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The battle at Churubusco, by Carl Nebel, 1851
(Descendants of Mexican War Veterans)

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Beneath an Emerald Green Flag The Story of Irish Soldiers in Mexico

By Michael G. Connaughton



Dennis Conahan, John Daly, John Sheehan, Thomas Cassidy, Patrick Casey. These names with a familiar Hibernian ring to them lay etched upon a rectangular stone tablet hung unassumingly on a building at the far end of the square. This simple memorial commemorated soldiers who had fought and died for a country attacked and invaded by her neighbour.

The memorial that I came across that bright early summer morning was not in West Cork or South Armagh nor was it on the site of an old battleground on the Western Front. It was in Plaza San Jacinto in San Angel, a suburb of Mexico City. Dedicated to the *San Patricios* or San Patrick's Battalion, it honoured a group of mainly Irish-born American soldiers who changed sides and fought for Mexico in the US-Mexican War (1846-1847).

Their reasons for defection vary according to whom one consults. Those sympathetic to the *San Patricios* state that they drew parallels between US invasion of Mexico and the plight brought upon Ireland by her colonial master. They also point out that it was anti-Catholic bigotry within the WASP-dominated US officer corps that compelled them to fight alongside their fellow Catholics in Mexico. Those unsympathetic state that their motivations were purely financial claiming that the Mexicans merely offered them land and money. Other prejudiced opinions that would not look out of place amongst the pages of an old *Punch* magazine assert that alcohol was their primary incentive.

Their defection may still be a matter for conjecture, however what is for certain is that Galway-born John Riley, a US artillery lieutenant, led this band of Irish soldiers together with a smattering of German, Scottish and American Catholics across lines on the outbreak of hostilities in 1846. Their expert knowledge of artillery and infantry warfare proved invaluable to the Mexican army lead by General Santa Anna. They strode into numerous battles under an emerald green flag with *Erin Go Bragh* emblazoned across it and fought courageously in most of the war's major engagements. Ultimately, however, their endeavours came to an end when, after ferocious close-quarter fighting, they were routed at the decisive Battle of Churubusco on 20 August 1847.

A horrendous fate awaited those who survived the battle and surrendered to US American forces. As deserters they were found guilty of treachery by a military court-martial. Forty-eight of the *San Patricios* were sentenced to death by hanging. The rest were branded with the letter 'D' for deserter and sentenced to severe floggings and long terms of imprisonment.

At daybreak on 13 September 1847 the condemned men were led to the gallows on a ridge overlooking the final battle of the war at Chapultepec Castle just outside Mexico City. Colonel William Harney, the US executioner, insisted that their hanging would only take place once he sighted the US American flag flying over the castle. The men waited agonisingly for hours in the baking heat with nooses around the necks providing a constant reminder, if they needed one, of their impending death. Francis O'Connor, one of the condemned men, had only recently had both legs amputated due to injuries sustained in battle. Finally at 9:30am their former comrades flew the Stars and Stripes signalling the final defeat of Mexican forces. Colonel Harney gave the order and the *San Patricios* entered Mexican folklore.

Almost 160 years after the event the story of the *San Patricios* still resonates in Mexican society. Each year in Plaza San Jacinto a commemoration in their honour is faithfully attended by dignitaries from the Mexican government and military, Irish embassy staff as well as members of the public. An honour guard of elite Mexican soldiers salutes them and both the Irish and Mexican national anthems are played. The

current Mexican president Vicente Fox Quesada, himself of Irish descent, proclaimed in 2003 that “the affinities between Ireland and Mexico go back to the first years of our nation, when our country fought to preserve its national sovereignty...Then, a brave group of Irish soldiers... in a heroic gesture, decided to fight against the foreign ground invasion”.

As I embarked on my trip home to England the taxi driver who brought me to Mexico City airport acknowledged the *San Patricios* when I happened to mention that I was Irish. “Ah your soldiers” he exclaimed in broken English as he veered erratically in and out of traffic on the busy airport road, they were very brave, they fought for my country you know?”. His sentiments are echoed by many people throughout Latin America. From the River Plate in Argentina to the Rio Grande on the Mexican-US border many Irishmen fought and gave their lives in the epic wars and independence struggles of the nineteenth century for nations far removed from their own. It is certain that they went on to provide inspiration to those who would finally achieve independence the following century in their homeland.

