

Brazil and Ireland

By Edmundo Murray

The first Irish settler in Brazil was a missionary, Thomas Field S.J. (1547-1626), born in Limerick, who entered the Jesuit Order in Rome in 1574. Fr. Field arrived in Brazil in late 1577 and spent three years in Piratininga (present-day São Paulo). He then moved to Paraguay in the company of two other Jesuits, and over the next ten years they established missions among the Guaraní people. Thomas Field, who died in Asunción, is credited with being the first priest to celebrate the Roman Catholic rites in the Americas.

Around 1612 the Irish brothers Philip and James Purcell established a colony in Tauregue, at the mouth of the Amazon river, where English, Dutch, and French settlements were also established. Huge profits were made by the colonists from trading in tobacco, dyes, and hardwoods. A second group arrived in 1620 led by Bernardo O'Brien of County Clare. They built a wood and earthen fort on the north bank of the Amazon and named the place Coconut Grove. O'Brien learned the dialect of the Arruan people, and his colleagues became expert navigators of the maze of tributaries, canals and islands that form the mouth of the Amazon. The first recorded Saint Patrick's Day celebration was on 17 March 1770 at a church built in honour of the saint by Lancelot Belfort (1708-1775). The church was located on his estate, known as Kilrue, beside the Itapecurú River in the state of Maranhão in northern Brazil.

Several Irish soldiers served in Brazilian armies, including Diago Nicolau Keating, Diago O'Grady, and Jorge Cowan. Another Irish military man, William Cotter, was sent to Ireland in 1826 to recruit a regiment for service against Argentina. Cotter went to County Cork where he promised the local people that if they enlisted they would be given a grant of land after five years' service. He left for Rio de Janeiro in 1827 with 2,400 men and some of their wives and children, but they were completely neglected when they arrived. The Irish mutinied together with a German regiment, and for a few days there was open warfare on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. While most were ultimately sent home or re-emigrated to Canada or Argentina, some did stay and were sent to form a colony in the province of Bahia.

In the 1850s the Brazilian government was anxious to raise agricultural production and to increase the population of its southern provinces, in particular with northern European immigrants. After German and Swiss governments imposed restrictions on emigration to Brazil as a consequence of the poor conditions that many of these countries' citizens had experienced there, Brazil turned its attention to other possible sources of immigrants. Fr. T. Donovan, an Irish Catholic priest, led up to four hundred people from the County Wexford barony of Forth to Monte Bonito, near Pelotas in the then province of Rio Grande do Sul. The Irish colony rapidly collapsed, and most of the survivors made their way to Argentina or Uruguay, complaining of the lack of preparations for their reception, the lack of agricultural tools, poor land, scarce water, and of the local diet.

Further colonisation schemes in Brazil were also a failure. In 1867 Quintino Bocayuva, a Brazilian newspaper editor and future republican leader, was sent to New York by the Brazilian government to recruit immigrants. His mission was to sign up former Confederates, but to help fill the ships he also dispatched several hundred poverty-stricken Irish. Most of these were sent to Colônia Príncipe Dom Pedro, near present-day Brusque in the province of Santa Catarina. Fr. Joseph Lazenby, an Irish Jesuit living in the provincial capital, made his way to Príncipe Dom Pedro and declared that he would develop the village into an Irish Catholic colony. Lazenby soon got in contact with Fr. George Montgomery, an



Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers in Brazil, 2004
([The Spiritans](#))

Irish Catholic priest in the English 'Black Country' town of Wednesbury, who arranged in 1868 for some three hundred of his parishioners to be sent to Brazil. Montgomery maintained that the Irish had no future in England and saw in Brazil an opportunity to create Irish Catholic communities. He firmly believed that thousands more Irish living in England would soon be joining the first emigrants. However, within just two years the new Irish colony had failed. It was located far from any possible markets and its land was vulnerable to flooding. Many of the immigrants died, and the survivors moved on to other parts of Brazil, Argentina and the United States, or returned to England.

Irish immigration to Brazil was also the main objective of the *Anglo-Brazilian Times* newspaper, published weekly by William Scully in Rio de Janeiro between 1865 and 1884. Scully was also the founder of the 'Sociedade Internacional de Imigração' in 1866, which represented his material support to the Brazilian government.

Irish diplomats served British interests in Brazil. Daniel Robert O'Sullivan (1865-1921), medical doctor, army officer, and diplomat, whose career was largely spent in East Africa and Brazil, served as British consul or consul-general in Bahia (1907), São Paulo (1910), and Rio de Janeiro (1907-1908, 1913-1915, 1919-1921). The Irish patriot Roger Casement (1864-1916) was a British consular official in Brazil in 1906-1911. In 1906 Casement was appointed consul in Santos and in 1908 he became the consul in Pará (Belém). He was promoted to consul-general in Rio de Janeiro in 1909, a position he retained until 1913. In 1910 Casement was directed by the Foreign Office to occupy a commission of enquiry sent to the rubber-producing Putumayo region of the western Amazon, an area straddling the Peruvian-Colombian frontier, to investigate treatment of the local Indian population by the Peruvian Amazon Company. He was knighted in 1911 for this and for similar work in Africa. During the First World War Casement sided with Germany as a tactic to promote Irish independence, and in 1916 he was hanged by the British for treason. To damage his reputation, the British publicised the existence of Casement's diaries, which included numerous graphic and coded accounts of his homosexual activities in Brazil and elsewhere.



Dancing in the streets of Dublin after the football match vs. Ghana, 27 June 2006
(John O'Reilly)

In 1964 Michael J. Siejes was appointed as the first honorary consul of Ireland in Rio de Janeiro, and later Pádraig de Paor was appointed non-resident Irish ambassador accredited to Brazil. In September 1975 an Irish trade mission led by Robin Bury visited São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The Irish diplomatic mission was established in Brazil in 1975, and Brazil opened its embassy in Dublin in 1991. The first resident Irish ambassador to Brazil, Martin Greene, arrived in Brasília in December 2001.

In Latin America, Brazil is Ireland's second most important trading partner after Mexico, with an average of US\$154 million in exports and US\$80 million in imports per annum in 1996-2002 (International Monetary Fund, *Direction of Trade Statistics*, Yearbook 2003). In 1999 Kerry do Brasil was the first major Irish company to set up in Brazil with a US\$20 million investment in a production plant in Três Corações.

There are a significant number of missionary undertakings by Irish religious orders in Brazil. The Redemptorists established themselves in Brazil in 1960, the Kiltigans in 1963, and the Holy Ghosts in

1967. In 2004, John Cribbin O.M.I., of Shanagolden, County Limerick, was awarded honorary citizenship of Rio de Janeiro for his work there since 1962.

Among the academic initiatives in the region, since 1999 the Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses at the University of São Paulo has been publishing the *ABEI Journal: The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies*, edited by Munira H. Mutran and Laura P.Z. Izarra. The University of São Paulo has offered a post-graduate course on Irish literature since 1977.

By the end of 2000, it was estimated that 925 Irish citizens were living in Brazil, 64 per cent of them in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Bahia. In Ireland, one of the most significant Latin American communities is that of the Brazilians in counties Galway and Roscommon dating back to 1999. Most hail from the countryside near Anápolis in the state of Goiás and arrived equipped with experience in working in slaughterhouses in Brazil. A large number of Brazilians have also recently settled in Dublin City and in Naas, County Kildare.

Edmundo Murray

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See also *The Irish in Latin America and Iberia: A Bibliography (Brazil)*. [[document](#)]