

William Duane and his 'Visit to Colombia' of 1823

By David Barnwell

The neatness of their silk shoes, and the saucy breeze ascending from the adjacent river displaying more of their silk stockings than they seemed to intend, could not but attract the eye of the traveller sauntering along, and he must be a stoic who could not afford a smile on passing the pleasant disorder of the pretty señoritas.

A Brief Biography

William Duane was born in 1760. According to his own account, the birth occurred in New York State, though there is evidence that he was in fact born in Newfoundland, a region which was in regular contact with Southeast Ireland during the eighteenth century (Little 2003). [1] Born to Irish Catholic parents, Duane left North America before the Revolution. He was to spend almost three decades outside of North America; first in Ireland, followed by a brief residence in England, and a spell in India. When he returned to the United States, approaching middle age, he faced continual questioning from his political opponents of his right to reside in the country.

Duane's family returned to Ireland when he was aged about eleven, and settled in Clonmel in County Tipperary. His family appear to have been quite prosperous, but as a young man Duane

was disinherited because he married an Anglican woman in Tipperary. Faced with the need to earn a living, he entered the printing trade. Some time later he left Ireland, first for England and thence in 1785 to Calcutta, India. Initially a member of the East India Company's paramilitary force, he became disenchanted with this employ by the cruelties he witnessed in England's colonial regime. His opposition to the Raj government led to his deportation back to England. Duane then renounced all ties to the British Empire, and in 1795 returned to the US.

Once in America he quickly became part of the radical political scene in Philadelphia, a setting in which Irishmen were very prominent. Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of Ben Franklin, owned the radical newspaper *Aurora*, the organ of the Democratic Party, and Bache gave Duane his start in newspaper publishing in the US. Bache died in September 1798, in the great yellow fever epidemic which swept the city in that summer, leaving a wife and four children. Duane, whose own wife Catherine Duane had died in the same Philadelphia epidemic, married Bache's widow. He took full control of the *Aurora* and was to be associated with the newspaper for decades afterwards (Rosenfeld 1997).

Under Duane's guidance the *Aurora* took part in the fierce polemic between Jeffersonians and conservatives that characterised the turn of the eighteenth century. Indeed Thomas Jefferson attributed his



William Duane (1760 - 1835)
by Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin, 1802
(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

election to the presidency in 1800 to Duane's vigorous support. Duane had been arrested under the Sedition Act for taking part in a violent affray outside Philadelphia's St. Mary's Church, but was spared any unpleasant consequences when charges against him were dismissed upon Jefferson's accession to office. He remained a hate figure to many, and was satirised as a cross between a prototypical Irish-American corrupt politician and an Irish Sancho Panza-type figure, Teague O'Regan, in the serialised novel *Modern Chivalry* written by Hugh Henry Brackenbridge in the early 1800s. [2] Aside from the newspaper business, Duane derived income from book-selling and publishing. He served for a number of years in the United States Army, attaining promotion to the rank of Adjutant-General during the War of 1812. Afterwards, with the centre of gravity of US politics moving ever more decisively to Washington rather than Philadelphia, and with the decline in the influence of the radical wing of the Democratic party, Duane left the main stage of public life.

Duane and Latin America

Duane spoke what he described as 'rather imperfect Castilian'. It is probable that he was taught by one of the many Latin Americans living in Philadelphia at this time, perhaps by someone like Manuel Torres, who represented the state of Colombia in Philadelphia for many years. An intriguing possibility is that he learnt Spanish from a fellow Irishman, Matthias O'Conway, who was an eminent language teacher in Philadelphia for many years, as well as being Official Interpreter in French and Spanish for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. O'Conway wrote the first Spanish grammar published in the United States (O'Conway 1810) and one of his sons had died fighting for the Republican forces in Venezuela. There is much evidence to suggest that Duane had been acquainted with O'Conway for several decades, therefore it is not entirely speculative to presume that Duane may have sought his help in learning Spanish. It is perhaps worth remarking that Duane, like several Irish-Americans of the time, had an interest in languages, for example in India he had designed different printing types to print the languages of the subcontinent. Apart from Spanish he had a certain command of French, which he utilised to translate documents concerning the Napoleonic Army.

