

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

From a Shipwreck to Macayadas: The Macays in Ecuador

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Legend has it that around the middle of the eighteenth century a shipwreck occurred in the Spanish Pacific, off the north-western coast of South America, from which a small number of survivors on a small craft managed to reach the shores of the Audiencia of Quito. They landed at Crucita, a fishing village on the northern coast of the Gobernación de Guayaquil. Among the survivors were a family who claimed to be Irish, consisting of a young couple and their infant son. They had lost all their belongings and salvaged only a briefcase well stocked with silver coins and some jewellery, yet they were fortunate enough to receive help from the local fishermen who escorted them to the neighbouring Spanish town of San Esteban de Charapotó.



San Esteban de Charapotó
(Guía Turística Digital del Cantón Sucre)

Records of this tragic accident have yet to be located, together with the identity of the lost vessel which perhaps would shed light on the reasons why an Irish family was travelling in Spanish waters. The ship may have been on its way south, to Callao or Buenos Aires, where Bourbon reformism had recently allowed foreign merchants to operate, or perhaps north, on its way to Panama. So the question remains: what was an Irish family doing in the realms of the jealously guarded Spanish Empire, generally hostile to outsiders? We know very little about them except for the hispanicised name of the head of the family, Juan Nepomuceno Macay and that of his young son, Albert Macay, but we gather that they were well received by the Creole families in Charapotó, since despite the nature of their arrival they settled there and never left the town. This article seeks to trace the history of this family and some of its descendants and to investigate the ease with which they integrated into local society and participated in some of the most important political events in the early national period in Ecuador. The town of San Esteban de Charapotó was located a short distance from the harbour that bears the same name, at the edge of a beautiful, emerald-green valley, which is striking to this day, since the valley is surrounded by chalky, dry slopes, the result of climatic conditions brought about by the Humboldt Current as it flows from the Antarctic up the coast of South America. According to colonial records, by the 1740s San Esteban de Charapotó had only ten Spanish families (Alcedo y Herrera). In the following decades demographic growth changed the character of the town.

Charapotó attracted Creoles from other parts of the Audiencia and from neighbouring New Granada, as well as newly arrived Spaniards, more than likely also the result of Bourbon policies easing trade restrictions. The area was out of the reach of colonial control, far away from Guayaquil and Quito, centres of colonial government, and so it offered excellent opportunities to engage in trade unbeknownst to authorities. Furthermore, by the end of the century, a locally manufactured product was swiftly becoming the most important export commodity after cocoa in the coastal region



Toquilla hats
([Images d'Ailleurs](#))

of the Audiencia: this was the *toquilla* hat, later misnamed the Panama hat. *Toquilla* hats were woven from the leaves of a native palm tree in nearby rural communities by men, women and children, following ancestral indigenous traditions. The *sombrero ordinario* had found an important niche in the Caribbean markets and the torrid valleys of Peru, and was much in demand in plantations to protect the enslaved labourers from the scorching sun. Of course there was also the ‘sombrero fino,’ so delicately woven that it could be folded many times without losing its shape, and which to this day carries a higher price. It was foreign demand for the *sombrero ordinario* which boosted the local economies, compensating for its lower price with the volumes exported. Sleepy towns like Montecristi, Jipijapa and Charapotó were abruptly awakened, as the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano would have it, under the magic touch of commerce.

The Macays fared well in Charapotó, more than likely engaging in the export trade. They married their children Albert and Ramona into prominent local families. In later generations, the name of the founder of the lineage - the survivor of the shipwreck - was always honoured: Juan Antonio Macay y de la Chica, the son of Albert Macay, Juan Antonio Macay y Ureta, his grandson, and Juan Francisco Macay Lozano, his great-grandson. Several of their descendants were sent abroad to further their education: Elio and Benito Santos Macay went to the Sorbonne in Paris to become medical doctors, while Juan Francisco Macay was listed by the British Census Commissioners in 1881 as a native of Ecuador and science student in London. Others attended schools in the United States of America. The reality was that Charapotó was more connected to the outside world than to elsewhere in the country.

