

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

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Francisco Burdett [*Frank*] O'Connor (1791-1871), officer in the Irish Legion of Simón Bolívar's army in Venezuela

O'Connor, Francisco Burdett [*Frank*] (1791-1871), officer in the Irish Legion of Simón Bolívar's army in Venezuela, later chief of staff to Antonio José de Sucre and minister of war in Bolivia. Francisco Burdett O'Connor was born on 12 June 1791 in Cork City, to a landowning Protestant family from England (originally named Conner), son of Roger O'Connor and Wilhamena Bowen, brother of the MP and Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor (1794-1855), and nephew of Arthur O'Connor (1763-1852), MP and hard-line leader of the United Irishmen, who was deported to France. Frank O'Connor's godfather was Sir Francis Burdett, a baronet and radical member of the English parliament.

In July 1819, the lieutenant-colonel of the Tenth Lancers Francisco Burdett O'Connor boarded the *Hannah* in Dublin together with 100 officers and 101 men of the Irish Legion in Simón Bolívar's army of independence. The commanding officer of the Tenth Lancers, Colonel William Aylmer, was also second in command of the Irish Legion. They arrived in September 1819 on the island of Margarita off the coast of Venezuela. No preparations had been made to receive them, and hardships were experienced by the men of the Irish Legion suffering the combined effects of the officers' lack of experience, scarce victuals, and deficiency of buildings. Many of the officers died and others refused to remain and returned to Ireland.

In December 1819 the Irish Legion was reorganised and O'Connor was appointed commandant of a regiment formed by mixed forces. In March 1820 the regiment sailed for the mainland to attack the city of Riohacha together with other units. O'Connor's lancers hauled down the Spanish royal ensign and raised in its place their own standard, displaying the harp of Ireland in the centre. When, on 20 March 1820, the enemy attacked the patriots near Laguna Salada, O'Connor's lancers were the only soldiers to rush out of their barracks and storm the royalist forces, forcing them to withdraw in flight. One hundred and seventy soldiers, supported by a company of sharpshooters and one small field gun defeated 1,700 royalists.

As the division was marching out of Riohacha the advance guard walked into an ambush. O'Connor was slightly wounded in the right shoulder when he and his lancers charged upon the enemy with a terrible 'hurrah'. After a mutiny, the Irish Legion was dispatched to Jamaica but some hundred of the lancers whose loyalty O'Connor had managed to retain disembarked again on the mainland and played an important part in the siege of Cartagena and the campaign against Santa Marta.

Bolívar had quickly developed a high regard for the young Irish colonel, whom he appointed chief of staff of the United Army of Liberation in Peru within six months of his joining it from Panama early in 1824. It was O'Connor who kept the patriot forces coordinated and supplied as they manoeuvred under Sucre's command in distinctly hostile territory to bring the last Spanish viceroy in mainland America to battle and defeat. At the battle of Junín in August 1824, O'Connor was chief of staff of the patriot army with 1,500 men against the viceroy's 7,000 troops and nine artillery pieces. The engagement was confined to cavalry charges and ended within an hour with not a single shot fired.

Once established in present-day Bolivia, almost fifteen years later O'Connor rejoined forces with Otto Braun, ex-commander of the grenadiers at the battle of Junín, to aid the Peruvian-Bolivian army. On 24 June 1838 they inflicted a defeat on the invading Argentine army at the battle of Montenegro (known as Cuyabuyo by the Argentines). The battle of Montenegro consolidated the present southwestern border of Bolivia as well as allowing O'Connor to retire from military service and dedicate himself to his farms.

From 1825 O'Connor regularly contributed to *El Condor* of Chuquisaca (Sucre). In June 1827 he published a proclamation encouraging Irish people to settle in the 'New Erin' of Tarija, 'where the poor of my flesh and blood will be received with open arms.' O'Connor's memoirs were published in 1895 by his

grandson Tomás O'Connor d'Arlach with the title *Independencia Americana: Recuerdos de Francisco Burdett O'Connor*. They are an essential contemporary account of the South American wars of independence.

In 1826 Francisco O'Connor was appointed military governor of Tarija. The congress of Bolivia awarded him 5,000 pesos as a 'liberator', but he himself never used that title despite the rare honour it bestowed. In 1827 he married Francisca Ruyloba, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a family of clerks and priests. Francisco Burdett O'Connor died in Tarija on 5 October 1871 at eighty-one years of age. An atheist while in Ireland, he became a devout Catholic in South America and died with the last rites.

Although only one of his children survived - a daughter, Hercilia - O'Connor d'Arlach is still a recognised family name in southern Bolivia, and one of the provinces of the department of Tarija carries the name of O'Connor.

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