The *Aurora* had provided unflinching support to the campaigns of South American nations for independence from Spain. As Duane puts it:

Thirty years ago I became acquainted with some of the men of virtue and intellect who were preparing the way for that revolution in South America which is now realized. Those intimacies had, by exciting my sympathies, led me to bestow more earnest attention on the history, geography, and the eventual destiny of those countries.

Duane applied for the position of United States ambassador to the new Colombian republic, but his application was unsuccessful. There is no doubt that radical circles in South America were conscious of the debt they owed to him for his support. Indeed the Congreso General de la Gran Colombia held in 1821 expressed gratitude to William Duane.

The Trip To Colombia

In 1822 Duane closed down the *Aurora* and embarked on a journey through what is now Colombia and Venezuela. In the company of his daughter Elizabeth and stepson Richard Bache, he set sail from Philadelphia on 2 October 1822 and arrived in Venezuela sixteen days later. He was to remain in South America until late May 1823.

The product of the trip was *A Visit to Colombia*. [3] The book details Duane's rather leisurely trip from Caracas to Cartagena de Indias, via Bogotá. It appears that he had been sent to South America to recoup a business debt, 'on behalf of persons in the United States having claims against the government, of which other agents had not procured the liquidation.' He managed to conclude the business successfully, but on his return to Philadelphia those who had employed him 'contrived to cheat me out of my commissions, a transaction of transcendent knavery, meanness and ingratitude.' The business purpose of the trip is never alluded to in the body of Duane's book, instead *A Visit to Colombia* concentrates on observations on the places Duane passed through and the people he encountered. The book also contains

verbose descriptions of the flora of Colombia, though rarely of the fauna except the mules. Duane provides some interesting observations about contemporary social conditions and politics in Gran Colombia. Comprising a number of extended digressions such as a disquisition on trees, or a quite prolix examination of the Colombian economy and constitution, this quite weighty tome clocks in at some 600 pages in all.

The book does require some editing, at least for the modern taste, but even as it stands it offers a variety of interesting aspects to the patient reader.

By the time of writing, the 1820s, knowledge of Latin America was still quite sketchy among its northern neighbours, and Duane saw one of his tasks as drawing up descriptions and taxonomies of what he had seen. Hence for example a long description of the banana, a fruit hitherto rarely encountered North America:

The banana is a sweet luscious fruit, and when ripe is superior in richness to the fig. It is of the consistency of a soft butter pear, but without acid. The fruit is not produced single like the apple, flowering on detached branches or single stalks, but in bunches, side by side.

A striking aspect to Duane's journey is the relatively comfortable conditions he enjoyed while undertaking it. Generally he followed the *Camino Reales* road system that had been developed by the Spaniards centuries earlier. He had prepared well for the trip, and brought with him a large number of letters of introduction to people he was to meet along the route. His record of support for the independence struggle opened many doors and ensured that his venture went off without the major disasters one might have feared in such an arduous undertaking in South America during the 1820s. He encounters no major difficulties until page 240 of the book, and even then it is not a critical problem, merely an uncooperative *alcalde* (mayor) who had to be coaxed into providing food and shelter for the Duane party. On the matter of food, on no occasion during his trip did Duane go hungry, as he tells it, and very often he was provided with lavish cuisine:

A spacious table was soon covered with a fine damask cloth, and salvers of the most delicious fruit, light wines and a service of chocolate with hot rolls of as good a quality and as well made and baked as we could have had in Philadelphia. Eggs and butter and sweetmeats and a handsome case of liqueurs covered the board [...] our appetites were good, and our host and hostess perfectly delightful, and appeared to enjoy our familiarity without reserve.

Similarly sumptuous preparations were made for the following day's trek:

We took the opportunity to lay up in some baskets, arepa bread, rice, sweet bananas, some raspadura or cakes of sugar, bottles of fresh milk, a small basket of limes, plenty of young onions, a dozen live fowls, and closing our evening with chocolate and arepas we were in our hammocks before nine o'clock.

