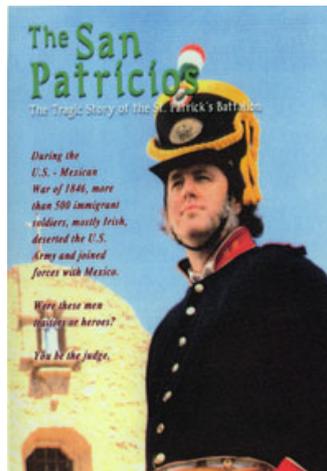


Review of Mark Day's documentary film
The San Patricios
The Tragic Story of the St. Patrick's Battalion

By William H. Mulligan, Jr. *



DVD and VHS, 49 minutes

Produced and directed by Mark R. Day, narrated by James Lancaster,
edited by Joanne Hershfield. Original music by Steven A. Yeaman

When this documentary was first released, the San Patricios were a much-neglected aspect of Irish American history and the history of the Americas generally. During the ensuing decade, they have received a great deal of attention both with the publication of books and with other documentaries, one of which was shown at the national meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies in St. Louis, Missouri, in April 2006. At least some of the credit for rescuing the San Patricios from neglect must go to Mark Day.

The story of the San Patricios is deceptively straightforward. A group of Irish immigrants who were serving in the United States army deserted and formed a unit in the Mexican army that fought against the United States during the war with Mexico. Some had deserted before the war began, - as it turned out, a salient point - and others after the war began. The generally harsh treatment of enlisted men in the US army at the time and discrimination against Irish Catholics were factors in their desertion - all accounts agree on this point. When United States forces captured them, those who had deserted after the war began were hung in an especially cold and calculated way. The leader of the San Patricios, John Riley, was from Galway and had worked on Mackinac Island, Michigan before enlisting in the army. There is not much disagreement on any of these issues.

Where things begin to diverge is in how the San Patricios are viewed. The documentary makes the point that they are honoured in Mexico as heroes who fought and died for Mexico. A memorial was unveiled in Ireland honouring them while the documentary was being made. In the United States, they are often seen as traitors - when their existence is acknowledged at all. For many years, the US army apparently denied that the incident had ever happened. Clearly, the incident happened. We can debate why the US army would deny it. The motivations of the individuals in the unit for their decision, especially those of their leader John Riley; the motivation behind their harsh punishment; and what, if anything, the incident tells us about the position of the Irish in the United States, together with a range of other historical questions, are less straight forward and are subject to speculation and debate. Like many immigrants, the individual San Patricios left little behind with which to study their motivations and thoughts.

However, the real question in this review is: how effectively does *The San Patricios: The Tragic Story of the St. Patrick's Battalion* tell its story? The answer is neither simple nor straightforward. The production values generally are first-rate. This is a well-executed, professional piece of work without question or quibble. It is sharp, clear, in focus at all times, unlike another documentary on the same topic that I had seen. There are still too many historical documentaries that do not have these basic qualities. There is a nice mix of period graphics, scholars offering facts and

interpretations, and footage of battle and other reenactments that are quite well done. Visually this is a successful production. The documentary also has a clear argument that organises the information presented and structures the presentation.

With the exception of Kerby Miller, the 'expert scholars' are not especially impressive. One, Rodolfo Acuña, seems to have a political agenda to champion rather than a historical interpretation to present and journalist Peter Stevens does not appear to know much about scholarship on Irish migration to the US, even allowing for the fact that the programme is ten years old, or much beyond the handed-down, popular history of the Irish in America. This raises questions about the point of the presentation - is it intended to explore a little-known episode in US history or is there a political agenda of accentuating the racism of United States society and past discrimination against Irish Americans, and even of supporting Mexican groups seeking to regain the territory lost in the war between the two countries? Neither Acuña nor Stevens provides much of historical substance nor shows any evidence of a deep knowledge of the incident itself, US military history, or the history of Irish migration to the US. Having an opinion is one thing, having an opinion based on familiarity with the relevant primary source materials and scholarship is another.

There are other problems. Riley is an elusive figure and little can be said about him with certainty. The examination of his character is probably handled as well as it might be, although the uncertainties undermine a solid acceptance of the thesis advanced. More troubling is the confused way in which the history of Irish migration to the United States is presented. Many of the graphics used to illustrate life in Ireland date from after the period when Riley and the other San Patricios left. They do not show their Ireland, but a later, post-famine Ireland that was markedly different. The entire discussion of Irish emigration to the United States is confused at best, especially as it relates to the war between Mexico and the United States. Kerby Miller tries to sort it out, but the other experts do not seem to have the chronology clear in their own minds. The discussion of the idea of Manifest Destiny in the United States is weak, especially in relation to the issue of slavery. Since it was a critical factor in the war, it should be more fully and clearly developed. There are other issues, mostly small ones that could be raised.

Despite these problems, the programme succeeds, to a considerable extent, in achieving its goals. The San Patricios are portrayed in a sympathetic light and the brutality of their treatment is clear. It sustains interest throughout because of its technical excellence. In raising questions and making the viewer engage with the topic and seriously weigh the material presented, even if in disagreement, it has accomplished a great deal. As a testament to the significance of the documentary, I will be using it in my military history course because its perspective needs to be considered seriously and the issues it raises discussed.

