



## James Rooke (1770-1819), commander of the British Legion in Bolívar's army

By Moisés Enrique Rodríguez

**Rooke, James** (1770-1819), commander of the British Legion and hero of the battle of Pantano de Vargas during the South American wars of independence, was born in Dublin around 1770, to a British father and an Irish mother. Nothing is known about his father, but on the paternal side, he came from a distinguished military family with roots in Gloucestershire, England. Fifteen Rookes had served in the British Army in the previous two centuries and three of them had reached the rank of General, including his father (a Lieutenant General).

Rooke joined the British Army in 1791 as a Second Lieutenant, fought in several campaigns against the French and by the time of the Peace of Amiens in 1802 had reached the rank of Major. In May 1798, he married Mary Rigge, who later bore him a son and a daughter. The years that followed were happy ones, with Rooke moving in high circles and becoming a personal friend of the Prince of Wales, the future King George IV. Unfortunately, such a lifestyle cost money and the Major got used to spending beyond his means. In 1801, probably because of losses incurred at the races, Rooke was forced to sell most of his property and left for France, then temporarily at peace with Britain.

During the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens, the Major was caught in French territory and the local authorities arrested him. He was interned at Verdun in May 1803 and held prisoner for the next ten years, almost the entire duration of the Napoleonic Wars. He escaped early in 1813 and made his way to Wellington's headquarters at Cádiz, Spain, where he commenced a second career in the British Army. He was commissioned as Second Lieutenant on 15 April 1813 and promoted to Lieutenant in August, but with the abdication of Napoleon, hostilities came to an end and Rooke was demobilised in 1814. In November of that year, his wife died.

When Napoleon returned to power (the saga of the 'Hundred Days'), Rooke hurried to Belgium and joined Wellington's staff in Brussels. He was made aide-de-camp to the Dutch Prince of Orange and in this capacity fought at Waterloo, where he was wounded (1815). He was demobilised for the second (and final) time in 1816 and, with no prospects in Europe, decided to visit his sister, who happened to be the wife of Colonel Probyn, the Governor of St. Kitts, a British colony in the Caribbean. It was there that he met and married his second wife, Anne Tucker.

In 1817, Rooke travelled to Angostura and joined the Patriot army as a Lieutenant Colonel on 23 September. He became a full Colonel on the following year. He was initially assigned to the Liberator's staff as an aide-de-camp but soon afterwards was put in command of an Anglo-Venezuelan unit whose creation he had proposed. With the '1st Regiment of Hussars of Venezuela', he took part in the campaign of the Venezuelan Llanos (Plains) in 1818 and fought in the battles of Calabozo, El Sombrero, El Semén, Ortiz, Rincón de los Toros and Calabozo. El Semén (La Puerta) merits mention, because almost all the twenty British or Irish officers present in the field were killed or captured. Rooke himself, fighting at Bolívar's side, was wounded twice.

On 11 March 1819, at Araguaquen, the Liberator integrated most of his foreign volunteers (previously serving in different units) into a single 'brigade' and put Rooke in command. The unit was named the British Legion and comprised 250 men.

After an inconclusive campaign, the rainy season arrived and the Royalist and Patriot armies went to winter quarters. Another year had passed and there was still deadlock in Venezuela. Bolívar then decided to do the unexpected - or, rather, to attempt the impossible -: to break out of the Venezuelan interior, cross the entire length of the Llanos during the rainy season, ascend the formidable Andes mountains and strike at the heart of present-day Central Colombia. The project looked like madness since the Llanos were virtually impassable during the rainy season. That was why armies went into winter quarters, but that was also why Morillo could never expect such a move.

The Liberator kept his plan secret until the last minute. He only revealed it to his officers at a Council of War held at Mantecal, in the middle of the Llanos, on 23 May 1819. Generals Iribairren and Rangel considered that it foolhardy and withdrew from the expedition. Predictably, Rooke assured Bolívar that, 'if necessary he would follow with the British Legion even beyond Cape Horn'. The march was an epic journey, with the men having to walk every day for several hours, in water up to the waist and seldom finding a dry place to rest at night. In spite of the incredible hardships, Colonel Rooke was, according to O'Leary, 'pleased with everyone and with everything, and especially with himself. He seemed to be satisfied with the life he was living and not at all indifferent to it'.