In Bogotá Duane met John Devereux, the organiser and rear commander of the Irish Legion that fought with Bolívar. Devereux introduced Duane to one of the monks in Bogotá's Franciscan monastery. Duane was 'not a little surprised to be accosted in the English language, ornamented with a very genteel brogue.' He met with this 'Irish friar' on a number of occasions; a somewhat unlikely pair. The principal topic of their conversations appears to have been the monk's lamenting of the bad effects on society and morals of the recent revolution.

In Valencia, Venezuela Duane fell down a staircase and was attended to by an Irish doctor, William Murphy of Sligo, a Surgeon in the Republican Army. In Duane's words: 'as a Catholic and a man of talents, his own country was the last in which he could expect to prosper. Colombia presented to him a field where his qualifications and virtues promised to place him on equal terms with other men of virtue and worth.' Dr. Murphy is mentioned in the work of Eric Lambert, notwithstanding that he gives his first name as Richard. According to Lambert, Murphy stayed on in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, where he

offered his services to the city's poor and had a statue erected in his honour at the Hospital de la Caridad. [4] Incidentally, Murphy was not the only Irish doctor whom Duane encountered; he mentions another Sligo native, Dr. Mullery.

At a place called Serinza Duane came across Colonel Lyster, who, like John Devereux, was from County Wexford:

We had not advanced quite to the town when we recognized some officers in the Colombian uniform, dashing towards us in the desperate style of riding so common in Colombia. It was Colonel Lyster and five other officers of the Irish Legion, on their way to join the army under Urdaneta [...Lyster] had served in the British Army in Spain, and with the experience of that war had acquired the fluent use of the Castilian language. [...] I was gratified at meeting him in the bosom of the Andes, as if we had both been on the banks of the Barrow.

Duane was not a particularly astute or subtle student of human nature, but there are occasional fine descriptive vignettes, such as his portrait of an old man selling milk in the mountains, or an extended depiction of the tragic figure of a widow whose husband had died in the Revolution. As has been noted in the case of his enjoyment of fine food, Duane was something of a *bon viveur*. At the time of his journey he was approaching his mid-sixties, yet he maintained an eye for the many good-looking women he encountered along his route. For example at Santa Rosa, a place of 'industry, activity and opulence', he came across a group of young women by a stream:

The neatness of their silk shoes, and the saucy breeze ascending from the adjacent river displaying more of their silk stockings than they seemed to intend, could not but attract the eye of the traveller sauntering along, and he must be a stoic who could not afford a smile on passing the pleasant disorder of the pretty señoritas. And it would be a miracle if the young ladies did not laugh too on seeing, by the stranger's significant leer, that their confusion was understood and noted.

There are few records of Duane after his return to the United States, though we know that he was appointed prothonotary (First Officer) of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania for the eastern district, an office which he retained until his death in 1835. He remained loyal to the country of his youth and family. In 1827, he was involved in collecting money for a Robert Emmet memorial in New York City and delivered the eulogy of the patriot. It is worth mentioning that his stepson, Richard Bache, also seized the opportunity to write about the trip, publishing his account in 1827 (Bache 1827).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Irish people travelled and emigrated to the Americas in their millions, travel writing by the Irish in the Western Hemisphere is scanty. Travellers such as Theobald Wolfe Tone and Lord Edward Fitzgerald left some - often acerbic - observations on what they saw, while in the Irish language there is Mici MacGabhann's *Rotha Mór an tSaoil*, (The Big Wheel of Life) set in the Western States and the Klondyke. In Hispanic America, Pedro Alonso O'Crowley's *Idea compendiosa del Reyno de Nueva España*, published in the 1770s, is a fascinating if fanciful description of Mexico, while one could perhaps list William Bulfin's *Tales of the Pampas* as possessing elements of the travel literature genre. There are undoubtedly a number of others, but to this small canon should definitely be added William Duane's *Visit to Colombia*.

Notes

[1] In addition to Nigel Little's dissertation, see below the standard biography of Duane by Kim Tousley Phillips.

[2] I am grateful to Prof. Kevin Whelan for this information.

[3] See the full title below.

[4] The late Brian McGinn shared my interest in Duane and provided me with these details on Dr. Murphy. *Que Descanse en Paz*.

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