

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

William Smith [Guillermo] Payne (1870-1924), missionary in Argentina and Bolivia



William Smith Payne (1870-1924)
(Ernest Moore, *Pioneer Work in Argentina*)

Payne, William Smith [Guillermo] (1870-1924), missionary in Argentina and Bolivia and founder of the first Evangelist church in Cochabamba, was born in Dublin, the second of four children. His father died when William was six years of age. When his elder brother moved to New York for employment, William Payne joined the railway company, where he was respected as a responsible and disciplined employee. Reportedly, his neighbours in Dublin used to say: 'Set your clocks on the hour. Here comes little William!'

At the age of sixteen, Payne was appointed superintendent of the Sunday school in an evangelical mission. His formal studies were at Wesley College in Dublin, and he was subsequently employed by a company that administrated properties. During a Dublin visit by John Henry Ewen, who had been on a mission in Argentina, William Payne was convinced to travel to the mission in South America. At the same time he met his wife, Elizabeth Milne from Scotland, and they were married in September 1890. The young couple travelled to Spain to observe the gospel methods used there and to learn the Spanish language. During their stay in Spain their first daughter, Margaret, was born. Later in Argentina, Lillian and Arthur completed the family circle.

In August 1892 the family arrived in Buenos Aires. First William helped out at the mission at Quilmes and then in the southern district of Tandil. Due to Elizabeth's bad health, in 1894 they moved to Córdoba. Payne went on horseback to visit small towns in the provinces of Córdoba, Santa Fe, Salta and Jujuy. Sometimes while he preached, he was pelted with stones, rotten oranges and other refuse. The Roman Catholic priests accused him and his companions of distributing false bibles, and many copies were confiscated and burned.

In 1902 William Payne established a mission in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In September of that year an enraged mob, instigated by the local clergy of Cochabamba, advanced to the Paynes' house throwing paving stones and shouting 'heretics, enemies of the holy religion.' Then they beset their house and made a kerosene bonfire in the street with the Paynes' furniture and belongings. This incident was the result of political feuds between liberal and traditionalist leaders in Bolivia. Paynes' house, including a gospel bookstore and lecture room, was on Comercio street in Cochabamba (present-day Nataniel Aguirre). William Payne registered before the Bolivian authorities as a member of the Canadian Baptist Mission, recently permitted to operate in the country according to the liberal laws of the Federal Revolution.

However, the bishop of Cochabamba Jacinto Anaya verbally attacked the mission through the pages of *El Heraldo* newspaper.

Payne replied that he was a photographer, preacher, and that he was trained in many trades unknown at that time in Bolivia. He added that he had been born in Ireland, that he was waiting for a shipment of bibles to be distributed in Cochabamba, and he would consult with his lawyer about his situation. The municipal council warned William Payne that he must refrain from celebrating faiths other than the Roman Catholic, but to no avail. The debate intensified and politicians in Cochabamba and La Paz defended their views for or against freedom of worship. Riots ensued and the police had to intervene. The affair ended with a constitutional reform that allowed freedom of worship and abolished the ecclesiastical privileges of the Roman Catholic clergy in Bolivia.

William Payne and his family returned to Argentina, where they settled in Córdoba. Elizabeth died in 1916. In November 1917 he married Marie L. Mohsler, who had been in the mission in Tucumán, and they settled in Jujuy. His second wife died in May 1921. His third and last marriage was to Constance Coomber, who had commenced working among indigenous peoples in northern Argentina and in southern Bolivia. William Payne died in 1924 in Jujuy.

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