

The Irish in Uruguay and Paraguay

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Uruguay

Known as Banda Oriental until the 1900s, Uruguay was a part of the Spanish colonial Viceroyalty of the River Plate. In 1814, José Artigas and other leaders broke with the governing junta in Buenos Aires, initiating a struggle for independence which lasted until Brazil's annexation of Uruguay in 1821. The Eastern Republic of Uruguay was constituted in 1830.

In 1762 the Irish-born captain John McNamara led a British force to occupy Colonia del Sacramento, a stronghold alternately held by the Portuguese and the Spanish. The expedition ended in failure and McNamara lost his life in the attempt, together with most of his men. Brigadier-General Samuel Auchmuty occupied Montevideo in 1807 with a regular force of British and Irish officers and rank and file. British rule in Uruguay lasted fourteen months, a period during which prominent merchants from Britain and Ireland settled in the city, influencing its culture. One Irish soldier enlisted in the 71st Regiment, Peter Campbell (1780-c1832), remained in the River Plate and served in the patriot ranks. He fought under Artigas and was appointed deputy governor of Corrientes province. Campbell is credited as a founder of the Uruguayan navy.

Often perceived by the English and Irish press as part of the same country as Buenos Aires and Paraguay, Uruguay started to receive a steady flow of Irish immigration in the decades subsequent to independence. The countryside, especially in Rio Negro district, was settled by sheep-farmers from Kilrane parish in County Wexford. Paysandú, in the same district and close to the Argentine province of Entre Ríos, was settled by immigrants from Westmeath and Longford.

In the 1840s, following Juan Manuel de Rosas' dictatorship in Buenos Aires, which was favourable to British settlement, many Irish sheep-farmers moved from Uruguay to Buenos Aires province and leased or purchased land in counties such as Carmen de Areco, Salto, and Pergamino, and later Nueve de Julio and Lincoln. Landowners such as James Gaynor (1802-1892) and John Maguire (d. 1905) moved to Argentina but maintained their properties in Uruguay and when they died left important estancias on the eastern bank of the River Plate. Other Irish settlers worked in Entre Ríos in Argentina and Rio Negro in Uruguay. William Lawlor (1822-1909) of Abbeyleix, County Laois, married in Guleaguay, Entre Ríos and died in his ranch "Las Tres Patas" in Uruguay. It is likely that other Irish ranchers owned land on both sides of the Argentine-Uruguayan border, speculating on the prospects of political and financial stability in each country. However, simultaneous management on both sides of the River Plate did not initiate migration chains from Ireland to Uruguay as it did in Argentina.

Two distinguished Irish physicians in Uruguay were Constantine Conyngham (1807-1868), who rendered important services during the epidemic of 1856 in Montevideo, and Dublin-born Louis Fleury, surgeon-general to the army in Charity Hospital. Among the rural settlers were J. Hughes in Paysandú and several Irish foremen working for Robert Young in what is today Young city in Rio Negro district. In the 1870s Young purchased ten square leagues of land in Estancia Bichadero and planted a magnificent quadrangle of ombúes, the typical tree of the pampas, near the house. In 1875 he owned 100,000 sheep and horned cattle, implementing improved methods for farming and agriculture. The life of Irish sheep-farmers in rural Uruguay in the nineteenth century is described in Hugh Fitzgerald Ryan's novel *In the Shadow of the Ombú Tree* (Enniscorthy: Chaos Press, 2005).

In the twentieth century, the Irish presence in Uruguay included missionaries and educators. Alfie Lamb of the Legion of Mary lay missionaries established a Legion praesidium in Montevideo in 1956. The Legion of Mary had been successfully launched in Colombia, and many people were attracted to contribute to its work in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Furthermore, Uruguay was one of the Latin American countries chosen by the Irish

Christian Brothers to establish one of their schools. In May 1955 Br. Patrick C. Kelly opened Stella Maris school in Carrasco, Montevideo. Stella Maris is a distinguished education centre aimed at the sons of Catholic families. The school achieved some renown when a Uruguayan aircraft carrying the Old Christians rugby team composed of Stella Maris graduates crashed in the Andes. Sixteen of the forty passengers survived and were rescued in December 1972.