Michael G. Connaughton

Dedicated to Brian McGinn, the man who fostered my interest in Irish-Latin American history, who sadly passed away on 20 July 2005.

Contrasting Histories

The San Patricios is a controversial story. The late military historian Brian McGinn rightly pointed to the fact that "from the viewpoint of the U.S. military, the less said about such subjects, the better. Desertions reflect poorly on political leadership and military command; defections even more so. [...] In general, Irish-Americans have also been uncomfortable with the story of the San Patricios. They could argue, and convincingly, that the overwhelming majority of the 4,811 Irish-born soldiers who served in the U.S. army during the Mexican-American War did not desert. Even if all the San Patricios soldiers were Irish--and they were not--Irish-born deserters would represent less than four per cent of Irish soldiers" (The San Patricios: An Historical Perspective in "irishdiaspora.net").

In the website of the Descendants of Mexican War Veterans, the San Patricios battalion is depicted as "a group of mostly Irish deserters from the U.S. Army who joined the Mexican Army and fought against their former comrades during several battles of the U.S.-Mexican War. These turncoats were among the defenders of the convent of Churubusco [...]. In Mexico, the San Patricios are venerated as martyrs and heroes. Americans, on the other hand, generally see them as traitors who got what they deserved. To some, it seems unfair that the San Patricios have received so much attention while the thousands of Irish immigrants who served honorably in the U.S. Army have largely been ignored" (The U.S.-Mexican War, Frequently Asked Questions About the U.S.-Mexican War).

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Edmundo Murray

The St. Patricio Battalion The Irish Soldiers of Mexico

By Jaime Fogarty



The Battle of Churubusco
(Carlos Nebel, 1851)

On 12 September 1997, the Mexican government paid special tribute to the soldiers of the San Patricio Battalion who were tortured and hanged at the San Jacinto Plaza, San Ángel, in 1847. Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo presided at the ceremonies marking the sesquicentennial of that tragic event and declared: "One hundred and fifty years ago, here in San Ángel, ... members of the St. Patricks Battalion were executed for following their consciences. They were martyred for adhering to the highest ideals, and today we honor their memory. In the name of the people of Mexico, I salute today the people of Ireland and express my eternal gratitude." [1] The president concluded, saying: "While we honor the memory of the Irish who gave their lives for Mexico and for human dignity, we also honor our own commitment to cherish their ideals, and to always defend the values for which they occupy a place of honor in our history." [2] Irish Ambassador to Mexico Sean O'Huighinn emphasized the bonds of friendship that the "San Patricios" have forged between the two countries, and which continue to grow and prosper. He noted that Ireland and Mexico shared a common history of struggle to preserve their cultural identities and political liberties, often threatened by powerful and aggressive neighbors. He also paid tribute to the humanitarian insights of the San Patricios who, "despite the confusion and animosities of war, were able to discern the admirable qualities of the Mexican people, unclouded by preconceived notions of racial prejudice." In this context, he quoted the leader of the San Patricios, John O'Reilly (also written Riley) who wrote: "Do not be deceived by the prejudice of a nation at war with Mexico, because you will not find in all the world a people more friendly and hospitable than the Mexicans." [3]

Historical Review

Following the US declaration of war against Mexico in 1846, an Irish-born deserter from the US army, John O'Reilly, organized a company of soldiers at Matamoros to fight on the side of Mexico against the invading US forces. These foreign volunteers became known as "Las Compañías de San Patricio," and were renowned for their skill as artillerymen as well as their bravery in battle for the duration of the war (1846-1848). Not all the San Patricios were deserters from the US army. Their number also included Irish and other Europeans already settled in Mexico, and some historians use Mexican army records as a basis to state that the majority were not deserters. The San Patricios did, however, have a distinctly Irish identity since their name-sake, St. Patrick, is the patron saint of the Irish people. The group's banner displayed an Irish harp surrounded by the Mexican coat-of-arms with a scroll reading, Freedom for the Mexican Republic and underneath the harp was the motto in Gaelic "Erin go Brágh" (Ireland for Ever). On the other side of the banner Saint Patrick was depicted holding a pastoral staff resting on a serpent. A US soldier described it as "a beautiful green silk banner [that] waved over their heads; on it glittered a silver

cross and a golden harp, embroidered by the hands of the fair nuns of San Luis Potosí." [4] Historian Robert Miller also cites another reference to the San Patricio banner by an American observer: "Among the mighty host we passed was O'Reilly and his company of deserters bearing aloft in high disgrace the holy banner of St. Patrick." [5]

