

Crusaders for Liberty or Vile Mercenaries? The Irish Legion in Colombia

By Matthew Brown

The perceived cowardice and dishonourable behaviour of Irishmen on the Colombian Caribbean coast, widely chastised by Colombians at the time and since, caused considerable discomfort for Irishmen who had stayed at home. The Irish rebellion in Colombia undermined comfortable notions of an Irish identity that was supposedly characterised by a natural love of liberty.



Riohacha, Colombia
(Alcaldía de Riohacha)

An under-studied footnote to both Irish and Colombian history, John Devereux's Irish Legion was recruited in Dublin, Cork and Belfast between 1819 and 1821. Several thousand Irish adventurers crossed the Atlantic to join Simón Bolívar's armies in the struggle for independence from Spanish colonial rule. It is unknown exactly how many there were because the 1819 Foreign Enlistment Act made the mercenaries illegal in Britain, and so surviving records are rare. The fate of most of these individuals was early death, disease or desertion, and therefore they left little documentary record of their activities. Some survived and settled in Colombia, on occasion reaching positions of prestige and influence. [1]

This article provides a brief overview of the events and the people involved in the Irish Legion, reproducing and analysing Devereux's first contact with the Colombian rebels. The reception back in Dublin of the Irish Legion's most infamous action - the Riohacha rebellion in 1820 - will be examined. The perceived cowardice and dishonourable behaviour of Irishmen on the Colombian Caribbean coast, widely chastised by Colombians at the time and since, caused considerable discomfort for Irishmen who had stayed at home. The Irish rebellion in Colombia undermined comfortable notions of an Irish identity that was supposedly characterised by a natural love of liberty. [2]

Recruitment

John Devereux was born in Wexford in 1778. [3] He may have been involved in the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798. There is no convincing surviving evidence to support his own claims that he had played a part in the rebellion, claims which were frequently cast in doubt by contemporaries. [4] By 1815 he had developed trading relations with family members in Baltimore, Maryland and was therefore well positioned within the Atlantic world to take advantage of the political turmoil in Spanish America. In early 1815 Devereux wrote to the New Granadan government, at that time in the midst of a struggle against the *reconquista* led by the Spanish general Pablo Morillo, to offer his services: [5]

To the Honourable citizen Crisanto Valenzuela, Secretary of State of the United Provinces of New Granada.

A son of Ireland addresses himself to Your Excellency with the utmost respect to make the following request, in order that Your Excellency can then bring it to the knowledge of the General Government.

A member of one of the most noble and ancient Catholic families of the British empire, he was named as their representative by the vote of sixty thousand of his armed countrymen, to serve them as Leader in defence of their liberty and to procure the emancipation of Catholics oppressed by the despotism of Protestants. However, principally because of the perfidy and treachery of the Protestant influence, the generous and magnanimous efforts of the Irish Catholics were frustrated, and ended in ruin.

In consequence of that result the undersigned was forced to seek refuge in North America from the religious persecution that he suffered in his native land. Keeping in mind, nevertheless, the glorious part that he was to play in that most noble of causes, and thinking also of the asylum that by their humanity and magnanimity the South Americans provide to the oppressed and persecuted of the United Provinces of New Granada, the undersigned was, from the commencement of the present battle of the patriots against the bloodthirsty and odious Spanish Government, unable to avoid casting all of his feelings and his reason on the side of American patriotism, against the impious and degrading despotism that sought to reduce this noble country from planetary significance to the low condition of a provincial satellite of old Spain. He is filled with horror at seeing the monster of Spanish despotism, like an immense snake stained with the butchery committed in the New World and trying to satiate its ferocity and quench its thirst with the same entrails and the blood of these people; a people who should have risen once and for all to rank among the highest nations of the Earth, eliciting admiration and envy as did North America.

The feelings of hatred and hostility evoked in the undersigned by a project so perfidious and abominable led him to immediately adopt the best possible plan so that his efforts and services would be most effective and beneficial to the cause of the 'patria'. His heart, wounded by the offences inflicted on a brave and generous people, led the undersigned with the most lively enthusiasm to channel the sacred fervour which animates the South Americans into vindicating and defending their civil rights.

