

Daniel Florence [*Florencio*] O'Leary (c.1802-1854), army officer in the South American Wars of Independence



Daniel Florence O'Leary (c.1802-1854). Bronze by anonymous artist.
(Government Arts Collection, London
<http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk>)

O'Leary, Daniel Florence [*Florencio*] (c.1802-1854), army officer in the South American Wars of Independence, was born in Cork City at the turn of the nineteenth century to a relatively prosperous merchant family. His paternal grandfather, Florence O'Leary, of Dunmanway in West Cork, had moved to the southern city to become a grocer and butter merchant. The business was inherited by his two sons Daniel and Jeremiah, who owned it in partnership. Jeremiah, a member of the influential Cork Committee of Merchants, married Catherine Burke, who hailed from a family involved in tailoring and the licensed victualling trade in Cork City. The couple had ten children in all, few of whom survived to adulthood. Daniel Florence was their eighth child. His elder brother became a medical doctor in Killarney, County Kerry and his sister Catherine was a milliner in Cork.

In 1815, as the Napoleonic Wars in Europe finally drew to a close, the merchants of Cork, who had grown wealthy through provisioning the British Navy and the West Indian trade, were faced with disaster. Jeremiah O'Leary's business went bankrupt and two years later his son, Daniel Florence, aged only sixteen, decided to join the army. He was recruited as Second Lieutenant by the British Legion in London for the 1st or 2nd Division of the Venezuelan Red Hussars under Colonel Henry Wilson. In December of that year, the cavalry regiment sailed from Portsmouth, England on the corvette *Prince*.

In February 1818 they disembarked at St. Georges, Granada, and two months later arrived at Angostura, present-day Ciudad Bolívar. Shortly after arrival, Wilson was sent back to England on suspicion of political intrigue. O'Leary busied himself with studying the Spanish language and subsequently travelled to Guyana to join the troops being organised there by Simón Bolívar, recognised as the Liberator of northern South America. He was presented to General Carlos Soublette, future President of Venezuela and father-in-law of Daniel Florence O'Leary, and was chosen for the Dragoon Squadron of the Guard of Honour under the command of General José Antonio Anzoátegui. O'Leary had a personal audience with Simón Bolívar at this time.

By early 1819 on an inspection of the troops by Bolívar, O'Leary had been promoted to the rank of First Adjutant of the Dragoons. He received a facial injury from a sabre wound in July 1819 at the battle of Pantano de Vargas, resulting in false reports of his death in the Cork newspapers. From his arrival in South America, O'Leary distinguished himself in numerous battles and rose through the ranks of the army to become aide-de-camp to Anzoátegui. In September 1819 Bolívar authorised O'Leary's member-

ship of the order of Liberators and named him one of his own personal aides-de-camp. He accompanied the Liberator to sign a peace treaty in favour of the new state of Venezuela in Trujillo and sealed the country's independence at Carabobo. O'Leary was named Colonel in 1827 and a year later he married Soledad Soublette. He was finally appointed Brigadier General by Bolívar in 1830.

O'Leary had a round beardless face, a high forehead, brown hair, sparse sideburns and bright attentive eyes. He was literate and educated, though no records survive as to where he received this education. He had a lively interest in history, science, the natural world and politics, understanding the import of the events in which he was involved in South America, and conserving records and papers. He was also an adept horseman.

Subsequent to the death of Simón Bolívar, Daniel Florence O'Leary and his wife Soledad Soublette travelled to Kingston, Jamaica, where the General attempted to set himself up as a merchant and the couple had the first of their nine children. In 1833 he was advised by General Soublette to return to Venezuela.

O'Leary was sent by the Government of Venezuela to Europe in 1834 as secretary to the Plenipotentiary General Montilla. While on that side of the Atlantic, General O'Leary visited Cork, though his parents had already passed away. He met with his only surviving sibling Catherine. He spent almost six years as a diplomat in London, Paris, Madrid and the Vatican.

In 1841 the Corkman was appointed British Consul at Caracas and later at Puerto Cabello. Two and a half years later he was appointed British chargé d'affaires and consul-general at Bogotá, Colombia. O'Leary settled in Bogotá with his family on the ranch 'El Chocho' on the savannah. For health reasons O'Leary again travelled to Europe in 1852 to visit consultants and receive treatment in Paris, Rome and Malvern, Worcestershire. Back in Cork, he presented his collection of minerals, plants and birds from South America to Queen's College Cork, now University College Cork.

Daniel Florence O'Leary arrived back in Bogotá in December 1853. Just two months later he died of apoplexy caused by a brain haemorrhage early on the morning of 24 February 1854. Some twenty-eight years later his remains were removed to the National Pantheon in Caracas, Venezuela, close to the final resting place of Simón Bolívar.

O'Leary's son, Simón Bolívar O'Leary collated and edited his father's extensive manuscript collection on the South American wars of independence in the 32-volume *Memorias del General O'Leary*, a crucial source in the study of the era. Daniel Florence O'Leary's papers were donated by the family to the 'Archivo del Libertador' (Liberator's Archive) in Caracas, Venezuela.

Claire Healy

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