The lack of roads made it easier to board a passing vessel and sail to distant lands than to visit cities like Quito, the capital of the Audiencia, and later the capital of Ecuador. Yet living conditions in the province remained extremely primitive, taking a heavy toll on well-trained young men returning to their native land. Several among them were not up to the challenge, succumbing to depression and even suicide.

After independence from Spain in 1822 and secession from Colombia in 1830, liberalism became the main contesting force in Ecuador, as was the case in other Latin American countries. Liberals sought to modernise the country by separating church from state, hoping to create a more secular society. They also wished to implement economic regulations more in accordance with the needs of the market. The struggle was particularly strenuous and protracted in Ecuador, where a *de facto* confessional state had been in existence since the early 1860s. Not surprisingly, Charapotó, along with other merchant towns in the province of Manabí, became strongholds for liberal ideas. This was particularly because the main *caudillo* (leader) of Ecuadorian liberalism, Eloy Alfaro, was a native of neighbouring Montecristi, and the second-in-command, Leonidas Plaza Gutierrez, twice president of Ecuador once the liberals seized power, was a native of Charapotó.



Segunda María de la Concepción Santos Macay (1870-1955), Guayaquil 1896
(Galería de Artes de Castillo y Alvarado)

Early on in the liberal struggle, Charapotó was burned to the ground by government forces as a reprisal for a liberal manifesto issued by Manuel Santos Centeno, a grandson of Ramona Macay. Another member of the family, Antonio Macay, was appointed by Alfaro 'Comandante de Armas de Manabí y Esmeraldas' in 1883, in one of Alfaro's many attempts to oust conservatives from power. Exiled in Panama during most of his adult life, Alfaro had sacrificed all of his resources and his family's well-being to the liberal cause, orchestrating military campaigns over and over until he finally succeeded in 1895. Fortunately for Alfaro he had a benefactor who looked after his every need, Jose Miguel Macay Lozano. *Pepito* Macay, as he was called, had left Charapotó along with other families when the town was destroyed by fire. He moved to El Salvador in Central America, where he acquired great wealth in the mining industry. A close friend of Alfaro, he looked after his every need, even bequeathing partial ownership of his mining venture to Alfaro so that he could enjoy a steady income to support his family. The only condition was that Alfaro cease his political activities, something that of course Alfaro was unwilling to accept (Santovenia 1943: 70-71). In his private correspondence Alfaro always spoke fondly of his friend and was greatly saddened when news of Macay's death reached him while campaigning in Esmeraldas (Andrade 1916).

The Macays were a prolific clan. As a quick search on the Family History webpage of the Church of Latter Day Saints shows, there are so many listings for the name Macay in Charapotó and its surroundings that the surname would seem to be indigenous to the province of Manabí rather than the result of a twist of fate earlier in the eighteenth century. Of course not all of their progeny was successful, in particular those who bore the stigma of illegitimacy. To this day one can find families bearing the name Macay in impoverished rural communities, leading a life no different from that of other peasants, their heritage betrayed only by their fair complexion and perhaps by blue eyes, a result of endogamous practices.

How did their contemporaries perceive these taller, often red-haired, sometimes blue-eyed neighbours? They highlighted their eccentricities, coining across generations a phrase for that purpose: *la macayada* (the Macay ways). And indeed tales of their sometimes odd behaviour would rival those of the mythical Macondo, as narrated by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. A scientist and inventor, formerly a student in London, spending the rest of his life in a hut on an isolated beach; a successful family man confining himself to a soundproof dwelling, plastered with *balsa* wood for that purpose, never to be seen again, even by his children who dutifully delivered his daily meals to his doorstep. Perhaps there was a trace of mental illness, also the result of endogamous practices. Or perhaps these were the consequences, to borrow the title of García Márquez' novel, of one hundred years of solitude.

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