

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

Ireland and Mexico

By Séamus Ó Fógartaigh

The first Irishman to set foot on Mexican soil may well have been St. Brendan the Navigator, who, according to legend, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in his 'currach' (traditional Irish rowing boat) in search of new converts to the Christian faith. An ancient manuscript found in Medieval European monasteries allegedly described his voyage to strange Western Lands, and is known as the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. Some historians claim that Christopher Columbus found inspiration for his seafaring adventure in the pages of the *Navigatio* of St. Brendan the Abbot.

Whether the ancient Mexican Toltec god Quetzalcóatl (plumed serpent) was in fact a deified Irish monk is a matter for speculation, but the rumour seems to persist on both sides of the Atlantic. According to the Toltec legend, a white-skinned, bearded man from across the sea visited the shores of their land some 1500 years ago and taught the native people a new religion based on fraternal charity and resignation to God's will. The legend also claims that he taught them new methods of agriculture and the use of metals, as well as the art of developing a calendar to predict the changing seasons. To substantiate this theory, some commentators indicate a striking similarity between an astronomic-archaeological centre in Mexico and the passage-tomb at Newgrange, County Meath in Ireland. If an Irishman did teach the Mexicans about the art of astronomy, he certainly did a very good job: when the Spaniards arrived, they found the Mexican (Aztec) calendar to be more accurate than its European (Julian) counterpart.

Irish-Hispanic historical links can also be traced, according to historians, to the Ibero-Celts (Milesians) who, in ancient times, set sail from the Iberian Peninsula in search of the fabled island of Inis Fáil, where they established themselves as the dominant group, and contributed to the development of the Irish linguistic and cultural heritage. The Spanish province of Galicia still cherishes its ancient Ibero-Celtic cultural identity, and many Galicians regard the Irish as their distant cousins.

Reverse migration from Ireland to the Iberian Peninsula began on a significant scale following the defeat of the Irish-Spanish alliance at the Battle of Kinsale (1602), when the O'Neills and O'Donnells, as well as other dispossessed Irish chieftains, were given sanctuary by King Philip III of Spain. As a result, Irish regiments were organised in the Spanish forces, and Irish colleges were established in Spain to educate priests and other professionals who would minister to the Irish Catholic diaspora in Spain and throughout Spain's American colonies. Some were sent to the Spanish colony of New Spain (present-day Central America) as soldiers, administrators, explorers and missionaries, and the Hibernian Regiment (*Regimiento de Hibernia*) was stationed in present-day Mexico in the late 1700s.

The Capitán Colorado

Hugh O'Connor (*Hugo Oconór*) was born in 1734 in Dublin, Ireland, and emigrated to Spain as a young man, where he joined the military and became an officer in the Regiment of Aragón. He saw military service in Cuba, a Spanish colony, and was later transferred to New Spain. He was appointed military governor of Northern Mexico by the Spanish Viceroy and was assigned the task of reorganising and improving Spain's military outposts (*presidios*) as a bulwark against the Apache and Comanche people from the north. O'Connor earned a reputation for skill and bravery as a military commander, and the local *criollos* - the Mexican-born children of Spanish parents - referred to him affectionately as *El Capitán Colorado* (the ruddy-complexioned captain). He established new and more efficient *presidios* all the way from Texas to California, which guaranteed a period of relative peace and prosperity throughout the region for the settlers. O'Connor is still remembered in Arizona as the founder of the original *pueblo* which today is known as the City of Tucson.



Quetzalcóatl



Bronze statue of Hugo Oconór at the Manning House, Tucson, Arizona

Following his arduous tour of duty in the northern desert regions, and due to failing health, Don Hugo Oconór was transferred to the Yucatán Peninsula where he served as governor until his death in 1797, at the young age of 45 years.

Irish names underwent a linguistic transformation in the Spanish-speaking countries: O'Connor became Oconór; O'Brien, Obregón; O'Kelly, Oquelí; O'Donohue, O'Donojú; and Murphy was transformed into Morfi and Morfin. Just as Gaelic names became anglicised in Ireland under English influence, they became hispanicised under Spanish influence. One of the most important explorers and historians of the late 1700s was Juan Agustín Morfi, who emigrated from Galicia in Spain to Mexico, where he became a Franciscan friar in 1761. He travelled extensively throughout Northern Mexico and described life as it was lived by the indigenous people in their *pueblos*. He also traced maps of some of the uncharted regions, and provided detailed accounts of the flora and fauna that he observed in his travels. His written account of his discoveries as an explorer and cartographer are to be found in his book, *Viaje de Indios y diario del Nuevo México* (Mexico City: Bibliófilo Mexicanos, 1935). (Indian Journey and Diary of New Mexico), which is still an excellent source of information for those who are interested in the history of the regions now known as Texas and New Mexico - formerly the northern provinces of New Spain. Morfi also had a distinguished career as a theologian and lecturer, and occupied a leadership role in the affairs of the

Franciscan Order in Mexico until his death in Mexico City in 1783.