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Author's Reply

I would like to thank Dr. Mulligan for his kind remarks about the San Patricios documentary, especially his reference to the film's production values as first rate.

I would also like to thank him for his scholarly analysis of the documentary's treatment of Irish immigrants, the unjust US intervention in Mexico of 1847 and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that to this day influences US foreign policy. This is exactly the kind of discussion that I hoped this documentary would spark. The purpose of all historical texts should be reflection on times past and how they speak to us in the present. In that spirit, I would like to share some of my thoughts regarding the ideas expressed in his review.

Mulligan asks: 'Is it intended [my documentary] to explore a little known episode in US history, or is there a political agenda of accentuating the racism of US society and past discrimination against Irish Americans, and even of supporting Mexican groups seeking to regain the territory lost in the war between the two countries?' In other words, does Mark Day have a political agenda, a specific point of view, a bias? Yes, of course. Everyone operates from his/her particular bias. To deny bias becomes an agenda in itself. There is no such thing as 'pure' history. Historical facts are interpreted. And those interpretations are themselves historically contingent.

The most commonly recounted history of the US, from the genocidal treatment of Native Americans through slavery and on to the military conquest of Mexico, has been the grand narrative written by the victors, not the losers. One of the chief spoils of conquest and colonisation is the power to tell the stories of history. Traditionally, these storytellers are, for the most part, white, conservative and middle-aged men who believe the lens through which they interpret the world is pure and unbiased. In other words, the normalising gaze of power hides the reality that history is always told through an ideological lens. The question that I believe to be most important is: Who benefits from this interpretation of historical facts? Not to do so belies a cultural blind spot, a blind spot born of the privilege of power.

So instead of stories about resistance from Native Americans and the rebellions of slaves, we learn about the exploits of presidents and generals. Instead of life and death struggles of workers and trade unions, we are told about wealthy bankers and the golden ages of industry and commerce. And instead of learning about the humiliation of Mexico with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, we are regaled with stories about the rugged individuals who tamed the West. We learn about History with a capital 'H,' but very little about the histories of the people who shaped and were affected by the onward rush of events. We seldom learn about history told from the bottom up.

Historian Howard Zinn points out some examples of this historical amnesia. He writes about the glorification of Christopher Columbus as a man of skill and courage, but the omission of criticisms from contemporaries such as Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. The latter writes of Columbus: 'The admiral was so anxious to please the King that he committed irreparable crimes against the Indians' (Zinn 1990: 57).

Zinn also mentions historians' omission of the Ludlow massacre of miners' wives and children by the Colorado National Guard in 1913. He suggests that it might be considered 'bold, radical, or even communist' to talk about these class struggles in a nation that prides itself on the oneness of its people. And where, he wonders, are the stories about the abolitionists, labour leaders, radicals and feminists? Zinn writes that the 'pollution of history' happens not by design, but when scholars are afraid to stick their necks out, and instead play it safe (Zinn 1990: 62; Zinn 2003). This provides strong evidence that the project of history itself is inherently political.

This is why the story of the San Patricios always intrigued me. I first learned about this motley band of mostly Irish renegades from César Chávez when I worked as an organiser with the United Farm Workers Union in the late sixties. But it was due to the scholarly work of Robert Ryal Miller and his book, *Shamrock and Sword* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), that I discovered the story behind the battalion, formed by Irish immigrants in the Mexican army. Later, working on the film put me in contact with several Mexican scholars and ordinary citizens who saw the story from a totally different angle, from the viewpoint of the conquered, the vanquished. I also spoke with experts on nativism in mid-nineteenth century America.

This leads to another question. Are there parallels in the nativist attacks against the Irish in US history and the resurgence of nativism against Mexican and Latin American immigrants today? I would suggest that parallels are to be found in the tendency to exploit and scapegoat newcomers, the shared colonial experience and Catholic faith, the crude stereotypes applied to both groups, and the perceived threats of immigrants to the job market and American culture, to name a few. The similarities in nativist rhetoric from that period are so closely related to the current situation that you can simply remove the word 'Irish' and replace it with 'Mexican'. Few people today would recognise the difference. But I did not make this documentary to accentuate nativism and racism. These realities come forth because they were endemic to that period, much to the dismay of those who would like to downplay them for ideological reasons.

Lastly, was the intent of the San Patricios documentary to support those who wish to regain the territory that Mexico lost with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo? Hardly. Aside from commentator Lou Dobbs of CNN and his nightly nativism, the only people talking about the so called *reconquista* or re-conquest of the Southwest are fringe groups like the Minutemen vigilantes and Pat Buchanan, who attract a miniscule following among ordinary US Americans. Most Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, like their nineteenth-century Irish counterparts, simply want what most US Americans seek - to live in peace, to work hard and to be accepted, like everyone else. In short, they are seeking the US American dream. It has been gratifying to witness the lively discussions at the screenings of the San Patricios, to watch the interchanges between disparate groups of people, and to get feedback from students and professors who have benefited from the film. If it advances understanding about Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century and the situation in Mexico, then and today, I am more than satisfied.

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References

- Zinn, Howard. *Declarations of Independence* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 57.
- *Ibid.*, 62. See also Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).