

Irish Doctors in the Colombian Wars of Independence

By Matthew Brown (1)

Abstract

This essay seeks to return the attention of researchers to a subject that has fallen out of favour in recent decades, especially since the retirement or death of the historians who first identified sources, asserted the significance of the topic, and opened the field to investigation. It presents a bibliographical review of the existing literature on the Irish doctors who served in the wars of independence in Gran Colombia, followed by a short biographical survey of some Irish doctors who have not been studied before, at least not in an English language publication such as this. The conclusion makes some general remarks about the role of Irish doctors in the wars of independence. (2)



The role of foreign doctors in administering to the troops of independence in Gran Colombia has been recognised by scholars since the 1960s. Before then, the study of medical practitioners had taken a subsidiary position to the *historia patria* which focused primarily on battles and their heroes. Most historians agree, however, that many more soldiers died of disease in these wars than they did in battle. (3) The ground-breaking work of José Rafael Fortique and Francisco Alejandro Vargas in particular, identified the principal doctors who sought to limit these losses, drawing primarily on published sources, and postulated that these men played a key role in ‘modernising’ Simón Bolívar’s armies and enabling them to resist Spanish forces. (4) A conference and publication in 1972 brought many contributors to the new

field together, providing much useful biographical detail about the doctors (foreign and local) who tended to the wars’ wounded. One of the participants, Franz Conde Jahn, suggested that one of the principal achievements of the foreign doctors was to revitalise the image of the medical practitioner, in Venezuela at least, where prior to independence most doctors were people of colour. The activity and prestige of white doctors who knew Latin terms, he argued, gave confidence and strength to the soldiers in the ranks, and contributed substantially to the victories of Bolívar’s forces at Boyacá and Carabobo (Dias 1972).

It is worth noting that while the medical practitioners referred to in the literature above,

and in this essay in general, were all male, recent scholarship has emphasised the role of women in caring for the sick and wounded during the wars of independence. The contribution of these women continues to be underestimated in the literature, due to a perceived lack of sources or a continued lack of respect for their role. However, a fuller picture of the role women played in maintaining minimum levels of hygiene and tending to injuries can be constructed from references in archival documentation. (5) The work of the AHRC 'Gendering Latin American Independence' project has unearthed many new sources and individuals who can be studied from this angle (Brewster 2005).

The study of health care provision in Colombia and Venezuela has regained the attention of scholars in recent years. Hugo Armando Sotomayor Tribin's excellent *Guerras, enfermedades y médicos en Colombia* builds on the earlier literature whilst placing its attention on a social history of the period, rather than on its protagonists. (6) From Sotomayor Tribin's extensive archival research we learn, for example, of the shopping lists of doctors in 1819 - including powdered rhubarb and selected peanuts, with their respective prices (Sotomayor Tribin 1997: 201). He reveals that Irish doctors such as Thomas Foley used alcohol as an anaesthetic when performing amputations after key independence battles such as Boyacá and Pantano de Vargas (Sotomayor Tribin 1997: 190). Sotomayor Tribin makes a strong case for seeing ill health as one of the principal protagonists of the wars of independence, and its treatment one of the neglected social concerns of the period. For him dysentery, poor nutrition and yellow fever determined the course of military campaigning and shaped the societies that were born out of warfare. 1830 is often taken to mark an epoch in Colombian history; for Sotomayor Tribin this is because 'yellow fever appears in the country's interior, [...] Gran Colombia is dissolved, and Bolívar dies' (Sotomayor Tribin 1997: 213).

My own work on foreign participation in the wars of independence in Gran Colombia has emphasised the Irish predominance in expeditions also comprising English, Scottish,

German, Italian, French, Spanish, Maltese and Welsh men and women (Brown 2006). In 2007 I posted online a database which contains preliminary biographical details for over 3,000 of the 7,000 foreigners who joined the cause of independence, drawn from my own larger database. The database can be consulted freely (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hispanic/latin/research.html>). Searching the database for 'Irish' and 'Surgeon' or 'Doctor' as rank, or 'Apothecary' as profession, brings up a total of 85 names. (7) Some of these are well known already, such as the aforementioned Thomas Foley and James H. Robinson (also known as Robertson), and accounts of their careers can be found in the general accounts of Alfred Hasbrouck or Eric Lambert. The database shows that in the years after independence Irish doctors who had made their reputations during the wars were scattered across Gran Colombia: William Porter Smyth settled, married and practiced in Cartagena de Indias. John Irwin of County Sligo settled, married and practiced in Maracaibo, leaving a line of descendents begun by his daughter Margarita, who claimed his pension upon her father's death in 1846 (AGN). Richard Murphy settled in Puerto Cabello (Lambert 1984: 35). Trinity College in Dublin provided many of the Irish doctors who served in Venezuela, Colombia or Ecuador. Edward French Mullery and William Murphy, both of Sligo, were amongst those who sailed for Colombia after graduation. The traveller William Duane recalled meeting them at their practice in Barquisameto in the early 1820s: Duane commented that 'they were held in the highest estimation, as well as for their professional merits, as the exemplary integrity of their social character' (Duane 1826: 185).