Guided by these sympathies, the undersigned offers his services in convincing the English government and the English people to provide aid for the glorious cause in which such distinguished patriots have nobly and heroically dedicated their fortunes and their lives to their native country; and by the same methods, he hopes to give such proofs of his commitment to, and veneration of, the cause that under the auspices of the government, working in the name of the people, he will be granted the honourable privilege of being admitted into the military service of the United Provinces, in circumstances which will not serve as a lack of consideration to the worthiness of his previous rank.

In consequence of this plan the undersigned has already written to various distinguished people in England, among the Lords and the Commons, with the purpose of eliciting their cordial and fervent sympathies for the patriots of these United Provinces; and because of his special capabilities, the undersigned offers his services in negotiating an alliance with Great Britain, which would aid and assist in removing the relentless oppression of Spain from these colonies, at a great advantage to British interests.

At the same time the undersigned offers his services in putting into effect the above-mentioned project, trusting as he does that great benefits will result for the sacred cause over which Your Excellency presides; and trusting equally in his ability to achieve this. Far from evading the responsibility of leading the said project to realisation, the undersigned offers to execute it in the most effective manner possible; it is necessary to explicitly add that he does not desire any more remuneration than the honour and the glory of participating and of assisting the Granadan Provinces in the

divine task of overthrowing the most oppressive and calamitous despotism that has ever afflicted humanity.

Yet even though the undersigned expressly renounces any concept of private gain, truth and good will oblige him to suggest to Your Excellency the advisability of making some arrangement to provide adequate resources to offset the costs which will necessarily be occasioned by the execution of the said plan.

There is no doubt but that this measure requires Your Excellency's trust; but to justify said trust and to give a guarantee of the loyal conduct of the undersigned in terms and conditions which the said trust demands, the undersigned, without hesitation, appeals to his reputation for honour and integrity; more relevant is the just and severe conduct for which, for all of the years gone by from his virility until the present time, he has won the respect and friendship of many among the most distinguished and illustrious members of the English nation. And so that Your Excellency has the same understanding of such conduct, the undersigned refers Your Excellency to His Excellency Governor Juan de Dios Amador, who has in his power recommendations and proofs that will satisfy Your Excellency as to the competence of the undersigned and his qualifications for the execution of said project.

I have the honour to remain, with the deepest respect, Your Excellency's obedient and humble servant.

J. D'EVEREUX

General of the Irish Army

Devereux portrayed himself as an Irish general fleeing religious persecution in Britain and seeking honour and glory fighting against tyranny in the Spanish world. In the opening paragraph of the letter he describes the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798 in overtly sectarian terms, emphasising political divisions between Protestants and Catholics. Then he explains his exile in North America by referring to the religious persecution that he had been subject to. He decided to cast 'all of his feelings and his reason' on the side of '[South] American patriotism' against Spain's 'impious and degrading despotism'. Justifying this decision he described himself as a natural lover of liberty who could not stand idly by while a 'brave and generous people' were exploited and oppressed. Turning to practical matters, Devereux offered himself as a mediator between the United Provinces of New Granada and the 'English government and English people'. In return he wished for a 'worthy' rank in the New Granadan military service. After that Devereux explains the motivation behind his offer. He wanted to serve the 'sacred cause' of Independence; he wanted 'honour and glory' rather than payment. Nevertheless he qualified this noble claim with the acknowledgement that he would require 'adequate resources' for the venture. In conclusion, Devereux reminds Valenzuela of his 'reputation for honour and integrity', and claims to have 'won the respect and friendship of many amongst the most distinguished and illustrious members of the English nation'.

In this letter Devereux exaggerates his role in the Irish rebellion of 1798 and his importance in British empire circles in London. At the same time as stressing his Irish love of liberty, he claims to have influence in the British government and on public opinion, and frequently uses the vague term 'inglés' - literally Englishman, but often used in Spanish America to refer to any foreigner - rather than 'irlandés'. The New Granadan government reacted cautiously to Devereux's offers and asked Devereux to come back to them with proof of his experience and a carefully drawn up plan of action.