From Matamoros to Churubusco

The San Patricios took part in the fighting at Matamoros and Monterrey where they earned a reputation for their expertise in handling heavy weaponry. Following the US victory at Monterrey, the Mexican army retreated to San Luis Potosí, where General Antonio López de Santa Anna reorganized the Mexican forces in late 1846. Liberating Army of the North, as well as a special artillery unit manned by the San Patricios. This unit was commanded by Colonel Francisco Rosendo Moreno and played an important role in the Mexican victory at the Battle of Angostura in February 1847. According to Miller, "Two six-powder cannon of the US Fourth Artillery were captured by the enemy due to intense fire from the San Patricio cannoners, aided by support troops." [6] General Francisco Mejía cited the San Patricios in his report as "worthy of the most consummate praise because the men fought with daring bravery." [7] As a result of their heroism in battle, O'Reilly, among others, was promoted to the rank of captain and was given the Angostura Cross of Honor. Despite the apparent victory of the Mexican forces at Angostura, Santa Anna decided to abandon the field of battle and retreated to San Luis Potosí. According to Miller, about a third of the San Patricios were killed or wounded at Angostura. [8] Only two weeks after the battle of Angostura, the main focus of the war shifted to the Mexican Gulf Coast with the arrival of General Winfield Scott at Veracruz with 9,000 troops. The San Patricios were transferred from San Luis Potosí to Jalapa and took part in the Battle of Cerro Gordo which ended in defeat for the Mexican forces.



In June 1847, Santa Anna created a foreign legion as part of the Mexican army, and the San Patricios were transferred from the artillery branch to the infantry and merged into the Foreign Legion. They then became known as the First and Second Militia Infantry Companies of San Patricio. Colonel Francisco R. Moreno was made commander, with Captain John O'Reilly in charge of the First Company and Captain Santiago O'Leary of the Second. The companies were also referred to as "The Foreign Legion of San Patricio".

The Battle of Churubusco

Dr. Michael Hogan, the Irish-American author of *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, provides a detailed, well-documented account of the heroic defence of the "convento" (monastery) at Churubusco when it was attacked by the invading US forces on 20 August 1847. The monas-

tery, surrounded by huge, thick stone walls, provided a natural fortress for the defending Mexican forces. The San Patricio Companies together with the Los Bravos Battalion occupied the parapets of the building which was to become the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the war. Though hopelessly outnumbered, the defenders repelled the attacking US forces with heavy losses until their ammunition ran out, and a Mexican officer, realizing the hopelessness of the situation, raised the white flag of surrender. According to Hogan, Captain Patrick Dalton of the San Patricios tore the white flag down, and General Pedro Anaya ordered his men to fight on with their bare hands if necessary. Mexican historian, Heriberto Frías described the heroic last stand of the San Patricios: "Only the soldiers of St. Patrick, brave Irishmen who spontaneously defended our standard, passing to our ranks out of sympathy for our ideals and religion, were able to use the munitions; and they continued their spirited volleys, until the enemys rain of fire brought death to those valiant marksmen." [9] History records that following the surrender, when US General Twiggs asked General Anaya where his ammunition was stored, he replied bitterly: "If I had ammunition, you would not be here." [10] Undoubtedly, the tenacity and skill of the San Patricio companies at Churubusco earned them the everlasting esteem and affection of the Mexican people; and their

willingness to fight to the death for their commitment to Mexico forged an indelible seal of honor on that commitment. Mexicans are also justly proud of the heroic stand of their national guardsmen, "green civilian recruits, fighting to the death against Scotts well-equipped veterans." [11]

According to General Anaya's written report, 35 San Patricios were killed in action, O'Leary and O'Reilly were wounded and Francis O'Connor lost both legs as a result of his heroic stand against the invaders. Eighty-five of the San Patricios were taken prisoner, while the other survivors (about 85) managed to escape, and apparently were later able to rejoin the retreating Mexican forces. Seventy-two were charged with desertion from the US army, and General Scott ordered that two courts-martial be convened to try them.

