

The Irish in Colombia

By Edmundo Murray

The only South American country with coasts on both the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, Colombia was part of the Spanish viceroyalty of New Granada. The United States of Colombia, which also included Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador was proclaimed in 1819 by Simón Bolívar when he crossed the Andes and defeated the royalist forces at the battle of Boyacá. In 1822 the four countries were united as Gran Colombia, which collapsed in 1830 with the separation of Venezuela and Ecuador. The republic of Colombia was established in 1886, but Panama separated in 1903, after the US-backed War of the Thousand Days (1899-1902).

Irish soldiers fought in Colombia during the War of Independence with Spain in 1816-1822. They were recruited in Dublin, London and other cities by John Devereux, James T. English, William Walton and others. The Irish Legion sailed from Liverpool in July 1819. Some of the officers were Major L'Estrange, Francis Burdett O'Connor, and William Aylmer. They arrived in the island of Margarita, where they suffered hardships, sickness and loss of life. In March 1820 the Legion sailed to Río Hacha, and after the attack to this city, their standard displaying the harp of Ireland was raised instead of the Spanish royal ensign. Weakened by lack of pay and proper food, and complaining of the native officers, some of the Irish mutinied, got drunk and began to ransack the city for booty. The mutineers were transported to Jamaica and turned over to the British authorities. O'Connor's lancers continued the campaign and reached Cartagena by the end of 1822, and effectively assisted Bolívar at the decisive battle of Boyacá. The chief responsible for the formation of the Irish Legion, John Devereux, did not arrive at South America until 1821. He never took part in a single engagement with the Legion, but he made a pretty profit in organizing it. However, Simón Bolívar absolved Devereux from any blame and in 1822 attached him to the general staff at Bogotá. In 1823 John Devereux was appointed Colombian envoy to the courts of northern Europe.

Some of the soldiers of the Irish Legion remained in Colombia after the War of Independence. After the battle of Boyacá, Daniel Florence O'Leary (1801-1854) was appointed Bolívar's aide-de-camp and served in Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. In 1828 O'Leary married Soledad Soublette in Bogotá and lent valuable services to Colombia and Venezuela. His memoirs, published posthumously by his son Simón Bolívar O'Leary, remain a basic reference for students of the South American Wars of Independence. Beatriz O'Connell, related to the Liberator Daniel O'Connell, married Manuel Pombo in 1795 in Madrid, and in 1819 was living in Bogotá. Other Irish settlers in Colombia related to the Wars of Independence were Thomas Murray (d.1823), who married Estrada Callejas, John Hands, Francis O'Farrell (known as Francisco Puyana), Joseph Boylan, Robert Lee, James Rooke, and the physicians



Palenquera in the Caribbean coast

*Photo Mauricio Zuloaga
(<http://www.uniandes.edu.co/Colombia/Turismo/turismo.html>)*

Dr. Hugh Blair Brown (surgeon of the Arthur Sandes' Rifles in Peru), Dr. Kennedy, Dr. Williamson, and Dr. McEwen.

Almost 150 years later, a new type of legion arrived in Colombia, though this time peacefully. In 1953 the Catholic lay movement Legion of Mary sent Seamus Grace and Alphie Lamb (1932-1959) to Bogotá to expand their mission in Colombia. From the capital, Grace and Lamb established many Legion branches (praesidia) in other parts of the country. They visited bishops and obtained their permission to set up in their dioceses. The Legion flourished around Colombia, especially among the poor, and then expanded to Ecuador, Venezuela and throughout South America.

The most recent chapter in the history of Colombian-Irish relations allegedly connects the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). On 11 August 2001, Jim Monaghan, Niall Connolly, and Martin McCauley were arrested at Bogotá's airport, accused of being IRA members providing explosives training to FARC in the demilitarised zone of San Vicente del Caguán in southern Colombia. Established in 1964 as the military wing of the Colombian Communist Party, FARC is the largest irregular army in Latin America. Washington accuses FARC and other 'narco-terrorists' of profiting from the illegal drug production and distribution business. The three Irishmen were travelling on false passports. At first they said they were bird-watching but later added they were studying the Colombia peace process. Their initial acquittal in April 2004 was overturned by a higher court, which imposed sentences of seventeen years on each of them. They escaped from Colombia and in August 2005 – a week after the IRA proclaimed the end of its military operations – they arrived safely in Ireland. The Colombian authorities have formally required their extradition.

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Adapted from: Jim Byrne, Philip Coleman and Jason King (eds.), *Ireland and the Americas: Culture, Politics and History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, forthcoming 2006), with kind permission of the publisher.

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