The emphasis on love of liberty, honour, and the religious undertones of Devereux's 1815 letter remained potent when, in 1819, Devereux began the formal recruitment of the Irish Legion in Dublin. He produced all the paraphernalia of a patriotic recruiting drive. He ordered a ceremonial engraved sword (now held in the Museo Bolivariano in Caracas, Venezuela), a ceremonial Irish Legion Seal (now held in the Museo Nacional in Bogotá, Colombia), and printed up recruiting forms in Spanish.

Campaigning

Over 1,700 Irishmen enlisted in the Irish Legion during the ensuing eighteen months, crossing the Atlantic in two dozen specially contracted ships. [6] These adventurers arrived in Spanish America at the wrong time and in the wrong place. By 1819 the tide of war seemed to be turning in Bolívar's favour, with the Spanish army increasingly demoralised and cut off from reinforcements from Europe. [7] Simón Bolívar and other rebel leaders had already begun to question the wisdom of recruiting large numbers of foreign mercenaries who needed barracks, provisions and payment. There were many who doubted the usefulness of the Irish, arriving as they did over four years after Devereux's original letter was sent.



Upon arrival most soldiers of the Irish Legion were held on the island of Margarita off the Venezuelan coast. There, disease and a lack of drinking water combined to cause the death and desertion of many of the adventurers. Only six hundred survived to join the long planned expedition, in March 1820, to attack the Spanish-controlled port of Riohacha on the New Granadan coast.

The attack on Riohacha did briefly serve, as Bolívar had hoped it would, to distract some Spanish and Royalist forces. In all other respects it was a spectacular failure. Planning, discipline and strategy fell apart in Riohacha. On sight of the expedition's ships massing outside the port, Riohacha's residents fled for the hills. The Irish Legion therefore was able to occupy the port without difficulty, and was then overwhelmed by disciplinary problems on a march into the New Granadan interior. Fear of being ambushed by local indigenous peoples combined with lack of food and drink to create a rebellious atmosphere amongst the men. This erupted upon their return to Riohacha, where some waiting merchant vessels from the British-ruled island of Jamaica offered to transport disgruntled adventurers away from Colombia. After rioting and setting fire to many of the town's buildings, the vast majority of the Irish Legion embarked and left Mariano Montilla, Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander to rue their ultimately costly and demoralising decision to recruit Irishmen to their cause.

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Aftermath - Back Home

Some Irishmen remained faithful to the cause of South American Independence after Riohacha. Francisco Burdett O'Connor led the remaining loyal troops, and eventually settled in Bolivia. [8] Daniel Florence O'Leary, Arthur Sandes and John Johnston, all Irishmen, were among Bolívar's most faithful officers during the political and military upheavals of the 1820s in Colombia.

However, back in Ireland these success stories were completely overshadowed by the bad news that trickled home during 1820. Newspapers such as the *Dublin Evening Post* and *Carrick's Morning Post* were full of returning adventurers' testimonies complaining of the terrible conditions to which they had been subjected. Many blamed Spanish American leaders, particularly Luis Brion and Mariano Montilla, for causing the Irish Legion's indiscipline by leaving it 'disarmed, betrayed and plundered'. Others blamed the Irish officers for their poor personnel management. The *Dublin Evening Post*, one of the most strident

supports of the Irish Legion, was able to find succour in reports of the loyalty and bravery of the common Irish soldier, whose only wish was an opportunity to serve nobly in return for fair remuneration. [9]