The O'Reillys of Yucatán

Justo Sierra O'Reilly (1814-1861) was of Irish-Hispanic lineage and became a noted lawyer, politician, historian and novelist, who left his mark on the history of the Yucatán Peninsula of Southern Mexico during the early 1800s. He was legal advisor to the state's General Assembly that rejected President Antonio López de Santa Anna's centrist policies and declared Yucatán to be an independent state. Santa Anna sent a military expedition to the region in 1843 and the Assembly was obliged to sign an agreement with the central government. When the US-Mexican war broke out in 1846, Yucatán declared its neutrality, and US forces occupied the Yucatán island of del Carmen.

O'Reilly was sent as a special envoy to Washington in 1847 to negotiate the US evacuation of the island of del Carmen and to offer the peninsula to the United States in exchange for military assistance to quell the Mayan uprising in the state. His diplomatic mission was not successful, and following the evacuation of US occupation forces from Mexico in 1848, the Mexican government subdued the Mayans in Yucatán and restored some semblance of order to that turbulent region. O'Reilly became a federal congressman in 1851, and the following year was appointed Minister for Development of his home state. Justo Sierra O'Reilly is best remembered in Mexico for his extraordinary contribution to jurisprudence, journalism and literature, rather than for his polemical activities in the political arena.

O'Reilly's son, Justo Sierra Méndez (1848-1912) also became a famous jurist, poet, author and educator, who was instrumental to Mexican history during the late 1800s and the early 1900s. He is known simply as Justo Sierra, whose celebrated aphorism 'the people are hungry and thirsty for justice' inspired an ideological movement which found expression in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. He is remembered and revered in Mexico for his extraordinary achievements in the field of education and for his heroic efforts as Minister of Education and Fine Arts to make higher education available to all, at a time when education was mostly provided by Catholic Church institutions, and was the prerogative of a wealthy minority. He insisted that it was the obligation of the state to provide an educational system that would be non-sectarian and subsidised by the government. Justo Sierra was a strong advocate for democracy and freedom of expression at a time when Mexico was ruled by an authoritarian dictatorship. He is remembered particularly as the intellectual architect of the National University (UNAM) which now has an enrolment of some 250,000 students, and which in 1948, to commemorate the centenary of his birth, bestowed upon him the prestigious title of *Maestro de América*.



Justo Sierra (1848-1912)

Following the success of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Justo Sierra was appointed ambassador plenipotentiary to Spain, where he died after a short illness in 1912. In 1998, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth, the National Congress decreed that his name be inscribed in gold letters in the Federal Chamber of Deputies.

Another well-known member of the O'Reilly clan in Mexico was the intrepid leader of the San Patricio Companies who fought against the North American invading forces during the so-called Mexican War (1846-1848). He is known to US historians as John Riley, an Irish-born deserter from the US Army; but in Mexico he is remembered as *El Capitán Juan O'Reilly* of the San Patricios, who distinguished himself for his skill and bravery as an artilleryman in many bloody encounters with the US invaders. His military exploits have become well known in recent years due to various books and documentaries, as well as the Hollywood movie *One Man's Hero*, which provoked much controversy on both sides of the US-Mexican border.



Joint issuance of stamps by Correos de México and An Post (12 September 1997)

Missionaries, Soldiers and Artists

Eugene MacNamara is referred to by historians as an 'Apostolic Missionary' in Mexico who conceived a grandiose plan to settle ten thousand Irish immigrants in northern California in the early 1840s, when that region was still under Mexican jurisdiction. Apparently, he had travelled extensively throughout northern Mexico and the Mexican government was supportive of his colonisation project in the hope that an Irish Catholic settlement would serve as a defence against the encroaching North Americans who were casting covetous eyes on the rich gold deposits in that area. The project had to be put on hold due to the outbreak of hostilities between the US and Mexico in 1846, and came to an abrupt end when all of Mexico's northern territories were ceded to the United States under the terms of the Treaty of Hidalgo in 1848.

