



Ireland and Iberia: An Introduction

By Igor Pérez Tostado

Relations between Ireland and the Iberian Peninsula have their roots deep in the mists of myth and history. According to the Irish *Leabhar Gabhála* (book of invasions), the last wave of settlers to arrive in Ireland came from the Iberian Peninsula. During the middle ages, trade and fishing created strong links between Ireland and the Peninsula. Foreign fishing vessels working in the fishing grounds of Grand Sol docked in Spanish ports for some months every year. For example, in 1571 around eighteen *chalupas* (fishing boats) from Gijón, Ribadesella and Llanos worked in Irish fishing grounds (Gomez-Centurión 1988).

During the sixteenth century, Irish-Iberian connections took on a religious and political dimension. The first diplomatic contacts and treaties between the Irish nobility and the empire of Charles V date back to 1529. Iberian political involvement in Ireland increased progressively from the 1520s to the 1640s. The myth of the Iberian origin of the inhabitants of Ireland (the 'Milesian myth'), a sense of solidarity based on Catholicism and the services rendered by the Irish in the armies of Spain, together with a strong campaign of cultural reinvention and projection carried on by the Irish with the Spanish Monarchy, convinced the kings of their duty to protect and defend the Irish.

Parallel to the profound transformation that the English state wrought in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a strong Irish community flourished in the territories of the Spanish Monarchy, mainly Castile, Portugal and the so-called Spanish Netherlands. On the other hand, as Declan Downey has demonstrated, the nature of the Irish Counter-Reformation movement was much more related to the Castilian monarchist model than to that of the Roman one (Downey 1994).

These sixteenth and seventeenth century migrations are best remembered in relation to the military commanders that served in the Spanish Army of Flanders (some of whom returned to Ireland in the 1640s) and the almost thirty Irish colleges scattered around Europe. Less known is the political role played by a small Irish lobby at the courts of Lisbon, Madrid and Brussels, in defence of the rights of the dispossessed nobility and Catholic Church.

On the other hand, the experience of the tens of thousands of migrants who served in the army as foot soldiers, and their dependent families, studied here by Moises Enrique Rodríguez, was full of hardship and need, as happened with many that took the *mestiere delle arme*. Many of them ended up dissolving in the marginal groups of society, as can be seen in the number of Irish making their last will at the paupers' hospitals of Madrid, or in the satiric works of Francisco de Quevedo. De Quevedo tellingly used the word *irlandesa* interchangeably with prostitute. However, there were also merchant settlers who opened up Iberian and American commerce to European networks of trade and acted as backdrop to the Irish commercial success of the eighteenth century.

Although the Spanish political role in Ireland was overshadowed by France's influence and the stronger English and Scottish authority on the island from the 1650s onwards, the eighteenth century might be considered the golden age of the Irish presence on the Iberian Peninsula. Starting with Daniel O'Daly (1592-1662) as one of the diplomatic cornerstones of the Portuguese Crown during its war of independence from Spain (1640-1668) until the era of Leopoldo O'Donnell (1809-1867), military commander, political leader and prime minister, both Portugal and Spain boasted high-ranking diplomats, military men and politicians of Irish origin at their service.

On the other hand, Irish merchants benefited from the full rights of Spanish citizenship, confirmed by the new Bourbon dynasty in 1701, in order to boost their trade. The most famous son of this trading aristocracy was the writer, poet and theologian José Blanco White (1775-1841) who in his writings refers to Lower Andalusia, the hub of Spanish intercontinental trade where he grew up. On this issue, Manuel Fernández Chaves and Mercedes Gamero present the unknown business and social context of the Irish community in eighteenth-century Seville.

Recent works to be published by the end of this year by Oscar Recio Molina and Enrique García Hernán show the success of Irish girls of marrying age at the Spanish Court among military officers, thanks to their social and cultural capital. On the other hand, Oscar Recio himself argues that in the same eighteenth century, some financial capital was always welcomed in order to have Irish claims to nobility swiftly recognised by Iberian administrations. However, high statesmen and military commanders such as Richard Wall (1694-1777), studied here by Diego Tellez Alarcia, and Alexander O'Reilly (1722-1794), endured severe criticism on the grounds of their being considered foreigners.

In a sense, the transition from the *ancien régime* to the nation-building of the nineteenth century was a period of cultural introspection in both Ireland and on the Iberian Peninsula, and signified the end of some types of mobility and migration of the *ancien régime*. All Irish colleges in Spain, except in Salamanca, were closed down in the wake of the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767.

Catholic emancipation in Ireland (1829) favoured the return of Irish Catholic institutions to Ireland from the continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but at the cost of diminishing hundred-years-old cultural connections. It also paved the way for the birth of nationalism. During the nineteenth century, Spanish culture and history served in Ireland as a mirror in which to reflect the themes and problems that preoccupied the Irish writers of the time, as seen in Asier Altuna's article in this journal. However, the great Irish migration of the nineteenth century was not directed towards Spain and Portugal, countries struggling with political turmoil and the need for economic modernisation, but did follow former Iberian links to Latin America.

