

## **Irish Immigrants and their Arrival in Chile: The Case of Dr William Blest Maybern**

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### **Abstract**

*This article includes a first part regarding Irish immigration to Chile during the last century of Spanish colonial rule up to the sporadic arrival of the Irish who left their mark on the newly born Chilean Republic in the nineteenth century. The second part considers the case of Dr William Blest Maybern, founding member and professor at the University of Chile's School of Medicine, who undertook many studies and helped the advancement of science in Chile giving him a notable reputation among his medical peers.*

### **Introduction**

Irish immigration in Chile did not have the numerical significance to compare with other waves of migration such as those of the Germans in the south, or the Italians and British. The Irish arrival in the country was sporadic and happened within a very precise context. It was principally the product of Spanish colonialism, (2) and the expansion of the informal British Empire in the port city of Valparaíso and in the northern cities, with the development and expansion of the nitrate trade. (3)

Nevertheless it is argued here that the Irish who arrived in Chile during the nineteenth century became a part of the Creole elite, which in turn was Anglophile and revered the British Empire. However, it is difficult to state that those Irish people identified with England and that they were counted as being 'British'. (4) Given their early presence in Chile, the fact that they were generally considered as Irish and not English was due to their Catholic religious affinity with the Spanish and subsequently the Chilean metropolis.

Regarding the arrival of Irish immigrants in Chile, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Ambrose O'Higgins, the Viceroy in Peru, endeavoured to re-found the city of Osorno with Europeans (Irish), Creoles and indigenous people so that they would live peacefully and thus drive an economy based on

flour milling, spinning mills and tanneries. O'Higgins' desire was to build a modern industrial centre and for that reason he sent for his compatriots (the majority artisans) to change the allegedly superstitious and pre-modern mentality of the native inhabitants of the place with the avowed purpose that the Irish would teach them some trade. To that end he counted on the help of another Irishman, John MacKenna, who would become Governor of Osorno.

By 15 September 1798 the first fifteen Irishmen arrived in the city of Osorno. Carpenters: Thomas Robertson, John Knitht [Knight?], Charles Bider, Robert O'Keefe [O'Keefe?], Charles Beaver; Blacksmiths: John Green, James Glover, John Titson, John Ornsbi [Hornsby?]; Tanners: John Waterson, John Web[b?]; Carvers: Daniel Cloghan; Shoe Maker: Peter Smith; Boys: James Wakeman, John Lervis [Jervis?]. (5)

In November 1798 a new group of Irishmen arrived. Masons: Thomas Sullivan; Carpenters: Charles Badder; Metal Workers: Richard Mills; Shoemakers: George Johnson; Weavers: William Conoly [Connolly?]; William Waito; Tailors: William Nial [Neal?]; Carvers: John Nelegan; Labourers: Henry Graham; Carpenters: Thomas O'Donovan, Abraham Thorn (Sánchez Aguilera 1948: 102-103).

O'Higgins' good intentions to build an industrious city failed. Apparently, the work-

shy habits of the Chileans and the constant drunkenness of some of his compatriots resulted in some of them being returned to Lima.

With the end of John MacKenna's government, O'Higgins' dream also came to an end. The city of Osorno would subsequently fall into a deep economic crisis from which it would in due course recover with the arrival of German immigrants to the zone.

Thanks to the Chilean historian Guillermo Bravo Acevedo in his transcription of volume 2834, piece 11 of the *Fondo de la Real Audiencia* from the National Archive in Santiago, entitled *El expediente tomado sobre averiguar los extranjeros que residen en el reyno* (The Dossier Made when Establishing the Number of Foreigners Living in the Kingdom) shows a census taken by the Spanish Government in 1808-1809, when five Irishmen appear as living in the Kingdom of Chile. Their geographic location was as follows: in Santiago an Irishman named Mark Lozet who came on board the corsair frigate *Cornoals* and was a quarryman or stone mason (Bravo Acevedo 1991: 31). William Luns lived in Talca; he arrived in the frigate *Lobera* and was a boot maker (Bravo Acevedo 1991: 38). Charles O'Hega[n] lived in Talcahuano. He arrived on the English frigate *Ceres* and was a carpenter and navigator by profession (Bravo Acevedo 1991: 40). And lastly in Valdivia resided James Hogan and Peter Smith; the former was contracted by the Valdivia Infantry Battalion on 2 March 1807 and the latter arrived on board the whaling frigate *Juniper*, and was a prisoner in Valparaíso in 1797 from where he was returned to Lima and then came to Osorno. In Osorno Smith was not given land because he was single, so he returned to Valdivia, where he was a shoe and boot maker. (6)

Chilean historian Gabriel Guarda provides other very interesting details for the period 1820-1850 in the southern zone of our country, where seven marriages were registered between Irishmen and women with southern Creole elite background. The Irishmen were Timothy Cadagan, James Glover, James Hogan, John MacKenna, Peter Smith, William Taylor and Charles Emanuel Webar (Guarda 2006: 674).

The small number of Irish who arrived in Chile left their influence on republican history by their participation in the military campaigns. (7) This is represented by such names as Ambrose O'Higgins, Governor of Chile and Viceroy of Peru; John Garland, a cavalry officer of the Order of Santiago; John Clark, an engineer who worked on the construction of the trans-Andean railway; John MacKenna, a soldier in the service of the Spanish Empire, Governor of Osorno 1897-1899 and subsequently a leader in the fight for Independence, as were Charles María O'Carroll, John O'Brien and Stanislaus Lynch. There are others with Irish ancestry, including Bernard O'Higgins the Liberator of Chile; Benjamin Vicuña MacKenna, politician and historian; Germán Riesco and Juan Luis Sanfuentes Andonegui, presidents of Chile (Griffin 2006); Albert Blest Gana, novelist and Chilean diplomat and son of the subject of this article, the medical doctor William Blest.