The army finally reached Pore, at the foot of the cordillera, and started ascending the mountains on 22 June. In less than a month, the Patriots had marched 600 km through extremely difficult terrain and had lost more than 300 casualties: men killed or incapacitated by illness or accidents, and deserters.

The crossing of the Andes was a feat as challenging, and as costly, as a battle against a determined enemy. The *Llaneros* (Plainsmen) had been raised in the intense tropical heat of their native plains and had no winter clothing. The extreme cold of the Cordillera caused many casualties. The crossing of the Páramo de Pisba was particularly daunting and several men froze to death in that desolate place. The Britons lost two officers and 60 men (one quarter of their strength) during the crossing of the Andes, and were in such poor condition after the ascent that they had to be sent to rest in Sativa. Rooke is reported to have kept his high spirits throughout the entire operation. This is remarkable on two accounts. First of all, he was no longer a young man. At 49, he was considerably older than the rest of his comrades and yet proved able to withstand the rigours of the campaign much better than men in their prime. His cheerfulness was a source of inspiration to the entire army. Secondly, he suspected that his wife (who had stayed behind in Venezuela) was having an affair with another British officer. He had written to his friend James Hamilton (the merchant) asking him to look into the matter and confirm or deny the rumours. Thus, during the campaign of 1819, the commander of the British Legion may have been going through a period of deep personal anguish. Hamilton was faced with the sad duty of answering in the affirmative, but Rooke was probably already dead when the letter arrived.

After recuperating, the British Legion rejoined Bolívar's army on 22 July 1819 and three days later fought at Vargas, the action which won them fame. At a crucial moment in the battle, Bolívar ordered Rooke to storm the heights in which the Spaniards had taken defensive positions. The Legion charged under a hail of bullets and achieved its objective. This action and a cavalry attack by the Venezuelan Lancers decided the outcome of the battle and turned defeat into victory. Rooke, however, was seriously wounded and Dr. Foley, the Legion's medical officer, was forced to amputate his arm in an attempt to save his life. After the operation, Rooke seized his severed arm with his good hand, raised it in the air and shouted: 'Viva la patria!' ('Long live the Fatherland!'). Dr. Foley enquired: 'Which country, Sir? England or Ireland?'. Rooke replied: *La Patria que me dará sepultura* ('The country that shall give me a burial').

The following day, Bolívar awarded the 'Order of the Liberator' to the British Legion, one of the rare occasions during the war when this decoration was bestowed onto an entire unit. John MackIntosh was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel 'graduado' and replaced the wounded Rooke as its commanding officer. Unable to follow the army because of his state, Rooke was left in a monastery (the Augustinian house in Belén de Chámeza) near Tunja, where he died on 28 July 1819.

The story of Rooke's death at Vargas and the amputation of his arm is perhaps the most vivid of all the war deeds mentioned in Colombia's history books. The Colombian Army still has a unit called *Batallón No. 18 de Infantería Jaime Rooke* based in Ibagué (150 km from Bogotá). There is a bronze statue of Colonel Rooke at Boyacá Bridge (surprisingly, not at Vargas) and another at the monastery where he died of his wounds. In the nearby city of Paipa, there is a *Parque Jaime Rooke* and at the main entrance to the Colombian capital, a sober but moving marble tablet reads: *Colombia, a los Próceres y a la Legión Británica*.

Moisés Enrique Rodríguez

## References

- Hasbrouck, Alfred. *Foreign Legionnaires in the Liberation of Spanish South America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928).
- Lambert, Eric. *Voluntarios Británicos e Irlandeses en la Gesta Bolivariana* (Caracas: Ministerio de Defensa, 1980-1993). Three vols.
- Rodríguez, Moisés Enrique. *Freedom's Mercenaries: British Volunteers in the Wars of Independence of Latin America* (Lanham MD: Hamilton Books, University Press of America, 2006). Two vols.