Many of the Irish doctors who appear in the database are not mentioned in the studies cited above. Periphery characters such as Henry Smith, who when questioned entered his profession as an 'apothecary' in Achaguas, Venezuela, in December 1820, have only been identified by means of careful accumulation of archival material (AHG). Others slipped through the official records because of the improvised nature of their recruitment, such as Dr Beaurain, who was serving with the British Navy and who, according to the account

published in Jamaica at the time, was 'forced to accept the situation of Director-General of Hospitals of Venezuela', where he served in Angostura (*Royal Gazette*, 25 September 1819; *Carrick's Morning Post*, 24 January 1820). Many of the doctors shared the same fate as the men they hoped to heal: death from the many diseases that afflicted them, especially in coastal regions. This was the case of Dr John Mortimer, who died while marching from Juan Griego to Porlamar on the island of Margarita in 1819 (*Dublin Evening Post*, 30 November 1820). A similar fate befell Dr Alexander Costello, a graduate of Apothecary's Hall in Dublin, who died of yellow fever in 1822, having served three years as *Inspector General de Hospitales* for the troops under the command of General John Devereux (Devereux to O'Connell, 16 July 1822).

Some foreign doctors arrived after independence had been secured, such as Davoren, Dudley, Jervis and the most famous of them all, the Scotsman Ninian Cheyne (Sotomayor Tribin 1997: 205). Cheyne settled in Bogotá after independence and became a crucial nexus between Colombian and British interests in the capital. It is possible that he was also trained at Trinity College in Dublin. (8)

W. Davidson Weatherhead may have been another Trinity College graduate who served in the wars of independence. He wrote two books after his return to Europe, one of which described the tribulations of General Gregor MacGregor's attacks on the coast of Panama. Its final pages demonstrate an interest in local ailments and diseases, with particular reference to fever, sexual organs, consumption, colic and ulcers. Weatherhead's conclusions, that the Spanish forces lost more men to disease than the British and Irish who served with the Independents, is in line with Rebecca Earle's recent synthesis of the role of disease in the wars of independence (Earle 1996). Unlike Earle, whose analysis does not address this differential, Weatherhead asserted that the Irish and British survived more often because Spanish practitioners 'know nothing of medical science' (Weatherhead 1821: 134).

One Irish doctor in Colombia who has been studied in some depth is Hugo Blair Brown. His

biographer, and descendent by marriage, Aquiles Echeverri, provides useful detail on Blair's personal and professional life. The author is keen to contrast his noble, disinterested medical services with the Irish soldiers who travelled to Colombia at the same time, who he sees as craven, mercenary and unpatriotic. Comandante Rupert Hand, the Irish mercenary who killed General José María Córdova in 1829 after the battle of El Santuario, epitomises for Echeverri the worst excesses of unwanted Irish intervention in Colombian affairs. In contrast, he sees Blair and other doctors like him as a benign force for good. (9)

Protestant in origin, Hugo Blair converted to Catholicism in Medellín in 1829, and married into the important local Gaviria family in 1836. He worked in Medellín until his death in 1864, and Echeverri posits Blair as a patriotic Colombian who founded an impressive line of descendents who should be proud of their 'Irish blood'. Echeverri's dedication to the subject went so far as to have Blair's remains exhumed from the San Pedro Cemetery in Medellín, where they had lain since Blair's death, in order to measure his bones and provide an accurate identification of his resting place (Echeverri 1972: 36). The book contains interesting oral history testimony from the subject's granddaughter, Julia Blair Gaviria, transcribed in the 1960s. Apparently in 1857 the Antioquian *caudillo* Mariano Ospina Rodríguez had asked Blair to assist him in a medical capacity, but Blair replied '*Yo no presto servicios a quienes fueron traidores del General Bolívar*' (Echeverri 1972: 52). (10)

In conclusion it can be asserted that the Irish doctors who served in the wars of independence in Gran Colombia provided an important service to the army and navy. Their contribution was acknowledged by contemporaries who sought them out for service and for treatment. Those who settled in the Gran Colombian republics even after Bolívar's death in 1830, found a settled lifestyle and a degree of social status that would have been difficult to attain in Britain or Ireland. It was the social status attained by these peace-time practitioners that secured the reputation of their colleagues who had served in wartime. Historians in both

Colombia and Venezuela have recorded the names of most prestigious of these doctors. It is to be hoped that this essay has provided an outline of a research topic that remains relatively un-mined and which can provide an important

contribution to the social and cultural history of the new republics.

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Notes

1. Dr Matthew Brown is Lecturer in Latin American Studies at University of Bristol.
2. Gran Colombia is the term used by most historians to refer to the republic formed by Simón Bolívar in 1819, and which was dissolved in 1830. Its territory covered the present-day republics of Ecuador, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela.
3. For a review of the literature see: Earle 1996: 371-83.
4. Fortique's more accessible work is *Crónicas médicas de la independencia venezolana*.
5. See Davies 2006 and Brown 2005.
6. See also the less accomplished Silva Alvarez 1985.
7. This figure includes individuals whose origin is unknown and as such is entered on the database as 'British or Irish'. My findings in *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies* suggest that such a person was more likely than not to be from Ireland.
8. John Watson Stewart lists a Dr Cheyne as a non-practising member of the College of Physicians in Dublin (Watson Stewart 1820: 1170). One of Cheyne's descendents produced a short biographical paper on his ancestor, which I have been unable to locate. Jaime C. Gomez, 'Doctor Ninian Cheyne: Profesor Escocés de la Cirugía en Colombia', paper presented to the Academia Nacional de la medicina, 26 May 1982 (Abel 1994).
9. In 2007 I travelled to El Santuario with the support of a research grant from SILAS, which I gratefully acknowledge. My book on the battle of El Santuario and its consequences will be published in 2010.
10. My translation: 'I will not serve those who betrayed General Bolívar'.

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