#### **An Irish Doctor in Chile**

William Cunningham Blest was born in Sligo in 1800, the son of Albert Blest and Ana Maybern. He studied at Trinity College, Dublin from where he graduated with a licence in medicine. He entered the University of Edinburgh, being a pupil of the Academy of James IV and obtained the degree of Doctor of Medicine on 21 March 1821. He went immediately to London where he began to practice, and was received as a member of the College of Surgeons and Apothecaries.

Blest arrived in Chile in 1824, about a year before his brothers Andrew and John. Andrew founded the first brewery in Valparaíso and married María de la Concepción Prats Urizar. Blest's brother John established himself in Valparaíso and practised medicine and would subsequently leave and go to work in the Peruvian city of Arequipa where he married María Faustina Zavala. (8) William married (for the first time) María de la Luz Gana y López in Santiago on 21 March 1827. Three of the seven children of that marriage were distinguished men of letters; the poet Guillermo Blest Gana, Alberto Blest Gana a notable writer and diplomat and Joaquín Blest Gana, journalist,

writer, lawyer and historian and who was also a member of the Supreme Court and Ministry of Justice prosecutor from 1866 to 1870.

Dr William Blest practised medicine with great success and in 1826 he was the author of a report entitled *Observaciones sobre el estado de la medicina en Chile* (Observations about the State of Medicine in Chile). Blest judged the sanitary conditions of the country and criticised the low level of teaching and the low interest in medical science in Chile. The repercussions of Blest's report were immediate and in 1826 the Government created the Medical Society which was made up of all the doctors of Santiago with Blest assuming the presidency.

His constant preaching regarding the importance of medical studies put Blest at the top of the medical profession when he published his *Ensayo sobre las causas más comunes de las enfermedades que padecen en Chile* (An Essay about the Causes of the Most Common Sickness Suffered in Chile) in 1828, and afterwards for his notable creation of the School of Medicine on 17 April 1833, during the government of Don Joaquín Prieto. On that occasion, Blest gave the following discourse:

*Gentlemen, students: the constant and ardent desire of my life has been to help the beneficent tendency, dignity, importance and respect of the profession to which I belong, and I being the first who has the honour to open the majestic doors of medicine to the Chilean people, an illustrious science which puts me in circumstances of being useful to the country, my spirit is moved by a sentiment of thanks to the Government which has provided the means to fulfil*

*my desires, and that my name be found in its future history (Blest 1946: 3).*

Blest was Professor of Pathology and Internal Clinics until the year 1851 and Dean of the School of Medicine from 1865 to 1867.

From then on Dr Blest was an important man in Chile, and after naturalisation was elected deputy for Rancagua in 1831-1834 but did not intervene much in parliamentary debates. He was also one of the drivers of Public Welfare and for many years was a member of the Central Committee. He put a lot of his creative work in to fomenting the creation of hospitals, cemeteries, orphanages and other institutes to help the destitute.

On a personal level, William Blest suffered greatly on the death of his wife María de la Luz Gana y López at his home (Alameda de las Delicias in front of the Poor Clare nuns' convent) in Santiago on 6 March 1851.

Dr Blest married for a second time on 15 September 1879 to María del Carmen Ugarte y Plaza, daughter of Juan de Dios Ugarte y de Santos Plaza Araya. Ricardo Blest Ugarte was born of this marriage, the father of Arturo Blest Ugarte and Clotario Blest, the well-known trade union leader and founder of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores.

Retired from professional practice, Dr Blest died on 3 February 1884 at his house in San Bernardo, bequeathing Chile a School of Medicine as well as an illustrious family, which was involved in Chilean republican history.

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## Notes

1. B.A., University Diego Portales; M.A. Chilean History, Universidad de Santiago de Chile.
2. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, due to the efforts of Viceroy Ambrose O'Higgins there were two Irish colonies in the city of Osorno in southern Chile. O'Higgins wished to create an industrial centre, but after some time the colonists began to desert and returned to Lima where they had come from.
3. Towards the end of the 1820-1839 period, Waddington House was the most important trading house on the Pacific coastline. Other commercial houses such as Haigh, Head, Huth, Gibbs, Hull and Hemenway were also active at the same time.

4. I share Edmundo Murray's thesis with respect to Argentina. Murray states that the nucleus of Irish arriving in Latin America identified themselves with England. See Edmundo Murray *Becoming Irlandés: Private Narratives of the Irish Emigration to Argentina (1844-1912)* (L.O.L.A., Buenos Aires, 2006).
5. National Archive, Vol. 225, F. 221, various sources. This migration may have also been related to the Irish 1798 Rebellion.
6. This Irishman appears in the first list of Irish artisans brought to the city of Osorno by Viceroy O'Higgins in 1797. See *Expediente formado sobre averiguar los extranjeros que residen en el reyno*, pp. 41-42.
7. Political unrest and upheaval in seventeenth-century Ireland saw many Irishmen leave the country to serve in the armies of Catholic Europe, particularly in the Spanish army.
8. *Revista de Estudios Históricos* (Santiago de Chile: Instituto Chileno de Investigaciones Genealógicas, 1974, No.19), p.18.

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