

# Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

## The Irish in the Peruvian Andes

By Rosario Sheen (\*)

### Origins

According to the coat of arms of the Sheen family, the name originates in the counties of Limerick, Kerry and Cork, in the southeast of Ireland, and it means 'little peaceful one.' It was probably with this peaceful vocation and an adventurous spirit that a young Irishman left his homeland in the opening decades of the 1800s and departed for South America. The exact date when the patriarch of the Sheens arrived in Peru remains unknown, but it is likely to have been subsequent to Peruvian independence (July 1821). The Sheens were the largest family of Irish origin in the Andean country.

My older relatives have told how the coastal city of Trujillo (now the third most important city in Peru, 557 km north of Lima) began to become familiar with a tall, robust and young visitor, with a pronounced foreign accent, whose main activity was commerce. He was William Sheen, who had arrived to the port of Salaverry, not far from Trujillo, and who was baptised by the Trujillians as 'el Gringo Sheen.'

His charisma won him not only clients, but also many friends. One of them once told him of the silver mines in Cajabamba, a province of the department of Cajamarca, located in the northern Peruvian Andes, and very well known for its gold, silver, copper and zinc reserves. Yanacocha, the most important Peruvian gold mine is located in Cajamarca. Peru is the fifth most important gold producer of the world.

As a skilful and intrepid merchant, attracted by the promising future that the mines held, the *Gringo Sheen* left Trujillo and travelled on horseback to Cajabamba with a friend. There are no accounts of that journey, but it is most likely that William would have suffered from *soroche*, the altitude sickness that affects anyone who does not live in the Andes, especially those travelling from the coast. Cajabamba is located in the highlands, at 2654 metres above sea level (m.a.s.l) and to reach it one has to travel across areas and villages at up to 4000 m.a.s.l. However, any inconvenience that trip might have caused was undoubtedly compensated for by the beautiful landscape – similar to that of the Irish countryside - he saw on his way: green valleys, vast meadows, crystalline rivers, animals out grazing, rain followed by rainbows, and blue skies with white snow.

The two friends arrived safe and sound in Cajabamba. It is said that William was impressed with the bucolic landscape and the hospitality of the people. One of the first people he met was Mr. Escuza, a descendant of Spaniards and a member of the Cajabambian 'high society,' who owned some mines. William



Patricio Sheen in Los Alisos farm, Contumaza  
(unknown photographer, ca. 1910)

was fascinated with the idea of starting mining activities in the area, so he soon began to make plans with his friend from Trujillo. However, destiny would later alter those plans.

### Change of Plans

After a short stay in Cajabamba, William returned to Trujillo to put his commercial activities in order. His plans for returning to Cajabamba were taking shape, both because of the mines and for other more influential reasons. One particular day, William informed his friend that he was ready to go back to Cajabamba, not exactly to search for mines but to ask for the hand of Florita, the beautiful daughter of Mr. Escuza, whom he had met on his first trip.

The return journey this time was faster. The *Gringo Sheen* already knew his way back and his heart was in a hurry. The engagement was quite formal and took place in front of the bride's parents. My relatives have related how, before giving the official answer, Florita cited two conditions: that the only language to be spoken in the new home would be Spanish, and that the couple would live in Cajabamba. As love conquers all, there was no objection from the groom. Soon afterwards, the marriage took place in the Cajabamba cathedral. The information is yet to be confirmed, but this was probably during the 1830s or 1840s. That marriage set the scene for the numerous Sheen family in present-day Peru.

### The First Descendants

Probably because he was captivated by the fertile valleys that looked like immense green carpets surrounding Cajabamba, William rejected his former interest in mining and decided to concentrate on agricultural activities. After the marriage, he bought a farm called *La Tambería*, situated in the adjacent valley of Condebamba. He then began a prosperous life as a farmer and a cattle-rancher.



The author in the valley of Cajabamba.  
*El Gringo Sheen* settled down in this region in the early 1820s.  
(Rosario Sheen, 1998)

Soon after, the first descendant was born. This was Thomas, who would become Mayor of Cajabamba, around the 1880s, during the Pacific War between Peru and Chile. Three more children joined the family: two boys and one girl. One of the boys was baptised with a typical English name, but in Spanish: Enrique (Henry). The next son was Antonio; and the girl was named Adelaida (the name of the wife of the British King William IV). These names would recur in the Sheen generations that followed.

The Sheen-Escuza children grew up surrounded by their father's agricultural activities, and thus, since that early age, they were part of the *La Tambería* team. Adelaida used to accompany her mother at the farmhouse, and, occasionally, engaged in light tasks in the fields. The four children were to stay in Cajabamba to continue with their father's business. Only two of the boys did this. The third inherited the adventurous blood of his father.