At issue was the reputation of Irishmen as brave defenders of liberty. Colonel Sampson described the Irish Legion as 'a glorious crusade in the cause of liberty, with the liveliest hopes', inspired by 'the noble spirit of the Irish youth'. [10] In 1819 the Irish Legion was sent on its way to liberate 'the innocent children of the Sun'. [11] By deserting the flag of freedom at Riohacha, the Irish had put their masculine honour and nascent national identity in question. In 1820, a Public Inquiry was set up in Dublin to investigate accusations of 'unmanly and dishonourable' behaviour against John Devereux and his associates. Some of the deserting adventurers were accused of being 'too fond of good living, with no stomach for the fight'. [12]

Aftermath - in Colombia

The dream of Irish courage contributing to the liberation of Spanish America lived on in the hearts of some of the surviving adventurers. In September 1822 Arthur Sandes wrote to Daniel O'Connell, informing the leader of the struggle for Catholic Emancipation of the death of his nephew Maurice O'Connell. Maurice died of a fever in the Ecuadorian highlands after more than two years' service in the Colombian army. Sandes emphasised that Maurice had been 'brave, generous, sincere,



Cathedral of Riohacha

and [had] possess[ed] qualities which raise the esteem and talents which arrest the attention of mankind'. His character was thus 'truly Irish, uniting in it all those virtues for which the sons of our country are so justly celebrated, being always worthy of his ancient and honourable name and of that love of liberty which had engaged him in the defence of an oppressed people'. [13]

Yet during the early 1820s Irishness had become a dirty word in Colombia. The rebellion at Riohacha meant that those Irishmen who did not leave Colombia during this period had to struggle to re-imagine and re-affirm their own identities. Being Irish had become synonymous with mutiny and indiscipline. As part of his submission to the Colombian government in 1823, Colonel John Johnston claimed that 'being from a country like Ireland, that has always been struggling to be free, I acquired at birth the most liberal sentiments that could possibly fill a man's heart [...] so that when [...] I heard favourable talk of a Heroic Bolivar and his glorious struggle [...] against the tyranny and despotism of Spain [...] at that moment my heart inflamed with the ardent desire to join such a noble cause'. [14]

Conclusion

The attempt to forge an Irish national identity through adventure in Spanish America was thwarted in 1820 by the practical difficulties of a military campaign in an unknown environment, by the Irish adventurers' constant fear of being attacked by indigenous people, and by the logistical obstacles to keeping them fed and watered to their satisfaction. The Irish rebellion at Riohacha in 1820 occurred in a year when leaders like Bolívar were looking for a convenient scapegoat against which to affirm the virtues of 'true' Colombians, as the threat from Spain diminished after the Santa Ana armistice in November 1820. The timing and the manner of the Irish Legion's rebellion and disintegration meant

that for several years Irishness was an unattractive identity for the Irish adventurers who remained in Colombia - they described themselves as *ingleses* or *colombianos* instead. The Irish Legion became fixed in Colombian *historia patria* as the very epitome of the 'vile mercenaries' whose depredations Bolívar lamented as the bane of his struggle for independence.

The person who originally dreamed up the idea of an Irish crusade for liberty in Catholic Spanish America, John Devereux, did indeed profit considerably from the expeditions. This was despite the rebellion at Riohacha at which Devereux was not present, since he was still leading the recruitment drive in Europe, and the ridicule to which he was subjected in Colombia throughout the early 1820s. Devereux returned to Bogotá in 1840 after an absence of almost two decades and, perhaps surprisingly, was welcomed with open arms by other veterans of the Wars of Independence. [15]

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Note of the Editor

Matthew Brown's *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries and the Birth of New Nations in Gran Colombia* will be published by Liverpool University Press later this year. In 2005 the Museo Nacional de Colombia published *Militares extranjeros en la independencia de Colombia: Nuevas perspectivas*, co-edited with Martín Alonso Roa Celis.

Notes

[1] It should be noted that between 1819 and 1830 'Colombia' consisted of the former colonial territories of Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela as well as New Granada (now Colombia). This short-lived country is often called Gran or Greater Colombia by historians, and sometimes simply Bolívar's Colombia, since it disintegrated not long after Bolívar's death in December 1830. The principal focus of this article is on the Irish in the New Granadan section of Gran Colombia.

