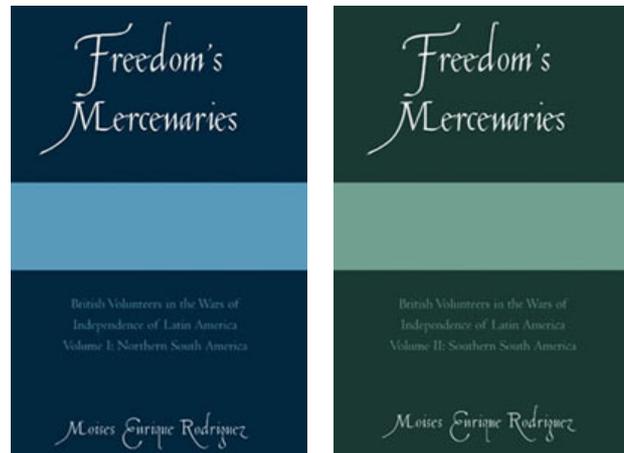


**Review of Moises Enrique Rodríguez's
Freedom's Mercenaries:
British Volunteers in the Wars of Independence of Latin America**
By Karen Racine



Lanham MD: Hamilton Books, 2006
Chronological appendix, maps, annotated bibliography
Volume I: Northern South America, 426 pages, ISBN 0-7618-3437-0, US\$ 58.00
Volume II: Southern South America, 524 pages, ISBN 0-7618-3438-9, US\$ 58.00

This book is clearly a labour of love. Moises Enrique Rodríguez describes himself as an engineer who has led a 'double life.' He spent almost twenty-five years indulging his passion for history by researching the fascinating and diverse experiences of the 10,000 British volunteers who joined the fight for Spanish American independence between 1817 and 1824. These two volumes are the result of his long-standing interest in the stories of the many adventurers who left their country to cast their lot with the fate of unknown people living in a distant, and very different, land. The author has taken a biographical approach to his subject and, quite naturally, focused mainly on the military aspects of the British soldiers' and sailors' lives in Latin America. He has also included elements of diplomacy, intrigue, commerce and culture where they are relevant. Rodríguez has a pleasant and readable style and the book benefits from his evident enthusiasm for the subject.

Although it is not entirely true, as Rodríguez claims, that the presence and contribution of these British volunteers has been forgotten, he is correct to note that there have been few attempts to draw together the experiences of Britons in both the northern and southern Spanish American theatres of war, not to mention their contribution to Brazilian independence. To this end, the author has done a great service to scholarship by gathering together the stories of these people and making them available to the English-speaking reader in one monograph. Rodríguez plainly states that he is not a professional historian and makes it clear that his book is not intended to be an academic study drawn from archival sources; instead, he set out to satisfy his 'personal interest, curiosity, and manic Anglophilia' (I: 2) by telling a 'good yarn based on fact and not on fiction' (II: 921). *Freedom's Mercenaries* is based on a multitude of contemporary printed participant accounts, and dozens of secondary books and articles.

Rodríguez structured his book as a series of biographical chapters. Volume One deals with the British volunteers who fought in the wars of northern South America (present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador

and Peru). These were the well-known, land-based military campaigns led by Simón Bolívar, José Antonio Páez, and Antonio José de Sucre. The British and Irish Legions began arriving in 1817 and included such famous or notorious soldiers, merchants and generals as: John Robertson, James English, George Elsom, James Rooke, John Devereux, Gregor McGregor, John Illingworth, and Daniel Florencio O'Leary. Readers curious about the activities of the Irish Legion in Colombia and Venezuela will want to pay particular attention to Chapter Ten, dedicated specifically to the Legion. The chapter opens with the siege of Cartagena in 1815, but its principal focus is the Irish Legion's military campaigns between 1817 and 1821, including their controversial mutiny at Riohacha in 1820. Rodríguez describes the Irish Legion's performance in Venezuela and Colombia as 'a sorry tale' and judges that they 'performed no deed of military value.' (I: 176). Nevertheless, he indicates that the presence of this unit engaged Spanish troops on the Caribbean coast which could otherwise have been used against Bolívar in other theatres of operation. He also recognises the contribution of former members of the Legion such as Francis Burdett O'Connor. The author concludes the chapter by hinting at the long-term influence of persons of Irish descent in the region's public institutions.

Volume Two treats of the experiences of the British volunteers who fought to liberate southern South America (present-day Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil) along with José de San Martín and Bernardo O'Higgins. The biographical chapters focus on the prominent and famous men who helped to found the navies of Chile, Peru, Argentina and Brazil: Lord Cochrane, William Miller, Martin Guise, Richard Vawell, William Brown, Walter Chitty and James Paroissien. The second volume also includes several chapters dealing with men of other European nationalities who also fought as mercenaries in South America - Germans, French, North Americans, Italians, Dutch and Swedes-, a chapter on merchants and bankers, a chapter on the diplomatic efforts of Foreign Secretaries Castlereagh and Canning to advance political recognition of the South American nations, and a chapter on British mercenaries in the Imperial Army of Brazil. Because of the tremendous variation in topics covered, this volume is less clearly focused on the subject indicated by the title, yet it does provide a panoramic view of the broad international spectrum of involvement in the Latin American independence movements.

Enrique Rodríguez first encountered the names and stories in this book as a child poring over his history textbooks in Colombia during the 1970s. Ironically, the trajectory of his own life has proceeded in reverse to the path of the men he has spent twenty-five years studying; Rodríguez crossed the Atlantic as a young man to study in England and then eventually settled in Switzerland where he works as a Manufacturing Systems Consultant for Nestlé. Nevertheless, Rodríguez's passion for historical research, reading and writing has remained constant, and one must admire the devotion of a busy engineer and family man who carried a project of this magnitude to fruition through his consistent efforts over two decades.

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Author's Reply

I would like to thank Karen Racine for her very generous review, which I accept with gratitude, and Edmundo Murray for having commissioned the review to her. I am very flattered that my efforts have encountered such a positive response from a professional historian with deep knowledge of the period, whose book on Miranda I greatly enjoyed. [*]

Moises Enrique Rodríguez

[*] Karen Racine, *Francisco de Miranda: A Transatlantic Life in the Age of Revolution* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003).