Thomas was the first to provide a further generation of Sheens. He married Juanita Galvez, a young lady from a very religious family, well known for their charitable activities. They had five children: María Antonieta, Artemio, Rosa, Florita and Ermancia. María Antonieta is recognised in local books and by the

Cajabamba people in general as a notable personality due to her virtue, her vocation for service and her dedicated work as a teacher. Antonio, William's third son, also married a Cajabambian lady, Julia Figueroa, with whom he had three children. William's only daughter, Adelaida, did not have descendants.

### **The Adventurer**

Enrique, William's second son, turned out to be the adventurer of the family and was somewhat rebellious. While still a teenager and after learning to work on the land, Enrique one day bade farewell to Cajabamba and hit the road on horseback heading southwest. This was some time around 1865-1870.

There is no clear information about his departure. We do not know if Enrique had already planned his destination or if he travelled with no particular course in mind, but determined start a new life on his own. Like any traveller, he surely hoped to find natural and human attractions on his way to his new home. Enrique found both things in the town of Contumazá, another province of the Cajamarca department, closer to the Peruvian coast. It is estimated that, at that time, the trip on horseback must have taken at least four to five consecutive days.

### **The Second Branch is Born**

Enrique's decision to settle in Contumazá led to another branch of the Sheens being based there. Enrique himself never knew of his contribution to the expansion of his family in Peru and with it the values of hard work, a vocation for service, perseverance and solidarity.

According to contemporary accounts, my great-grandfather Enrique was a handsome, tall and red-haired 'gringo' who impressed everybody, especially the young ladies, as soon as he arrived. One of those ladies, Manuela Leon, could not avoid falling in love with him and some years later married him. They had three children: Maria, Guillermo and Patricio, my grandfather. Like his father, Enrique and his family dedicated themselves to agriculture. He rented a farm where he grew mainly wheat, barley and beans, and worked that land until his death. His farming activities were upgraded with the acquisition of cattle. His sons later learned to master not only the harvesting of crops but also manual milk production.

Patricio was the strongest child and also the most sociable. He was the first son to get married and had the largest family among the Peruvian Sheens: a total of thirteen children (8 boys and 5 girls). He initiated his own economic activity by renting a huge farm called 'Los Alisos.'

Patricio Sheen not only cultivated wheat, barley, beans and potatoes but also engaged in cattle breeding and milk and cheese production, with the involvement of his children. At one time, he managed to hold as many as 200 cows. He created a form of rural factory where he prepared some of the most delicious cheeses in town. His relatives recall that any friend or neighbour that went to visit 'Los Alisos' could not leave the farm without receiving as a present a big piece of *Don Patricio's cheese*. The soft-ripened cheese became so popular that he began to sell it outside Contumazá and thus started a small business as a cheese merchant which later caused him travel to Trujillo and Lima.

Patricio was very strict with his children and also liked to share what he had with everyone. Among local anecdotes there is one that occurred in the first years of the twentieth century, around the time of the feast of the patron saint of Contumazá, Saint Matthew. It is said that once the celebrations were concluded, at the end of September, Patricio and his brother Guillermo showed up on horseback in the main square of town and surprised the people by announcing: 'The feast of our patron saint is over, now it is time for the Sheens' feast.' They then presented the neighbours with all the necessities for a good party: food, drink, music and even fireworks.

Patricio died in his native Contumazá in 1947. Francisco, his grandson, who spent some time with him in Lima the year prior to his death, remembered him as a strong and tenacious man who always missed his life in ‘Los Alisos’ - his friends, his crops and cattle and, of course, his soft cheeses.

While the above-mentioned events were taking place in Contumazá, in Cajabamba the Sheen family continued to increase: Artemio (William’s grandson) married Juana Murga and around the turn of the twentieth century, they started the fourth generation with their children Thomas Jr. and Juanita. Artemio’s sister Rosa married Genaro Cardenas and had five children (Fernando, Edilberto, Genaro, Rosa and Maria). Antonio Jr. (William’s other grandson) had eight children (Julio, Nereida, Walter, Copelia, Marco Antonio, Carlos, Guillermo and Antonio II).

The rapid expansion of the family makes it somewhat difficult to keep the information on the previous generations updated. For instance, it is not known when exactly *el Gringo Sheen* passed away, but we do know that longevity was – and still is - a family trait. His death probably took place between the 1880s and the 1890s.



Walter Sheen and his son Walter Jr., Trujillo (1946).  
(Author's collection)

### The Return to Trujillo

Starting in the fourth generation, the Sheens began to leave the countryside. Possibly due to the proximity of the city, the majority of the descendants departed Cajabamba and Contumazá in the direction of Trujillo, seeking a better future and professional careers. Some of them remained in Trujillo, while others moved on to Lima.