[2] I explore the local and international consequences of this event in Colombia in Brown, Matthew, *Rebellion at Riohacha, 1820: Local and International Networks of Revolution, Cowardice and Masculinity*, *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas - Anuario de Historia de América Latina* 42 (2005) pp. 77-98. Abstract available online (<http://www-gewi.uni-graz.at/jbla/jahr05.htm>), accessed 16 February 2006.

[3] There is a good sketch of the events of Devereux's career in Lambert, Eric T.D., *Voluntarios británicos e irlandeses en la gesta bolivariana* (Caracas, 1990), Vol.2, particularly pp. 400-470. In his three-volume history of the British and Irish volunteers in Bolívar's armies Lambert provided a wealth of detail and analysis of the Irish Legion.

[4] Some of Devereux's correspondence relating to the Irish Legion is reproduced in Brown, Matthew and Martín Alonso Roa Celis (eds.), *Militares extranjeros en la independencia de Colombia: Nuevas perspectivas* (Bogotá: Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2005).

[5] John Devereux to Secretary of State Crisanto Valenzuela, noted as received in Bogotá on 16 June 1815, reproduced in O'Leary, Simón Bolívar (ed.), *Memorias de Daniel Florencio O'Leary* (Caracas 1952) Vol.14, pp. 257-259 (English translation by Claire Healy):

Al Honorable ciudadano Crisanto Valenzuela, Secretario de Estado de las Provincias Unidas de la Nueva Granada

Un hijo de Irlanda presenta a V.E. con el mayor respeto la solicitud siguiente, para que se sirva V.E. ponerla en conocimiento del Gobierno general.

Miembro de una de las familias católicas más nobles y antiguas del imperio británico, fue llamado el exponente por los votos de sesenta mil de sus conciudadanos armados, para servirles de Jefe en la defensa de su libertad, y para alcanzar la emancipación de los católicos sometidos al despotismo de los protestantes. Pero los acontecimientos, principalmente originados por la perfidia y la traición del influjo protestante, fueron causa de que se frustrasen, terminando en ruina, los generosos y magnánimos esfuerzos de los católicos irlandeses.

A consecuencia de ese resultado se vio forzado el exponente a buscar en la América del Norte refugio contra la persecución religiosa que sufría en su país natal. Pensando, sin embargo, en la gloriosa parte que le cupo en la mas noble de las causas, y pensando esto mismo en el asilo que la humanidad y magnanimidad de los americanos del Sur brindan a los oprimidos y perseguidos en las Provincias Unidas de la Nueva Granada, no pudo prescindir el exponente, desde el principio de la lucha actual de los patriotas contra el sanguinario y odioso Gobierno de España, de poner todos los sentimientos de su corazón y todos los cálculos de su raciocinio, del lado del patriotismo americano contra el impío y degradante despotismo que quiso rebajar a este noble país del rango de planeta a la baja condición de un provincial satélite de la vieja España.

Lleno de horror al ver el monstruo del despotismo español, como una inmensa serpiente manchada con la carnicería hecha en el Nuevo Mundo, y tratando de saciar su ferocidad y aplacar su sed, con las entrañas mismas y con la sangre de este pueblo; pueblo que debiera levantarse de una vez entre las naciones mas altas de la tierra, excitando la admiración y la envidia de ésta, al igual de la América del Norte.

Penetrado así de todos los sentimientos de odio y hostilidad contra un proyecto tan pérfido y abominable, el exponente adoptó inmediatamente el mejor plan posible para que sus esfuerzos y servicios fuesen los más eficaces y benéficos para la causa de la patria.

Su corazón que estaba herido por las ofensas infligidas a un pueblo valiente y generoso, no pudo menos que decidir al exponente a aprovechar con el más vivo entusiasmo, el fervor sagrado que animaba a los Sur-americanos para vindicar y defender sus derechos civiles.