Lashing, Branding and Hanging

A court-martial at San Ángel on 8 September 1847, upheld the death sentence for 20 of the 29 San Patricios tried there, while a similar court at Tacubaya ordered the death penalty for 30 more. The others, including O'Reilly, escaped the death penalty since they had deserted before war was declared. They, however, were condemned to "receive 50 lashes on their bare backs, to be branded with the letter "D" for deserter, and to wear iron yokes around their necks for the duration of the war." [12] Two Mexican muleteers were forced to administer the lashes, according to Hogan.

On 10 September 1847, 16 of the condemned San Patricios were hanged at the San Jacinto Plaza, San Ángel, and 14 others received 59 lashes on their bare backs until, according to an American eyewitness, "Their backs had the appearance of a pounded piece of raw beef, the blood oozing from every stripe." [13] After the flogging, the prisoners were branded with the letter "D" with red-hot branding irons. Some were branded on the hip, while others were branded on the cheek, and O'Reilly was branded on both cheeks for good measure. San Jacinto Plaza thus became the scene of bloody and mangled bodies, mingled with the repulsive odor of the burning flesh of the tortured San Patricios. According to Hogan, five Mexican priests who sought to give spiritual assistance to the victims were forced to witness the whippings and brandings and ordered to withdraw to the gallows to witness the final act of this "gruesome and carefully orchestrated spectacle."

Eight mule-drawn wagons were brought up, and two prisoners were placed on each wagon. Sixteen nooses hanging from the crossbeam were placed around their necks, and the priests were brought forward to administer the last rites of the Catholic Church. Then, "the whips cracked, and the wagons drove off leaving the 16 victims dangling from their nooses." [14] Some, like Captain Patrick Dalton, had asked to be buried in consecrated ground, and were interred in nearby Tla-copac. The others were buried beneath the gallows, and C. O'Reilly and his tortured companions were forced to dig their fallen comrades' graves. On September 2, four more convicted San Patricios were hanged at the nearby village of Mixcoac. The final scene of this macabre and somewhat sadistic "hanging spree" took place near Tacubaya on September 13, when the remaining 30 convicted San Patricios were hanged. Francis O'Connor, who had lost his legs at Churubusco and was dying from his wounds, was nonetheless dragged from the hospital tent and propped up on a wagon with a noose around his neck. When the US American flag was raised over Chapultepec Castle, the San Patricios were "launched into eternity as the wagons pulled away, and the nooses tightened on their necks." [15]

Mexicans were shocked and outraged by this cruel and barbaric treatment of the San Patricios. The *Diario del Gobierno* expressed its indignation, writing: "This day in cold blood, these [US American] Caribs from an impulse of superstition, and after the manner of savages as practiced in the days of Homer, have hanged these men as a holocaust." [16]

In Memoriam

1997 marked the sesquicentennial of a bitter and traumatic chapter in the history of the Irish and Mexican peoples. Mexico remembered the tragic loss of almost half its territory, "ceded" to the United States; and Ireland remembered the tragic loss of almost half its total population due to starvation and emigration

brought about by the Great Famine of 1847. It has been wisely said that those who ignore the lessons of history are destined to repeat it, and that we do not need to savor the bitterness of the past in order to understand its lesson for the present and the future. Each year, on September 12, Mexico pays tribute to the San Patricios at San Jacinto Plaza. The commemorative plaque on the wall facing the plaza was designed by Lorenzo Rafael, son of Patricio Cox, who wrote the first book, a novel in Spanish, about the San Patricios. The escutcheon at the top of the plaque depicts a Celtic cross protected by the outstretched wings of the Aztec eagle. The inscription on the plaque reads: "In memory of the Irish soldiers of the heroic San Patricio Battalion, martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Mexico during the unjust US invasion of 1847". At the bottom of the plaque another inscription reads: "With the gratitude of Mexico, 112 years after their holocaust". The plaque was placed in 1959 and continues to remind visitors to the peaceful, tree-shaded plaza, of the tragic events that took place there on 10 September 1847.

