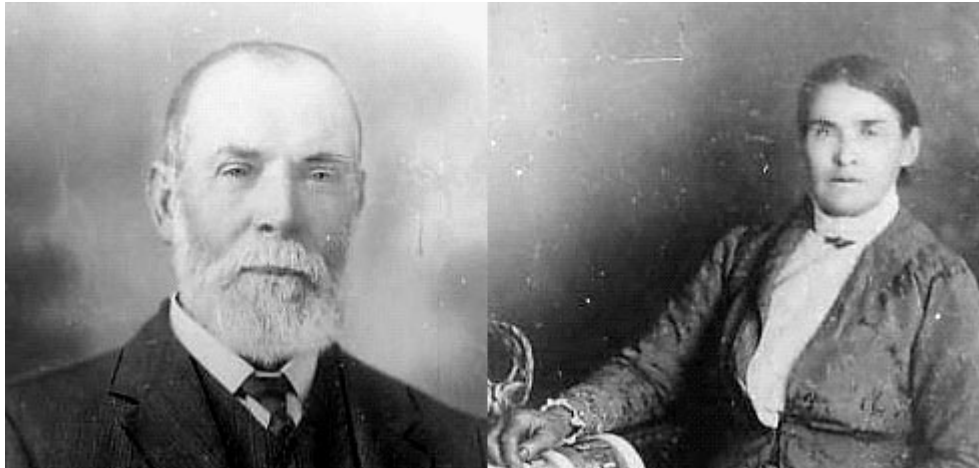


Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

From Ireland to South America: A Story of Departures, Separations and Reunions

By Julia Boland and Marilyn Boland



Matthew Boland (1840-1917) and Sarah Boland (*née* Monaghan), married in 1877

Emigration

There is no known record of the birth of John Boland, but from the dates of birth of his children, he was probably born about 1805 or earlier. He is said to have married Margaret Kelly at 'Llemonahan' on 27 February 1832, and they had four children, James, John (*jun.*), Bridged and Mathew. Mathew Boland (1840-1917) was the first to travel to Australia on an assisted passage on *The Light Brigade* and arrived in Sydney on 21 May 1867. Mathew stated on the shipping list that his father was a farmer in 'Lumcloon,' Cloghan, in King's County (present-day County Offaly), and that his mother was dead.

When Mathew first arrived he went to work on the gold fields at Sofala near Bathurst and later moved to Molong district where he worked on the land for some time, before he was able to select a plot of land at Amaroo in 1870, which he named 'Calabash' after the hill on the plot which looked like a pumpkin. In 1877, Mathew married Sarah Monaghan, a native of Bathurst, Australia, and they had four children: William, John, Elizabeth Miriam Jane and Patrick (Percy), the youngest, born in 1886 and died in Santa Cruz, Bolivia in 1958.

From Australia to Bolivia: The Adventure

On the first journey it is clear that Mathew Boland emigrated from Ireland in search of more prosperous climes. The second trip, by his son to America, is more difficult to explain. However, a hypothesis can be formulated thanks to information obtained in Australia. It was the youngest of Mathew's sons, Patrick James, that left the land of his birth. He was born in 1886 and known in Bolivia as Percy James Boland. The reasons why he changed his name from Patrick James to Percy James are not known, but it can be assumed that the change eased pronunciation of his name. What is sure is that the 17 March (St. Patrick's Day) was always a reason for a party in his house. These days, his descendants continue to celebrate that date with a gathering of all of the members of the Boland clan, currently over 120 people.

Percy's journey all the way to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, was long and difficult. Only a great adventurous spirit could inspire and sustain such a trip, in view of the conditions of the period. In 1907, he arrived in San Francisco, California, after the 1906 earthquake, on a boat with a cargo of horses. The opportunity of work which existed in America was possible because of the combination of his experience in agriculture and

breeding at the farm in Amaroo, and his studies as a fitter and turner in Orange, New South Wales, equivalent to mechanical engineering today.



The child Percy Boland Rodríguez, supported by his father Percy J. Boland, on the mudguard of the first car that arrived in Santa Cruz.