Paraguay

Under the Spanish colonial regime Paraguay included the Argentine provinces of Tucumán, Córdoba and Buenos Aires, all of which were subject to the Adelantado of Asunción. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Jesuits were introduced by governor Fernando Arias to check the cruelties of the Spanish conquistadors. For almost two hundred years the Jesuit missions received admiration from European travellers, and as Voltaire declared, they were a triumph of humanity. They comprised thirty self-governing cities of native Guaraní people scattered along both sides of the Paraná river which today forms the border between eastern Paraguay and northern Argentina. Raids committed by white slave traders from southern Brazil convinced the Jesuits of the need to establish these missions. In the late sixteenth century three members of the Society of Jesus, among them the Irishman Thomas Field (1547-1626) from Limerick, ventured into the area to work with the Guaraní. Fr. Field had entered the Jesuits in Rome in 1574 and landed in Brazil on 31 December 1577, where he spent ten years as a scholar at Piratininga, present-day São Paulo. In 1587 he moved to Paraguay, arriving in Asunción in the company of Fr. Ortega from Portugal and Fr. Saloni from Italy. Thomas Field became acquainted with Guaraní people through his missionary travels, and his recommendations concerning their evangelisation were to have a major influence on the setting up of Jesuit missions. He attended the crucial synod of 1603 where decisions were made to set up the missions, or Reductions as they were called. Fr. Field died in Asunción in 1626 and is credited by the Irish Jesuit historian, Fr. Aubrey Gwynn, with being the first Irish priest to celebrate a Roman Catholic service in the Americas.

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Other Irish Jesuits followed Thomas Field in working in the Paraguayan missions. They were Fr. Thomas Browne of Waterford (1656-1717), Br. William Leny of Dublin (1692-c1760) and Fr. Thaddeus Ennis, who was working in the Reductions at the time of the expulsion of the Jesuits . Br. Andrew Stritch arrived in Paraguay when the Jesuits were being expelled and was deported to Italy, where he died in 1773. The governor of Paraguay from 1766 to 1772, lieutenant colonel Carlos Morphi, was a Spanish officer related to the Murphy family of southern Ireland. Morphi founded the city of Caacupé in April 1770. When he received the order to expel the Jesuits, Morphi helped the priests to conceal and destroy documents, and he himself escaped from Paraguay. He was prosecuted on foot of this action and sent back to Spain. Culture and music flourished in the missions; they possessed some of the earliest printing presses in the Americas and published books in the Guaraní language. Angered by the Jesuits' defence of the native people, the colonial authorities finally persuaded King Charles III of Spain to expel the order from his territories in 1767. This paved the way for the collapse of the Jesuit missions in Paraguay. However, their legacy lived on as the absence of a land-owning class in this part of South America made Paraguay the most progressive state in the Americas. Paraguay achieved independence in 1811 and today Guaraní is the only vernacular indigenous language in any American state.

Undoubtedly the most colourful Irish person to appear in Paraguayan history was Cork-born Eliza Lynch (1835-1886), who met Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano López when he was visiting Paris in 1853. She returned with him to Asunción and in 1862 López became president and Eliza Lynch the first lady of Paraguay. She played an active role in the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), or Guerra Guazú, as it is known in Paraguay. Some historians argue that many of the atrocities that characterised López's rule were attributable to his mistress.

Among Irish-Paraguayans prominent in public life were López's successor as president, Juan B. Gill (1840-1877), who was murdered on 2 April 1877, and Juan O'Leary (1879-1969), historian and foreign minister in Alfredo Stroessner's administration.

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See also *The Irish in Latin America and Iberia: A Bibliography* (Paraguay, Uruguay). [document]



Montevideo (E. Essex Vidal, 1820)



Peter Campbell (1780-c1832)
(by F. Reilly, 1973)



The Jesuit mission of San Ignacio Miní,
present-day Misiones province,
Argentina (Misiones Tourist Board)



Eliza Lynch's mausoleum in Asunción
(www.johngimlette.com)