Walter (son of Antonio Jr. and William’s great-grandchild) is one of the few that moved to the countryside of Trujillo, but this was in order to take up a post as bookkeeper in the renowned and extensive farm of ‘Casagrande,’ then the largest sugar plantation in the country.

Teaching was one of the favoured careers of the Sheens’ new generations. An example of this is Tomás Jr. (Sheen Murga), a hard-working teacher who was not only concerned with the teaching of moral values to students but was also a renowned activist supporting the social causes of the poorest people. He was also a political activist and once challenged the government of Army General Sanchez Cerro in 1931. Because of this he suffered political persecution until the dictatorship ended the following year.

Tomás Sheen Murga died at the age of 93, in 1990. Among his legacies, there is a unique project to promote the development of competencies among elderly people in order to enable them to participate in local and national development. The project, now called Association of the University of the Third Age, is run by his daughter Consuelo, a member of the fifth generation.

My father Antonio, one of Patricio’s thirteen children, also studied pedagogy just as his older sister Maria and younger brother Marco did. He left Contumazá after finishing primary school and went to study in Trujillo. He is now a retired eighty-year-old man and is as strong and healthy as his predecessors were at that age.

Judging by the comments of his former students and from what he told me over the years, I can tell that teaching was for him both a duty and a pleasure. He really enjoyed teaching, a sentiment that was even greater when he went to work in the country’s poorest towns.

A story frequently retold is one that took place in the late 1950s in the rural town of Zuñiga, in the valley of Cañete, four hours' drive from Lima. It was Confirmation time and the future Cardinal of Peru, Monsignor Juan Landazuri, was going to head the big ceremony. One day at school, Antonio noticed that a group of about thirty students of different ages looked worried and some of them particularly sad. Asked about the reasons for their concern, they told him that it was because they did not yet have a *padrino de confirmación* or Confirmation sponsor. My father then learned that each *padrino* would have to make a contribution of about five dollars per child to the local organisers of the ceremony to finance the normal expenses for those occasions. Antonio immediately put an end to the students' concern by gladly offering to be a *padrino* to all of them. They jumped with joy. The day of the ceremony, about one hundred children, accompanied by their respective *padrinos*, were ready to receive the sacrament of Confirmation from Monsignor Landazuri. When it was the turn of the thirty above-mentioned students, the proud teacher Antonio started to put his hands on the heads of the children – as tradition dictated - one by one. This situation surprised the future Cardinal who approached Antonio and, in a low voice, asked him what was the reason for this. When he heard that the teacher was the *padrino* of the thirty students, he smiled and gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

As a gesture of gratitude for his genuine dedication to his job and his students, the primary school where Antonio worked in Zuñiga has now been named: Antonio Sheen Morales.

### The Fifth and Sixth Generations

With the exception of a small group of descendants who still live in Contumazá, the fifth generation turned its back on agriculture and commercial activities. It is composed of professionals with diverse specialisations, such as medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, economists, business managers, psychologists, biologists, military officials, and also teachers.



Peasant girl in Cajamarca  
([Universidad Nacional de Cajamarca](#))

Some descendants of the fourth and fifth generations emigrated to the USA, Brazil, Venezuela and Ecuador. The members of the sixth generation range from the ages of five to forty- something. There is no precise record of the current number of Sheen descendants in Peru, but there are probably several hundred. At present, most live in Lima, though another large group lives in Trujillo. Smaller groups are to be found in Contumazá, Cajabamba, Chiclayo, Piura and Pucallpa.

The vast majority of Peruvian Sheens are Catholic. Many are anxious to take up the tradition of celebrating Saint Patrick's Day in

March. I had the chance to be part of these impressive celebrations when I was living in New York, seventeen years ago. We are not lucky enough to drink delicious Guinness in Peru, but we did inherit a taste for good beer. Our national golden and *malta* (black) beers deserve to be enjoyed slowly.

As far as I know, no Sheen descendant has yet travelled to Ireland in search of our roots. I am confident that I will be the first one. Meanwhile, I hope this first attempt to chart the family history will encourage

others to assist me in completing the description of a history that began almost 180 years ago with the *Gringo Sheen*.

Rosario Sheen

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(\*) The author of this article is a member of the fifth generation of the Sheens. She is a social communication and business administration specialist, as well as a university professor. During 2003-2005 she served as Press Secretary for the Presidency of Peru (during the administration of President Alejandro Toledo) a post that allowed her to travel extensively around the country and meet several Sheen relatives scattered in different cities and towns.