Irish people were also involved in the most dramatic event of Spanish history of the twentieth century, namely, the Civil War (1936-39). Again, Spain served as a mirror in which the fears and hopes of Irish society were reflected. Most of the population, headed by the Catholic Church and its conservative political allies, strongly supported the military rebels. However, the Irish Free State advocated a policy of non-intervention in the League of Nations but did nothing to prevent the departure of volunteers to Spain.

General Eoin O'Duffy (1892-1944), former head of the Blueshirt movement in Ireland, brought a group of volunteers to fight for Franco. These were welcomed and integrated into the Spanish Legion (the elite troops of the Spanish army) in which they formed their own regiment, the *Bandera XIV* (Fourteenth Flag). Their poor military performance, combined with the high cost involved, convinced Franco's camp to reshuffle them back to Ireland as soon as possible.

Support for the Spanish Republic was an unpopular subject in 1930s Ireland. It was not uncommon for meetings in favour of the Republican government to bear the brunt of aggression. However, the Irish Republican Army leader Frank Ryan (1902-1944) brought members of the Republican Congress Party to Spain to fight for the Spanish Republic. They formed the James Connolly Column in the International Brigades. In contrast with the experience of their fellow countrymen on the opposite side, they participated in the major battles of the war, suffering heavy losses, up to the retreat of the foreign volunteers.

The second half of the twentieth century was characterised, both in Ireland and on the Iberian Peninsula, by progressive European integration. Although the two regions joined the European club at an interval of thirteen years (Ireland in 1973 and Spain and Portugal in 1986), they seem to have followed quite a similar path. On joining, all three countries were members of the so-called 'poverty crescent' of the community, comprising Greece, Southern Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland.

In recent decades, Ireland and Spain have followed quite similar paths inside the European Union (EU), of sustained economic growth. It is a clear sign of prosperity that both countries have rapidly made the transition from being countries of a profound tradition of emigration to having the highest immigration rates in the EU. In this journal, Oscar Molina studies the contributory factors that have led Ireland and Spain to their present situations, and Claire Healy analyses the similar immigration experiences of Ireland and Portugal.

Another issue, and a most sensitive one, which has linked Ireland and the Iberian Peninsula from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards, has been the nationalist conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country. The Irish Catholic priest Alec Reid, who played a prominent role as facilitator in the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, has attempted to bring his experience to bear in the Basque conflict. In recognition of his labours, he received the 'World Mirror' prize in 2002, awarded by the Sabino Arana Foundation. In a society in which political conflict invades every aspect of life, even a sportsman such as John Aldridge, as studied here by Matthew Brown, had to be extremely careful in his role as goal-scorer to avoid getting embroiled in nationalist politics.

Academic collaboration between Ireland and Spain, especially in the field of early modern history, has greatly increased in the last decade. Formerly, Irish scholars such as Micheline Kerney Walsh had gone to Spain in order to research sources relating to Irish people in Spanish archives. They were often amazed with the results, particularly compared with the scarcity of sources from the same period remaining in Ireland. This led Irish scholars to believe that, in order to understand the early modern experience in Ireland, sources had to be sought and analysed on the European continent. This idea was the origin of the *Irish in Europe* project, coordinated by Thomas O'Connor and Mary Ann Lyons in Maynooth, [1] and the Irish on the Continent database, directed by Ciarán Brady and Declan Downey.

The commemoration of the Battle of Kinsale (1602-2002) was the inspiration for many scholarly events in both Spain and Ireland, which have continued and gained momentum with the formation of a research group in Spain 'La comunidad irlandesa en la Monarquía Hispánica (siglos XVI-XVIII): identidad e integración social' ('The Irish community in the Hispanic Monarchy (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries): identity and social integration', HUM2005-05763/Hist). [2] This scholarly effort has been generously supported by both Spanish and Irish public authorities.

Research on the Irish in Portugal has followed a more discreet path, not quite befitting of the high quality of early modern studies in the country and the energy of its research community. In the 1960s, a thesis was presented at University College Dublin on the Dominican diplomat Daniel O'Daly by Margaret Curtin, which has not been published. An article by Benvenuta Mac Curtain was however published in *Irish Historical Studies*. In 1981 Manuel Gonçalves da Costa published a Portuguese sources collection for Irish history (Gonçalves da Costa, 1981). From then on, and excepting Patricia O'Connell who wrote a monograph on the Irish college in Lisbon ten years ago, no major research on Ireland and Portugal has been carried out, at least as far as this editor is aware (O'Connell, 1997). However, signs at present are positive and hopefully this situation is due to improve in the next few years: exciting times ahead in Portugal and Ireland.

Igor Pérez Tostado
Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Seville

Notes

[1] *The Irish in Europe Project*, Department of Modern History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland. Website (<http://www.irishineurope.com/>), cited 6 September 2007.

[2] *La Comunidad Irlandesa en la Monarquía Hispánica (siglos XVI-XVIII): Identidad e Integración Social*, Instituto de Historia, CSIC. Duque de Medinaceli, 6. 28014 Madrid. Website (<http://www.irishinspain.org/>), cited 6 September 2007.

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