

William Owens Ferguson (1800-1828), army officer in the South American wars of independence

Ferguson, William Owens (1800-1828), army officer in the South American wars of independence, was born in Ballinderry, County Antrim, the eldest son of John Ferguson (d. 1845), from a family of linen drapers in Belfast, and his wife Agnes, née Knox (d. 1861). Their other children were John Ferguson (d. 1868), the poet, antiquarian and president of Royal Irish Academy Samuel Ferguson (1810-1886), Hester Ferguson, who married Archibald Macelkeran, Mary Eliza Ferguson, who married John Cowan, and Ellen Ferguson (d. 1841), who married William Haughton. The family were descendants of Scottish Presbyterian immigrants who settled in Ulster.

According to Ferguson's own account, in his formative years he was 'headstrong and difficult' (*Journal*). After getting into financial difficulties, he was sent to South America on a commission in Simón Bolívar's army in 1818.

During his short yet eventful life, William Ferguson stood out as an intelligent and intrepid officer, and Simón Bolívar entrusted him with important responsibilities. He joined the South American army on 4 November 1818 as second lieutenant, was promoted to lieutenant on 2 September 1819, to captain on 1 January 1820, to lieutenant-colonel on 9 December 1824 and to colonel on 15 March 1828. Ferguson served in the Battalion of Rifles of the Guards, in the Staff of the North, the Battalion Voltigeurs of the Guards and in the Staff of General Simón Bolívar.

William Ferguson participated in the campaign of 1819 in the lower Apure and was present at the action of Camarra. He also saw action in the campaign of the East against Cumana. He was taken prisoner by the Spaniards at sea and carried to Puerto Cabello where he was imprisoned for four months. He embarked on the war schooner *Admiral Brown* and was present at a naval action.

Ferguson commanded the troops who landed on the island of Puerto Rico. He joined the expedition in Margarita as aide-de-camp to the commandant general, Colonel Mariano Montilla. He served in the entire campaign of Río Hacha, was present in the actions of Fonseca, San Juan, Molinos, Gurumito, Moreno and the general actions of Río Hacha. He served in the campaign of the Magdalena and was present at the taking of the Fort of Savanilla. With his company, Ferguson fought and entirely routed the enemy's vanguard in Pueblo Nuevo. Ferguson participated in both surprise attacks at Turbaso and fought for eight months during the siege of Cartagena.

William Ferguson served in the campaign of the South and was present with his company, the 2nd Rifles, in Bombona. He conducted several guerrilla campaigns until the surrender of Pasto. Ferguson fought in battles at the bridge of Guaytara, at Taindala, Tachanguer and Pasto, where he was promoted for bravery. In 1823 he served in the independence wars of Peru at the fortress of Callao and against Riva Agüero. The following year Ferguson took part in the battles of Junín and Ayacucho. With his company he did duty as a guerrilla fighter with the 3rd in Corpaguaico. He served in the campaign of Upper Peru against the Spanish General Hanesta, pursuing the rest of his army until the surrender of Valdez in Turmusla. He was employed in the pacification of Cinti and Tarija and he aided the passage of the battalions Junín and Pichincha through the Cordillera.

William Ferguson was decorated with the order of Liberators of Venezuela, and with the medals of the Liberators of Quito and Ayacucho. He received the shield, embroidered on the left arm, of the Magdalena in the years 1820 and 1821. He also received the order of *Beneméritos de la Patria* in Colombia and *En grado eminente* in Peru. He was twice wounded, once in the campaign of the East in 1819 and again in the taking of Carmen in 1820.

On the orders of Simón Bolívar, Ferguson carried the Liberator's constitution to the Republic of Bolivia. He rode together with Bedford Wilson from Lima across the Andes to Chuquisaca (1,800 miles) in nineteen days and did the return journey in a similar time. In 1827 he was took charge of providing rations and accommodation to the force at Chuiacota that was to march from Bucaramanga and Ocana

to Trujillo. By a subsequent order he took command of the vanguard of the army that marched on Venezuela against rebel forces. With only 120 men of the Battalion Paya, Ferguson managed to take control of the west of Venezuela in the space of two days, the defence of which consisted of four battalions of regular militia, eight squadrons of cavalry and four pieces of artillery. He managed to espouse these forces to the official government cause. By moving on Barquisimeto, which he took by surprise, the Colonel occupied San Felipe, Nirgua and Arsura and forced the division which had invaded Barinas to capitulate. During this campaign in Venezuela he kept a diary, a *Journal from Lima to Caracas*, including military and other details of his journey from Peru to Venezuela.

In his twentieth-nine year, William Ferguson was on duty at Bogotá as aide-de-camp to General Bolívar when a plot was hatched against the General. On 28 September 1828 Ferguson, mistaken by the conspirators for Bolívar, was shot in the back and mortally wounded while walking down the street. He had been engaged to the daughter of José Manuel Tatis of Cartagena, treasurer in Bolívar's army. After his death the people of Bogotá honoured William Ferguson with a public funeral and buried his remains in the cathedral - an unusual honour for a Protestant - and erected a handsome monument which bears a grateful inscription to 'Colonel Guillermo Fergusson'.

Edmundo Murray

References

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