Jaime Fogarty *

* Séamus O'Fógartaigh, Irish freelance writer living in Mexico, author of *Liberation and Development, A Latin American Perspective* (Minerva Press, 1998). This article was previously published by "Voices of Mexico" magazine, April-June, 2000. The magazine is sponsored by the National University of Mexico (UNAM).

Photos: Editorial Clío Photo Archive. Carlos Nebel's litograph reprinted by permission of the National Institute of Anthropology and History / Conaculta-INAH-MEX. Sam Chamberlain's water colour reprinted by permission of The San Jacinto Museum of History, Houston.

Notes

[1] *The News* (Mexico City), 13 September 1997.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Novedades* (Mexico City), 13 September 1997, Michael Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico* (Guadalajara: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997), p. 244.

[4] Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword, The Saint Patrick's Battalion in the US-Mexican War* (Norman, Oklahoma; University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 38.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[9] Heriberto Frías, *La guerra contra los gringos* (Mexico City: Ediciones Leega/Jucar, 1984).

[10] Hogan, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 178.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 184-187.

[16] Miller, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

Irish-Mexican Brothers: Edmundo and Juan O'Gorman

By Edmundo Murray

Historian Edmundo O'Gorman (1906-1995) and architect Juan O'Gorman (1905-1982) were sons of the painter and mining engineer Cecil Crawford O'Gorman (1874-1943), who arrived in Mexico from Ireland in 1895, and Encarnación O'Gorman. Cecil was the grandson of Charles O'Gorman, who in the 1820s was the first British consul to Mexico city. Charles O'Gorman and his Mexican wife returned to the British Isles with their son John, who was to attend Eton and to go back to Mexico.



Edmundo O'Gorman was born in the city of Mexico on 24 December 1906. He graduated in the school of law in 1928 but later decided to research and teach history. In 1948 he obtained his PhD in philosophy and in 1951 in history. In 1932-1952 O'Gorman worked in the Mexican public records office, and contributed to *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación*. He was appointed member of the Mexican academies of literature (1969) and of history (1972). Edmundo O'Gorman resigned to the later organization in protest against the use of concepts such as 'discovery of America', 'encounter of two worlds', and 'natural mixing'. For his outstanding research Edmundo O'Gorman was awarded the Mexican national literature award (1964), the history award Rafael Heliodoro Valle (1983), the Humanities Teaching Award of the Universidad Autónoma (1986), and the *honoris causa* doctorate of that university (1978).

Among Edmundo O'Gorman's works are *Historia de las divisiones territoriales de México* (1937), *Fundamentos de la historia de América* (1951), *La supervivencia política novohispana* (1961), *México: el trauma de su historia* (1977), *La incógnita de la llamada 'Historia de los indios de la Nueva España', atribuida a Fray Toribio Molina* (1982), and *Destierro de Sombras* (1986). However, his most popular book is *La invención de América* (1958), in which O'Gorman opposed to the traditional concept of America's *discovery* an innovative reading of the primary sources from original perspectives. For his work with contemporary sources of Columbus and other conquistadors, Edmundo O'Gorman is often singled as one of the pioneers of post-colonial studies in Latin America.

Edmundo's brother was the famous painter, muralist, and architect Juan O'Gorman, born in Coyoacán on 6 July 1905. Juan O'Gorman graduated in 1927 in the school of architecture at Academia San Carlos. He entered the studio of Obregón, Tarditi & Villagrán García and later Obregón Santacilia.

O'Gorman was one of the architects who worked on the reconstruction of Banco de México. In 1931 he frescoed the library of Azcapotzalco and in 1937 decorated and painted the murals of Mexico City's first airport. In 1940 he was engaged in the great mural of Gertrudis Bocanegra library, including scenes of Michoacán conquest, and the struggle for the independence from the Spanish rule. Juan O'Gorman's most important work was the painting of the Central Library in the campus of Universidad Autónoma. The works lasted from 1949 to 1953 and covered 4,000 square meters of historical scenes. Other important works include the Social Security Center, the International Bank in Reforma avenue, parks, theaters, museums, and private houses, most notably the painter Diego Rivera's "functional house."



Juan O'Gorman incorporated Mexican culture, history, and environment in his works. He studied the styles of Le Corbusier and Villagrán, and as a muralist he was a member of the group formed by Diego Rivera, Clemente Orozco, Pablo O'Higgins, and Rufino Tamayo.

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