



## In Open Fields

**L**ike everyone else, I live in a particular time and place that I consider my reality. Occasionally, inspired by a work of art or literature, I am transported to some other dimension and can vicariously experience an alternative reality, a different way of life.

I recently had the pleasure of taking that kind of trip when I read *In Open Fields*, the book by Heather Campbell (available on Amazon). Many will remember Heather from the pre-school she opened at her house in Carrasco in the late 1960s, where she helped to prepare three- and four-year-old children for admission to the British Schools. Later in life, Heather harnessed her boundless creative talents and wrote this book. It is a blend of fact and fiction, loosely based on the story of her forebears who emigrated from Ireland in 1874 and settled on a property near Mercedes, in western Uruguay. And what a story that was!

The narrator, Evie, and her husband sail across the ocean with their seven-month-old baby boy, a brother, a cousin, their Irish terriers, and a nanny to care for the wee one. It is a rough trip, but it is just the beginning of the challenges they are about to face. There are just a couple of crude shacks for them to live in at first, and Evie is dismayed at the primitive conditions they will be forced to endure until they can make improvements. She says, “When I look back over thirty years, I marvel at our tenacity and courage. We were young and so naïve, so full of hope and optimism.”

They get to work and are soon raising sheep and selling the wool. Then they start breeding cattle and selling cows to local buyers. They fence their land and plant peach and pear orchards and a vegetable garden. They have horses, of course, and Evie loves to ride across the open fields with her husband in the evenings, surveying their domain and keeping track of their *estancia* as it grows.

They meet other British settlers and build a tennis court on their farm that becomes the centre of social activities that add pleasure to their otherwise hardworking lives. Evie gives birth to more children, who are educated by their

nanny until the boys are old enough to go back to Ireland to university. There are heartbreaks of many different kinds. Destructive storms cause dreadful damage. Locust swarms devastate crops. Parrots destroy fruit orchards. A flu epidemic sweeps the country and sickens the entire family. Evie’s husband is bitten by a poisonous snake and the English doctor, who lives in the nearby village, says that only a miracle can save him. So they call a local *curandera* and she performs one. In a scandalous love scene set in a hay barn, a careless move starts a fire and the barn and its precious contents are lost to the flames. The author writes movingly about Evie’s emotional states—her loneliness, her struggle to find her place in her new home, her sense of despair when faced with the hardships and tragedies of life as a pioneer woman. Her spirits are lifted when she finds an *homero* bird making its nest out of mud on a fence post near the house.

There are good times too. They develop a wide circle of friends and throw parties and spend lovely afternoons picnicking and fishing at a nearby river. Piano players in the family and the community provide music and the house is filled with song. They take a trip to Montevideo in 1884 and the author paints vivid pictures of the city as it was in those days.

Behind the descriptions of life on the farm and the political turmoil that occasionally disrupts the young country, Evie’s narrative reveals the profound pleasure she derives from the land: “The fertile earth was yielding, the trees were growing and sprouting masses of leaves, the orchard was laden with good summer fruit crops and when one walked down the avenue there was a scent of clover in the warm sunshine.” Somehow, despite all manner of adversity, these dauntless settlers soldier on. Keeping their British customs and traditions alive, they gradually build a successful working farm that is still owned and operated by their family today.