

# Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

## Thomas O'Gorman (c.1760-?), merchant in Spain and South America

**O'Gorman, Thomas** (c.1760-?), merchant in Spain and South America, was born in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland, some time in the late 1750s or early 1760s. At an early age he became one of the 'Wild Geese', going into the service of the French king in the Walsh Regiment. O'Gorman rose to the rank of Captain before abandoning his unit as the Irish regiments were disbanded in the wake of the French Revolution. By 1792 he was in the French Indian Ocean colony of Ile de France (Mauritius), where he married the young Marie Anne Périchon de Vandeuil, daughter of an important French colonial official.

O'Gorman then aided his father-in-law who had resigned his post and subsequently engaged in mercantile activities. O'Gorman's command of English served them well as Mauritius in the 1790s had become a bustling entrepot for foreign captains and traders, and particularly for North Americans. With the reversal in Franco-Spanish relations in 1797, a new trade between the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata and French colonies in the Indian Ocean ensued. *Porteño* (Buenos Aires) merchants exchanged food and silver for slaves and manufactured goods, and O'Gorman was involved in that commerce.

The Irishman persuaded his father-in-law to take the drastic step of moving both families and all their possessions to the Río de la Plata. In Buenos Aires O'Gorman had a relative, Michael O'Gorman, who occupied the important position of *Protomédico* and who could vouch for the acceptance of the migrants. He could also call upon the goodwill of Casimiro Francisco Necochea, a *porteño* acquaintance involved in the Mauritius/Río de la Plata trade. In July 1797 the large party arrived at Montevideo. There O'Gorman and his father-in-law ingratiated themselves with authorities by emphasising their devotion to the Catholic religion and their distaste for the excesses of the French Revolution. Their request for residence was granted due to the fact that Necochea and Uncle Miguel had vouched for them. O'Gorman further requested naturalisation, stating that he was descended from the ancient Irish nobility, but was informed that that action would take some time.

The Irish immigrant then toyed with the idea of establishing a large sugar plantation in Paraguay, but investment in slaves and equipment required more capital than he possessed. Rather, O'Gorman found his vocation as a middle-man or facilitator for merchants of Buenos Aires as the neutral trade of 1797-1799 opened up new opportunities for those who discarded their traditional Cádiz/Río de la Plata commercial connections. Only a year after his arrival, O'Gorman received a commission from Francisco de Sar and Manuel de Sarretera to sail to the United States and there conclude the purchase of several North American ships as well as arranging for the cargo to be shipped south on various merchants' accounts, including that of Tomás Antonio Romero, the greatest merchant in the Río de la Plata. In Philadelphia he was informed that the neutral trade had been terminated, but he pressed onward with the enterprise. The ships and cargo arrived and the Viceroy approved the transactions, not wishing to alienate important merchants during an unstable period for the empire.

O'Gorman affiliated himself to a group of merchants who recognised the opportunities of free foreign trade and who were increasingly frustrated with traditional monopolistic mercantilist policies. Both legal licensed trade and contraband flourished and the Irishman was deeply involved in both. At the same time Madame O'Gorman, with typical Gallic vivacity, conducted what may be termed a salon at their Buenos Aires residence. There, French expatriates such as Santiago de Liniers, then an obscure French-born captain in the Spanish Navy who had minor business dealings with O'Gorman, associated with disaffected *criollos* and the occasional Yankee sea captain.

Following the temporary peace between Great Britain and Spain in 1803, Thomas O'Gorman embarked upon his most ambitious enterprise. Arranging a partnership with *porteño* merchants, he travelled to Great Britain and there, with the aid of a merchant relative, organised the purchase of a ship and British-made goods. Overcoming difficulties in Great Britain and receiving some financial aid in Spain from an agent of the *porteño* merchant Ventura Marco del Pont, he arrived in the Río de la Plata with a large cargo in early 1805. He was accompanied on the return voyage by a nephew, Edmund Lawton O'Gorman, and another fellow Irishman, James Florence Burke.

Burke was a secret agent of the British government, sent to Buenos Aires to assess the extent of discontent with Spanish rule. While there is no direct evidence that O'Gorman himself served as a British agent, he certainly provided Burke with information as to conditions in the Río de la Plata. Furthermore, the sudden resolution of difficulties O'Gorman encountered in Great Britain renders this even more likely.

In the viceregal capital Burke moved easily in *porteño* society, and at the O'Gorman residence and elsewhere succeeded in subverting a number of *porteños* before returning to report on conditions in the Viceroyalty. Edmund O'Gorman remained in the Río de la Plata until after the first British invasion in 1806. There he played an equivocal role. He did obtain for Santiago de Liniers a safe conduct into occupied Buenos Aires where the naval captain, outraged by the British invasion, recognised the enemy's weaknesses, and subsequently assumed leadership of the resistance to the British. On the other hand, during the same occupation Edmund O'Gorman acted as a commissioner for the enemy, as the British occupiers swept up the treasuries of various government organs.

Thomas O'Gorman was not in the Río de la Plata during the British invasions, but rather in Spain where, apparently acting for Ventura Marco del Pont, he obtained permission to charter Portuguese and North American ships out of Lisbon for the transport of goods of British origin to the west coast of South America. By this time his marriage had collapsed, and his wife, 'la Périchona', had begun her notorious affair with Santiago de Liniers, by then Viceroy of the Río de la Plata. The expedition to Chile and Peru was quite profitable for O'Gorman, but he never returned to the Río de la Plata. According to a few vague reports from Callao in Peru, he left the New World and rumour had it that he later died in Spain, spending his final days in poverty and almost deranged.

O'Gorman had left the care of his family to his French in-laws, and of course, to Viceroy Liniers. From his offspring emerged the Argentine O'Gorman clan, the most famous being his granddaughter, the tragic Camila, who was executed on Juan Manuel de Rosas' orders. As for an assessment of Thomas O'Gorman, he represented the entry of foreigners, particularly the Irish into the commerce of the Spanish American Empire in the final decades of its existence. With historical hindsight it is clear that this presence was one of the signals of the coming independence movement.

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### References

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