



**When merit alone is not enough
Money as a ‘parallel route’
for Irish military advancement in Spain**

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One of the many clichés about the Irish presence in Spain relates to the quality of the Irish as soldiers. This is taken as explaining the uninterrupted presence of Irishmen in the armies of the Spanish Monarchy from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the start of the nineteenth. Traditional historiography is replete with nineteenth-century-style individual portraits of illustrious Irish military figures (or those with Irish roots). When they are discussed as a group, they are quickly assigned the Romantic poetic categorisation of *Wild Geese*. This literary metaphor has become laden with strong ideological associations, almost all of these military and nationalist. The Irish are seen as victims, antagonists (be it Ireland versus England or Catholic versus Protestant), male and of course always heroic (*Remember Fontenoy!*).

But if the term *Wild Geese* did in its day have some meaning, today it appears completely out of date and reductive, faced as we are with a context so rich and complex as that of Irish emigration during the modern era. For not all Irish emigrants were soldiers, not all were men, and not all achieved the honours and the integration that they sought. In Spain they too were victims of marginalisation and caricature. Even the aristocrats among them underwent a process of integration and subsequent assimilation that was not without its difficulties, or exempt from conflict with the other ‘native’ elites of Spain. [1]

This is of course not to deny the Irish military tradition upon which Bartlett and Jeffery reflected in the opening chapter of *A Military History of Ireland*. Nor is it my intention to take away one whit from the merits and qualities that Irish soldiers demonstrated. What I propose to show is that neither military tradition nor merits were sufficient to account for the spectacular social ascent of the Irish military in Spain. This article does not propose to address other well-known factors such as religion, the tradition of service to the crown, or a supposed common ethnic origin. There is a need for a new theoretical framework to supersede old models, such as for example the study of the Irish solely in terms of their origin. To put it another way, I believe that it makes sense when studying the Irish to bear in mind the relations they established beyond the confines of the socio-professional and the geographical perspectives.

The Irish provide us with a microcosm of internal machinations at court, social advancement, relationships with other foreign communities, as well as with the host society, and so on. In this sense the Irish did not behave differently to anyone else at the eighteenth-century court - the Basques, for example, formed an extensive and complex network of relationships which went beyond simple common origin. Of course this does not mean that common origin was not an important element in group cohesion, nor that it was not especially marked among the Irish, although it was not the sole element. And, just like other groups, the Irish also used other ‘parallel routes’ to get to the top, much at odds with what we would today understand under the rubric of ‘meritocracy’. Money was just one of these.

The publication of F. Andújar Castillo’s work on venality in the eighteenth-century army has justifiably caused a veritable revolution in Spanish historiography. It has forced all of us to think about the world of the military in an unconventional way. [2] When it came to entry into the army and promotion thereafter, money was as important as seniority or any other distinction.

Often hidden within the official documentation, the buying and selling of positions in the military hierarchy was a practice that already existed in the Spanish Army from the time of Carlos V, and reached incredible proportions in the eighteenth century. The various options for buying and selling in the eighteenth-century army ranged from the classic ‘supply of soldiers’ (in return for a promotion), to the mixed system in which, as well as money, the supplier would receive jobs for himself and his family as well as blank officer commissions signed by the king. Of course there was also the direct purchase of office, and in the second half of the eighteenth Century even the provision of private finance for construction works - either civil or military - was one means of gaining access to the officer ranks.

The Irish entered fully into this market, especially around the middle of the seventeenth century. During the golden age of the Irish levies, war was big business, especially for Irish veterans of the armies of Flanders, Extremadura and

Catalonia. Whether or not these soldiers had been brought to Spain like enslaved Africans was of little consequence once they found themselves surrounded by money and positions in the officer ranks. I will mention just a few cases here. Captain Cristóbal Mayo brought 1,000 men from Ireland and with these he formed a regiment under his command in Catalonia, 'with the privileges of Spaniards and on the same footing'. Mayo was named commander of this regiment, the conditions being set out before the levy arrived in Spain. Mayo received the title of *maestre de campo* (commander of one or several regiments), allowing him to head the regiment. In addition, he was assigned the commissions for sergeant major, adjutant sergeant major, adjutant, eleven captains, eleven ensigns and nine other officer commissions, all 'blank' (AGS, GA, Libro 209, ff. 162-163v. Madrid, 2 April 1650).