An understanding of motors was very much in demand in those times. It was the era of the production and export of the first cars from the USA. That is how a new challenge emerged: that of accompanying the first cars that arrived in Argentina, in 1911. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first car arrived in Santa Cruz. Sitting on the mudguard of the vehicle was the child Percy Boland Rodríguez, supported by his father Percy J. Boland.

Unfortunately very little is known of the period between his arrival in the USA in 1907 and his

ultimate settlement in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, in 1912. It was in the latter region that Percy Boland left an enduring mark, where he settled, and where he died on 6 March 1958. The car trip from Buenos Aires, Argentina to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, took him six months. He was contracted to participate in this trip because he was able to fix the motor and produce parts if necessary. It is possible that this long and trying time was one of the reasons why he was reluctant to face the return journey. Or perhaps he fell in love with the place and its women, famous for their beauty...

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of Santa Cruz was about 18,300 inhabitants, and around 1922, it had reached 20,000, according to information published by the Society of Geographic and Historical Studies. The roads and paths leading to other departments in Bolivia and to other countries were not yet built, and it was a remote and inaccessible region.

Percy Boland arrived in a small town, a little village, markedly backward in comparison with the important cities of the high plains. It is possible that because of the isolation of the region, anyone arriving from foreign countries was held in high estimation, even more so if they were 'gringos' from the USA. Percy spoke only English and had lived in San Francisco, making it very easy to believe that he was a US-American citizen, also due to the fact that Australia was unknown to most people in Bolivia. The esteem in which foreigners were held facilitated his rapid integration into the highest echelons of *cruceño* society, intensified by the founding of a family and the arrival of his children.



Typical image of coaches in 1895. In the Santa Cruz of old, the main mode of transporting cargo was a coach drawn by oxen, even today they can be seen carrying agricultural produce from the countryside to the outskirts of the city.

Percy's legacy in Santa Cruz

Like many descendants of Irish people who settled in remote regions of Latin America, Percy Boland was a pioneer. He developed activities that were hitherto unknown at those latitudes. In the period in which he arrived, Santa Cruz was a backward and isolated town. The eastern region, today the most thriving region in Bolivia, was overlooked by the central government in the West with regard to infrastructure and, above all, roads. It was only in the mid-1950s that the road to other important centres was completed and the work on the railway was finalised, connecting this region to Brazil.

Since then there has been a period of accelerated and progressive growth, and agriculture is prospering because of the commercialisation of produce. The isolation of the region was gradually alleviated due to the efforts of the inhabitants of Santa Cruz. It was necessary to form cooperatives to install electricity and a telephone service. An overview of the period highlights the significance of Percy's work. He is connected to factors that undoubtedly assisted in the progress and modernisation of the Department.

In the region, Patrick/Percy Boland founded:



First car repair shop and ice manufacturing plant in Santa Cruz.

- The first 'maestranza' (mechanics' workshop), five blocks south of the main square in Santa Cruz.
- The first ice factory, transforming habits and customs due to the torrid climate of the region.
- The first power plant, that began to function in 1923, from which extended the first distribution network, the installation of public lighting and the first domestic connections.
- The construction and administration of the first swimming pool in the city (Hawai Pool).

Finally, there are indications that he was involved in the construction of the first oil refinery in

Bolivia.

The town of the dusty streets was transformed into a modern urban centre, today considered the economic engine of Bolivia. Santa Cruz is the department that receives the largest amount of internal migrants from other Bolivian cities. Santa Cruz has its own particular way of life, developed throughout four centuries, in which Spanish roots, the influence of the tropical environment, the spirit of adventure and the perception that there was an unlimited land to be conquered, the familiarity and the simplicity of the customs and other diverse elements, all play a part in giving that unmistakable stamp to this part of the Bolivian nation.