MacNamara was mentioned in US Army records as an Irish Catholic priest who was responsible for the desertion of Irish soldiers who joined the San Patricio Companies to fight against the invading US forces. Some US officers called for his arrest and execution, but he managed to evade his would-be captors and apparently lived to pursue his apostolic activities in a more favourable environment.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians at Jalisco, Mexico

'I believe I occupy a unique position, representing a state where every Irishman in the state is a Hibernian. We have but 18 Irish Catholics in the state of Jalisco. Each one is a member of Division No.1, of which I am president. I have learned through that organization the secret of how to keep members in good standing in the organization. When his dues are due I pay the dues. When he dies I pay his funeral expenses (laughter and applause). Although we have but very few members-but 18 here, they are loyal, genuine Irish boys, every one of them, who are glad to meet their Irish brothers from the States when they visit us, and will be glad to meet them at the next convention, and I hope Mexico will send 10 representatives instead of one.' This was communicated by Edward Blewitt at the 1902 national convention. See John T. Ridge, *Erin's Sons in America - The Ancient Order of Hibernians* (Brooklyn, NY: AOH Publications, 1986), p. 137.

Another controversial cleric of that same period was Miguel Muldoon, who came to Mexico from Spain in the company of the Spanish Viceroy General Juan O'Donojú in 1821, and volunteered to work as a missionary in the region that was soon destined to become the US state of Texas. He earned a reputation as a friend and collaborator of the Anglo-Protestant immigrants to Texas, who were not eligible for land grants under Mexican law. Muldoon, it seems, supplied them with Catholic baptismal and marriage certificates, and apparently his 'converts' made some kind of profession of faith in the Catholic church and thereby became eligible to receive Mexican land grants. This unusual ecclesiastical procedure gave rise to the cynical expression 'Muldoon Catholics' in the Lone Star state. Apparently, Muldoon was born in Ireland and emigrated to Spain where he was ordained a priest at the Irish Seminary in Seville. He received a land grant from the Mexican government near Saltillo in 1831, which he later disposed of, but his name survives in the small rural district of Muldoon, Texas to the present day. Some historians claim that he was expelled from Mexico as a *persona non grata* due to his collaboration with the leaders of

the Texan rebellion against the Mexican government in 1836. An historical monument in Texas hails him as 'the Forgotten Man of Texas Independence'.

General Juan O'Donojú (*O'Donobue*) was one of the most outstanding soldiers in the Spanish Army, and had served as aide-de-camp to the Spanish king. He was appointed Viceroy to New Spain (Mexico) in 1821, and was given the task of putting an end to the War of Independence which had commenced in 1810. However, when O'Donojú arrived in Mexico he realised that he had been given an impossible task, and decided that Spain should reach a negotiated settlement with the Mexican rebels and allow New Spain to become the independent United States of

Mexico. He signed the Córdoba Treaty with the Mexican General Agustín Iturbide in 1821, and thereby brought to an end Mexico's eleven-year struggle for national independence.

O'Donojú died in Mexico that same year and was buried with great pomp and ceremony in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City. Juan O'Donojú Street in Mexico City perpetuates his memory as a friend and collaborator of Mexican independence. At the entrance to the Independence Monument in Mexico City is the statue of another Irishman who is regarded as the precursor of Mexican independence and known to history as Guillén Lombardo (*William Lamport*) from County Wexford. He was condemned by the Holy Inquisition to be burned at the stake for his heretical ideologies in 1659 (*Irish Roots* 54: 'Zorro').

The Irish have also left their mark on the visual arts in modern Mexico, where Juan O'Gorman (1905-1982) and Pablo O'Higgins (1904-1983) have earned reputations as renaissance muralists in the distinguished company of Diego Rivera and Clemente Orozco. Edmundo O'Gorman (1906-1995) was one of Mexico's most outstanding historians and literary personalities of the last century.

Don Rómulo O'Farrill, Jr. is one of Mexico's prominent entrepreneurs and diplomats, and served as Ireland's Honorary Consul in Mexico for over three decades, until the appointment of a resident Irish Ambassador in 1999. The O'Farrills trace their Irish roots back to County Longford by way of Spain, and the surname is associated with publishing and other commercial enterprises throughout Mexico.

The Irish Society of Mexico was organised in 1978, and has served as a link between Mexicans of Irish lineage and their ancestral homeland. This humble scribe was elected its first president, and the organising committee included Irish expatriates Terry Burgess, Liam McAlister, Stephanie Counihan, Deirdre O'Neill, Catherine Corry, Matt McMahon, Allison O'Doherty and Séamus Ó Fógartaigh.

The special affinity between the Irish and Mexican cultures may be traceable to St. Brendan and his disciples who may have left an indelible Celtic imprint on Mexican culture and spirituality some 1500 years ago.



Juan O'Donojú (1762-1821)
(J.V. Thomas)

Séamus Ó Fógartaigh

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