The same thing happened in the case of the levy of 600 men raised by Ricardo White in 1650. These were to form six companies of 100 men in each. The six commissions for captain (pay: 40 escudos per month) were given blank to White - or, which amounted to the same thing, at his full discretion. He also received blank commissions for six ensigns and six sergeants. White imposed further conditions: note the king's order to the *Corregidor* (Governor) of Biscay Province to admit White as a resident of Bilbao 'as long as he does not marry a woman from Biscay but rather an Irishwoman and attends to the services he has promised to render'. The service, of course was to raise 600 men for the army (AGS, GA, Libro 209, ff. 198v-200v. In f. 200v. the order of Felipe IV to Juan de Torres y Armendariz, governor of Vizcaya. Madrid, 29 September 1650).

Blank commissions were again in evidence for the regiment of 1,500 Irishmen raised by *Maestre de Campo* Cristóbal Mayo in 1652. A blank commission was made available for the *maestre de campo* who would take charge of the regiment (pay: 116 escudos per month). There were also blank commissions for sergeant-major (65 escudos per month), adjutant-sergeant (20 escudos per month), adjutant sergeant-major, ten captains (40 escudos per month), eleven ensigns and ten sergeants (AGS, GA, Libro 225, ff. 94-97v. Blank commissions, February 1652). Much the same occurred in the case of 3,000 Irishmen divided into three regiments that were levied by Colonel Thomas Plunket: three blank commissions for the *maestres de campo*, three for sergeant-majors for each regiment, thirty for captains for each company in the three regiments and another six for adjutant sergeant-majors (AGS, GA, Libro 225, ff. 125-127. Blank commissions, February 1652).

This practice of privatising the officer class to the benefit of some recurred in 1652 in the case of the Flanders veteran Dermicio O'Sullivan Moar. He was named *maestre de campo* of an Irish infantry regiment which would be formed by the 1,000 men he undertook to bring from Ireland (AGS, GA, Libro 225, ff. 139v-140. Aranjuez, 29 April 1652. Appointment as *maestre de campo* in ff. 140v-141). Another instance is that of Sergeant-Major Guillermo Butler, named *maestre de campo* of a regiment of 1,000 Irish whom he promised to recruit (AGS, GA, Libro 225, ff. 161-162v. Madrid, 23 November 1652 and ff. 162-163v). Yet another is that of the levy of 3,700 Irishmen in four regiments by *Maestre de Campo* Juan Patricio, a veteran of Catalonia. He was offered the rank of *maestre de campo* of one of the regiments (116 escudos per month), 'over and above your pay as captain of a cavalry company which you will form with 100 of the men you have brought' (AGS, GA, Libro 225, ff. 170-171v. Madrid, 31 December 1652).

During the eighteenth century, contracts signed in 1709 with Demetrio MacAuliff and Reinaldo MacDonnell made possible the formation of two Irish units which would later become the Ultonia and Hibernia Regiments. The parties to the agreement obtained military ranks. MacAuliff was given that of colonel (the first condition in his contract) and MacDonnell was named lieutenant colonel as well being given the chance to sell (yes, sell) blank commissions signed by Felipe V. 'The said Macaulife [*sic*] will nominate all the officers in the regiment and these blank commissions will be acceptable to the court' (second condition). The third condition stated 'they will be paid on the same basis as are Spanish infantry regiments [...] All the officers will be Irish and of proven service, and the rank-and-file soldiers must be Irish to the greatest number possible' (AGS, GM, leg. 2716. Demetrio MacAuliff's conditions. Monzón, 29 October 1709). The conditions for the Hibernia (formerly Castelar) Regiment were practically identical (AGS, GM, leg. 2716. Reynaldo MacDonnell's conditions for raising the Castelar regiment. Monzón, 29 October 1709).

Other members of prominent Irish families continued to take part in the market for military positions. In 1734 Felipe V rewarded the sergeant major of the Toscana regiment, Luis Francisco O'Mahony, with a colonel's commission and a sergeant major's commission (blank, for him to sell), in exchange for a promise to levy 300 soldiers. José Laules (Lawless), son of the lieutenant-general and diplomat Patricio Lawless, obtained a company of the regiment of Fresian Dragoons for the price of 36,000 *reales*; Ventura FitzJames Stuart, son of the famous Jacobo Francisco FitzJames Stuart, second Duque de Liria, married María Josefa Cagigal, member of a Spanish family that was traditionally associated with the army, the Cagigal de la Vega. For their son, Jacobo Stuart Cagigal, the maternal grandfather 'benefited' (in other words, bought) a lieutenant position in the Prince's regiment when the boy was just two years old. This regiment had been raised by the boy's uncle, Juan Manuel Cagigal (Andújar Castillo 2004: 137-138, 182, 287).