The first descendants of Percy

The second son of Percy was Percy Junior, faithful heir of the characteristic spirit and impetuousness of the Irish. He also contributed greatly to the community of Santa Cruz, as a gynaecologist and obstetrician, trained in La Plata, Argentina, and a graduate of Harvard, Boston in Public Health. He was also a founding and honorary member of the Bolivian Society of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the Bolivian Society of Public Health. He was named 'Master of Latin American Gynaeco-Obstetrics' in the Dominican Republic in 1984, and the maternity hospital in Santa Cruz bears his name. He was president of the Pro Santa Cruz Committee, the Santa Cruz Tennis Club and the Rotary Club. He founded the Youth Exchange Programme of the Rotary Club and was Governor of the 469 district of Rotary International. He was also Vice-Chancellor of the state university 'Gabriel René Moreno' and founded the Santa Cruz Federation of Professionals. Percy Junior died in Santa Cruz in January 1994.

Percy Junior's sister Nelly married at a young age, and was widowed shortly thereafter. She had one son and six grandchildren. She died in Santa Cruz in December 1996. Patsy married a colonel in the Bolivian Army. She had just one daughter, who had four children. She died in Santa Cruz in December 1989. Dolly married a well-known lawyer in Santa Cruz and had one daughter and four sons. She died in April 2006. Freddy, the youngest of the children, married young. He had two sons and two daughters. He had a successful career in insurance and died in Santa Cruz in November 1987. Nancy also married a lawyer in Santa Cruz and dedicated many years of her life to teaching in primary schools. She has two sons and two daughters. Nancy and her husband are now retired and share their time with their much loved nine grandchildren.

Journey from Bolivia to Argentina: Exile

Percy's eldest son Hernán was attracted to politics from a very young age. At seventeen, he enrolled as a volunteer to fight in the Chaco War against Paraguay. He was taken prisoner, and his family took him for dead, but to everyone's surprise he returned home. Years later he received the Chaco War medal of honour, which filled him with pride. As an adult, he founded a local political party, the Workers' Union, with his friend Edmundo Roca, which was later subsumed into the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), led by Víctor Paz Estenssoro. In Santa Cruz, Hernán was President of the Banco Agrícola, Chief of Police and legislator.

Bolivian history has a sad record of changes of government. In the past sixty years, from 1946 to date, there were 45 changes. Interim governments and military juntas were the most frequent. Constitutional governments that completed their mandate were a rarity. This helps to understand why Hernán fled to save his life after the fall of President Gualberto Villarroel, who was murdered and hanged in the public square of La Paz as a warning. Edmundo Roca, with whom Hernán had founded the Workers' Union, was murdered by violent groups who also looted his houses. In the midst of this situation and thanks to the aid of certain people, Hernán managed to escape to Argentina, a place to which his wife Raquel and six-month-old daughter Julia arrived some months later. All of their belongings had been robbed or destroyed and their bank accounts had been blocked.

However, despite these adverse circumstances, Hernán managed to find his way thanks to his diligence and his personality, which inspired affection and friendships at every step. Hernán worked as a foreign correspondent for the Santa Cruz newspaper *El Deber*. He finally abandoned politics and integrated into the Argentine community without difficulty, even though he always missed his native country to which he returned just prior to his death, at the age of sixty-two years. Political activity in a country convulsed by coups d'état and changes of government was what obliged him to live in exile in Argentina from 1946 until he died on 3 April 1976, just days after the fall of Isabel Perón and the beginning of one of the darkest periods in Argentine history when 30,000 people were *disappeared*.

Reunions

After Percy had died, it was his son Percy who reinitiated contact with the Australian branch of the family, thanks to his job in charge of the Youth Exchange Programme of the Rotary Club in Santa Cruz and the work of another Rotarian in Australia whom he had informed of the nationality of his father. This person took on the task of tracing the Boland family in the region where they were said to have lived, Amaroo in New South Wales. He found their descendants in a city very nearby, Molong. The first contact was maintained in the form of a periodic correspondence even though they never got to know each other personally. Finally in 1997, three representatives of the South American Bolands, Martha and Marilyn (of Santa Cruz), and Julia (of Buenos Aires) returned to the places where their grandfather Percy had been born and studied, and met their Australian aunts, uncles and cousins. A couple of years previously, Julia had visited Tullamore, County Offaly and had met her cousin John Looby, a descendant of Bridged Boland and Michael Looby who had remained in Ireland. She was the first South American Boland to visit the places from which her ancestors had departed.

Julia Boland and Marilyn Boland

Translated by Claire Healy

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