Guiado por estas simpatías, el exponente ofrece sus servicios para lograr que el gobierno inglés y el pueblo inglés, ayuden la gloriosa causa en que tan distinguidos patriotas han comprometido, noble y heroicamente, sus fortunas y sus vidas por su país natal; y por los mismos medios espera, dar tales pruebas de su adhesión y veneración por la causa, que bajo los auspicios del gobierno, obrando en nombre del pueblo, se le conceda en honroso privilegio de admitírsele al servicio militar de las Provincias Unidas, en circunstancias que no sirvan de desdoro a su antiguo rango.

A consecuencia de este plan, ya ha escrito el exponente a varias personas elevadas de Inglaterra, así entre los Lores como entre los Comunes, a fin de excitar sus cordiales y fervorosas simpatías por los patriotas de estas Provincias Unidas; y debido a sus facilidades especiales, ofrece el exponente sus servicios para lograr una alianza con la Gran Bretaña, que ayude y coopere a separar la implacable opresión de España estas colonias, con gran ventaja para los intereses británicos.

Al mismo tiempo ofrece el exponente sus servicios para llevar a efecto el mencionado proyecto, confiando como confía en que resultarán grandes beneficios para la causa sagrada que V.E. preside; y confiando igualmente en su facilidad para lograrlo, lejos de evadir el exponente la responsabilidad de conducir dicho proyecto a su realización, se ofrece con la eficacia posible a ejecutarlo; debiendo añadir explícitamente que no desea mas remuneración que la que consiste en la honra y gloria de participar y ayudar a las Provincias granadinas en la divina tarea de derrocar el despotismo más opresor y calamitoso que jamás ha afligido a la humanidad.

Pero al mismo tiempo que el exponente declina expresamente toda idea de ganancia privada, la verdad y la buena fe le obligan a sugerir a V.E. la conveniencia de hacer algún arreglo que produzca recursos adecuados para afrontar los gastos que necesariamente ocasionará la ejecución del plan expresado.

No hay duda que esta medida requiere la confianza de V.E.; pero para justificar dicha confianza y dar una garantía de la conducta fiel del exponente en los términos y condiciones que dicha confianza exija, apela el exponente sin vacilar a su reputación de honra e integridad; mas aún a la conducta justa y severa que durante todos los años transcurridos desde su virilidad hasta la época actual, le han granjeado el aprecio y amistad de muchos personajes entre los más distinguidos e ilustres de la nación inglesa. Y para que V.E. tenga el mismo concepto, apela el exponente a S.E. el Gobernador Juan de Dios Amador, que tiene en su poder recomendaciones y comprobantes que satisfarán a V.E. de la idoneidad del exponente y de sus cualidades para la ejecución de dicho proyecto.

Tengo el honor de ser, con el más profundo respeto, de V.E. obediente y humilde servidor.

J. D'EVEREUX
General del ejército irlandés

[6] Irishmen also formed a considerable part of the British Legion, raised at the same time in London. I explore foreign involvement in warfare and peacetime in Gran Colombia in Brown, Matthew, *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries and the Birth of New Nations in Gran Colombia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, forthcoming 2006).

[7] Earle, Rebecca, *Spain and the Independence of Gran Colombia* (Exeter, 2000).

[8] Dunkerley, James, *The Third Man: Francisco Burdett O'Connor and the Emancipation of the Americas* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1999).

[9] *Dublin Evening Post*, 27 July 1820; *Carrick's Morning Post*, 22 August 1820.

[10] *Dublin Evening Post*, 3 February 1820.

[11] Phillips, Charles, *Fairburn's edition of the speech of Chas. Phillips* (Dublin, 1819), p. 4.

[12] See for example *Dublin Evening Post*, 29 January 1820, *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 7 December 1820.

[13] Sandes to Daniel O'Connell, 10 September 1822, Quito, Daniel O'Connell Papers, University College Dublin, P12/3/110.

[14] John Johnson to Secretary of War and Marine, Bogotá, 11 November 1822, in AGNC (Colombian National Archives) R GYM, Vol.35, f.884.

[15] Restrepo, José Manuel, *Autobiografía* (Bogotá, 1985), p. 41.