration pact between Argentina and Chile settling the boundary between the two countries. In July of 1903, it was resolved by law to “grant to Francisco P. Moreno, . . . as extraordinary recompense for his services, which have been carried out pro bono for twenty-two years, title to 25 square leagues of public land in the territory of Neuquén.” In November of that year, Moreno donated to the national government three square leagues (approximately 17,000 acres) to the west of Lake Nahuel Huapi, to establish the country’s first National Park. That same year, he spearheaded an expedition to Antarctica, to rescue Dr. Otto Nordenskjöld and the crew of the *Antarctic*. This earned him, in 1916, the gratitude and recognition of the governments of Sweden and Norway, which honored him, respectively, with the Polar Star and the Cross of Olaf.

In 1905, Moreno sold the remainder of his lands to finance works of social assistance: a soup kitchen and the backing for a movement to establish schools aimed at society’s most vulnerable children, so that they might eat and learn. Moreno explained:

If the State compels children to attend school, children have the right to be fed by the State if their parents are not able to feed them. Feeding all hungry children is, without a doubt, a duty of the State, since children who have not yet reached school age need to be fed in order to reach it. Children are our great national capital; the State must protect them, aid them, and put them on the right path. . . . I know from more than ten years of personal observation how thousands of children of the proletariat in our own capital city suffer for lack of food, in most cases through causes not attributable to their parents.

In keeping with these ideas, he also drafted a project (approved in 1914) to create the first night schools for adults. As part of the same project, he proposed

modifying the curriculum of schools to incorporate, among other things, music instruction, for a more well-rounded education of the students.

For a period of three years (1910–1913), Moreno served as national representative. His neighbors in Buenos Aires had nominated him: “We consider that you, our longtime neighbor and one who knows the area so well, are the ideal candidate to exercise the position of Representative.” Moreno accepted and, once elected, worked on determining the zoning of Buenos Aires, establishing norms for the placement of factories, residential districts, and large green parks in the city. He also supported education because, as he said, “It is known that, where work and school reign, the prisons are closed.” In 1912, in the midst of all this work, he created and presided over the Association of Argentinian Boy Scouts, to encourage in young people a love of nature through exploration.

Moreno drafted projects to expand the railway lines in the national territories (1910), to acquire the collections of the late Florentino Ameghino from his heirs (1912), to create experimental agricultural stations and tree nurseries under the national Ministry of Agriculture (1912), and to expand the protected areas (1912). As part of this last project he called specifically for raising the grade around Lake Nahuel Huapi and Lake Traful, as well as for the expropriation of:

- 100,000 acres in the territory of Misiones, between the Paraná and Iguazú Rivers;
- 60 acres in each of the old Jesuit missions;
- up to 50,000 acres characteristic of different national landscapes (in parts of Jujuy, Tucumán, Córdoba, Mendoza, Corrientes, and La Pampa); and
- up to 500 acres around each site with ruins of ancient cultures.

Included in the project was a proposal to create a national park in San Lorenzo, to celebrate in this way, “in memory of the humble soldiers’ sacrifice,” the hundred-year anniversary of that legendary, though brief, battle. Moreno had

a strategic vision for protecting the country’s natural and cultural patrimony, and he backed it up with every effort he could muster. In line with these projects, he sparked and was then part of the commission to create the Monument to the Army of the Andes atop the Cerro de la Gloria, generating several of its artistic details. He also directed the project for the Monument to Fray Luis Beltrán, a monk who had accompanied the liberation army of José de San Martín and fought alongside him, with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Héctor L. Fasano, one of Moreno’s best biographers, has reflected:

While his works and contributions to the country were certainly extraordinary, it is his exemplary conduct that makes him an icon, a model: Honesty, the absence of self-interest, love, and generosity characterize all the actions of his life.

Another emerging intellectual, Pedro Luis Barcia, concurred, enumerating Moreno’s attributes:

Values such as integrity, patriotic feeling, the idea of national identity, the mastery of several fields (not just geography), the ascetic sense of personal sacrifice for his country, the capacity to give of himself, which makes him one of those “invisible Argentines” of whom Eduardo Mallea spoke, and so many more attributes of his moral physiognomy.

Theodore Roosevelt himself once said to Moreno, “You have accomplished work that only a very few men in each generation are capable of carrying out.”

Francisco Pascasio Moreno dedicated his life to the service of his country. Argentines are forever indebted to him. His civic example is a model for all those who desire a future that offers equal educational and cultural opportunities for all citizens, which is the foundation of justice. His concern for conserving the natural and cultural patrimony, and his resolve to do so, should be emulated by



all municipal, provincial, and national functionaries. Unlike many public men, he avoided those social events which people attend in order to just “be seen,” but he accepted every invitation to visit a poor school, because he knew that every teacher needed his encouragement in the effort to help disadvantaged children. As his secretary, Clemente Onelli, put it, Moreno always believed himself to be “a protector of abandoned children.” Only two days before his death, in fact, he had accepted an invitation from the principal of the school in Barracas to help celebrate the end of the school year.

On November 22, 1919, Moreno died in Buenos Aires, at the age of 67, suffering from angina pectoris after a period of physical decline. The news spread rapidly among the scientific and cultural communities of the time. On that day there happened to be an annular solar eclipse. But the memory of Francisco Moreno continues to shine, illuminating, inspiring. In his memory both Geography Day (November 22) and Tour-Guide Day (May 31) are celebrated. One of the most spectacular national parks in Argentina and one of the most emblematic glaciers of another park (Los Glaciares) bear his name.

Because of the significant debt Moreno had accrued in order to finance his philanthropic activities, the banks (including the National Bank of Argentina) ordered his belongings to be auctioned off after his death. His last wish was to be cremated and to have his ashes scattered either at the foot of the *aguaribay* tree that still stands in the Bernasconi Institute or in the region of Lake Nahuel Huapi. In 1944 that wish was carried out, and today his remains are in Centinela Island, on Lake Nahuel Huapi.

Broadly speaking, Francisco Moreno was a “normal” person, with hopes and dreams, sorrows and joys, virtues and defects, frustrations and accomplishments.

What makes him extraordinary is his reputation for acting in accord with his ideals, forging ahead with perseverance, honesty, and courage. His life story teaches a powerful lesson: Ambitious undertakings are achieved neither easily nor rapidly, and it is possible, as happened in Moreno’s case, that the sought-after result may never come about during the lifetime of the people who are striving for it. I suspect that Moreno was aware of the unlikelihood of his seeing Argentina’s first national park formally established (despite his gift of land to the state for that purpose), but I am convinced that, even knowing that he might never see it, he would have carried on just the same.

Those who have followed his example of donating private land for park creation or expansion in Argentina (Carlos Blaquier with Calilegua, Tröels Pedersen with Mburucuyá, and the Tompkins family with Monte León and Perito Moreno) have gone through similar experiences. On more than one occasion they must have been put in the position of having to impress upon various public officials in various government agencies to accept the donation of lands to expand the area of our national park system, as if the officials would be doing them a favor by accepting. In a way, this makes clear that people who undertake these kind of public-spirited actions must be more thick-skinned than most, because the reception one would expect to such generous gestures is the opposite of the indifference, lack of interest, or ingratitude with which they are often met.

One additional modest comment: There is no record of Moreno—or of any other great benefactor of Argentina’s national parks—ever having boasted about his or her acts of generosity. We can hope that their example will inspire others here and around the world. Our most noble mission demands clarity, generosity, honesty, mettle, and steadfastness. Let us bet, then, on our success.