Those Irish businessmen with sufficient money to invest in a good military career for their sons also opted into this system. In 1768 the Butler Clarke family bought a commission as captain in the Foreign Volunteers infantry regiment for their son Juan (born in Seville, 1749). Juan became field-marshal in 1795, military and civil governor of

Puerto de Santa María in 1798 and Governor of Cartagena in 1806. In Cuba, Gonzalo O'Farrill enlisted as a cadet in the Havana Nobles company in 1764. In 1771 his father, the rich merchant Juan José O'Farrill y Arriola, bought him a company in the Princess's regiment. [3] From then on, Gonzalo began a meteoric ascent, holding ranks of lieutenant-general (1795), inspector general of infantry (1798); envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Prussia (1799), honorary privy councillor (1805); director general and colonel general of the artillery (1808), secretary of state and secretary for war (1808).

José Fleming, who reached the rank of brigadier in 1793, found his ascent facilitated by the purchase of ranks. A member of an Irish merchant family in Puerto de Santa María, in 1771 he bought the rank of captain. His father had purchased him a lieutenant's commission in 1762 in the Bourbon cavalry regiment. At the end of the eighteenth century, Nicolás Langton abandoned the family business in Cádiz and bought a company in the Jaén infantry regiment for 135,000 *reales* (Andújar Castillo 2008; Andújar Castillo 2004: 266, 268, 396).

It was to be another soldier of Irish origin, Alejandro O'Reilly, who exhibited serious doubts about the system of venality, to the point of openly rejecting it when he became Inspector General of Infantry in 1769. The place-buying phenomenon had acquired scandalous proportions under Juan Gregorio Muniain's tenure as Secretary of the War Department. It slowed down completely, at least in Spain, between 1774 and 1790. In fact, any future monograph on O'Reilly, one of the great military reformers of eighteenth-century Spain, should deal with the part played by the Irishman in opposing the practice of place-buying, even if the system did resurface once more in the 1790s. [4]

These are just a few issues that need to be teased out. The somewhat controversial goal of this article is to draw attention to the absolute need to question some stereotypes about the presence of the Irish in Spain. These range from the supposedly warm welcome the Spanish extended to their 'brothers from the north' to the belief that the Irish ascent within the political, military and social spheres was based entirely on their merits. The granting of a place in the army or a promotion was in fact based on criteria that were not restricted to competence or professional experience. Some of those practices, such as the venality described in this article, were outside the written military codes and hence are not easily to trace in the sources. However, in doing so, the Irish merchant or soldier can be placed squarely within the milieu of the *ancien régime* of which he formed part.

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Notes

[1] The processes are described in more detail in Recio Morales 2008.

[2] Andújar Castillo's forthcoming study on venality in the Spanish Army in the Americas promises to be equally interesting.

[3] Juan José O’Farrill y Arriola was the son of Ricardo O’Farrill. This powerful merchant settled in Havana, Cuba, around 1715 and became involved in the sugar business and slave-trading. He was named *factor* (business manager) of the Mar del Sur Company around this time. Money and patronage enabled him to marry the daughter of the Chief Accountant of the Royal Treasury Court, María Josefa Arriola y García de Londoño. From then on, the progress of this Irish dynasty knew no limits. Ricardo O’Farrill had come to Cuba from the island of Montserrat, where the Irish ran the slave trade (D.H. Akenson, *If the Irish ran the world. Montserrat, 1630-1730*: 1997). He appears in some documents as a native of Ireland and in others as a native of Montserrat. He attained Spanish citizenship by royal decree on 17 January 1722 (José Manuel Serrano Álvarez y Allan J. Kuethe, ‘La familia O’Farrill y la élite habanera’, in L. Navarro García (coord.), *Élites urbanas en Hispanoamérica (De la conquista a la independencia)* (2005), pages 203-212).

[4] For O’Reilly’s doubts about the place-buying system see Andújar Castillo 2004: 320-328.