

Under Three Flags The Diplomatic Career of Daniel Florence O'Leary

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Abstract

During the South American Wars of Independence (1810-1825), nearly 10,000 British and Irish volunteers joined the armies and navies of the rebellious colonies. One of the most distinguished was Daniel Florence [Florencio] O'Leary, who served both as soldier and diplomat. He also wrote his 'Memoirs', which are the most complete contemporary account of the Wars of Independence. The title Memoirs of O'Leary retained by posterity is somewhat misleading, since the work is not an autobiography and O'Leary dedicates few pages to himself. He is mostly a witness and not an actor of the events he describes. The central character is Simón Bolívar and not his aide-de-camp. A brief biography of Daniel F. O'Leary is included in a previous issue of Irish Migration Studies in Latin America, (2) and a full-length biography (Vida del General Daniel Florencio O'Leary) was published by the Venezuelan historian Manuel Pérez Vila in 1957. My own book, Freedom's Mercenaries dedicates two chapters to this distinguished Irishman. Readers interested in O'Leary's overall career are invited to refer to those sources. This article concentrates on O'Leary's role as a diplomat and a mediator. In this capacity, he served under three flags: those of Gran Colombia, Venezuela and the United Kingdom.

The Early Years

Daniel Florence O'Leary was born in Cork between 1800 and 1802 (the exact date of his birth is unknown) and came to Venezuela in 1818, in an expedition organised by Luis López Méndez, the Venezuelan representative in London. Bolívar was hiring thousands of British and Irish troops, which were organised in different regiments collectively remembered as 'The British Legion'. O'Leary soon realised that there would be better prospects if he could learn Spanish and several months after his arrival he asked to be posted to a Venezuelan unit in order to improve his knowledge of the language. His request was granted and he was assigned to the 'Guardia de Honor' (personal guard) of General Anzoátegui, later a hero of the battle of Boyacá. As part of this unit, O'Leary fought in the battle of La Gamarra (27 March 1819) and was promoted to captain at the end of the engagement. He also took part in the epic 'Campaña Libertadora', one of the major feats of the independence of South America. Bolívar crossed the entire length of the Venezuelan and Colombian *Llanos* (plains) during the rainy season - something that was considered impossible - moved up the Andes and took the war to the heart of Colombia. The

twin victories of Pantano de Vargas (25 July 1819) and Puente de Boyacá (7 August 1819) resulted in the liberation of central New Granada. From this rich and populous area, Bolívar was now able to strike both north (towards Venezuela) and south (against Ecuador and eventually Peru). O'Leary served as a staff officer during these operations, but (like Bolívar himself) he was in the thick of the fighting and in the battle of Vargas received a sword wound in the forehead. The injury was not serious but O'Leary carried a scar until the end of his life. In September 1819, O'Leary was awarded the 'Order of the Liberators', the highest distinction in the Colombian army.

O'Leary's career in the next few months is not well documented but it is almost certain that he remained attached to Anzoátegui's staff until the death of this general on 15 November 1819, caused by an infection contracted in the crossing of the Andes. Between this date and April 1820, O'Leary probably served under Anzoátegui's successors, Generals Salom and Urdaneta. We know for sure that in April 1820 O'Leary was appointed aide-de-camp to Simón Bolívar and that he quickly became one of his most trusted officers.

The First Diplomatic Missions

Bolívar's senior aide-de-camp at this time was Colonel Diego Ibarra and both he and O'Leary took part in the negotiations between Patriots and Royalists which resulted in the Trujillo ceasefire at the end of 1820. They spent many days travelling back and forth between the headquarters of the belligerents and, once agreement was reached, were present during the famous interview between Bolívar and Morillo. O'Leary gives a full account of this meeting in his memoirs. After the armistice, the 'Pacificador' left for Spain and never returned to South America. The armistice broke down in January 1821 and, as a member of the Liberator's staff, O'Leary took part in the campaign that followed and fought in the battle of Carabobo (24 June 1821), which sealed the independence of Venezuela.

In September 1821, Bolívar entrusted O'Leary with his first diplomatic mission. He was sent to Jamaica, to request supplies and assistance from the British colonial authorities and private traders. He obtained the help of Wellwood Hyslop, a merchant who sold him 470 uniforms and other supplies for the Patriot army and who was later appointed Colombian Consul in Jamaica in recognition for this and other past services. O'Leary returned to Santa Marta (New Granada) on 5 October.

Confidential Messenger

During 1822 and 1833, O'Leary's activities were essentially military. He was, however, no ordinary officer and he served as confidential messenger between Bolívar and Sucre, his commander in the south. O'Leary's contribution in the liberation of Ecuador was outstanding and he distinguished himself at the battle of Pichincha (24 May 1822). It fell to O'Leary to negotiate the surrender of the defeated Spanish forces. In recognition for his services during this campaign, O'Leary was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel 'graduado'. The fact that Sucre had selected him over more senior officers to negotiate with Aymerich was also a sign of esteem, and there are many passages in the General's correspondence which show how much he appreciated O'Leary.

In June 1822, Bolívar (moving south from New Granada) liberated Pasto and arrived in Ecuador. In Guayaquil he met O'Leary, who returned to his staff. In his capacity of aide-de-camp, O'Leary was present during the historic meeting between Bolívar and San Martín, the two liberators of South America. After the Guayaquil meeting, San Martín retired from the war and departed for Europe leaving Bolívar as the undisputed leader of the revolution.

Bolívar intended to invade Peru with an army of 6,000 men and in April 1823 General Sucre was ordered ahead with a force of 1,500 soldiers, as Colombian diplomatic representative to the Peruvian Patriots. On 25 May 1823, O'Leary was sent to join Sucre with confidential correspondence from Bolívar. He was also asked to gather information concerning the confusing situation in Peru, to investigate the true political sympathies of the population of El Callao and to assess how sincere was the petition of help made by the local patriots to the Liberator. O'Leary was with Sucre when the Colombians had to abandon Lima and withdraw to El Callao (18 June). Two days later, Sucre sent him back to the Liberator with a full and confidential intelligence report of the current situation in Peru.

O'Leary joined Bolívar in Quito and informed him that the situation in the south was critical. The main army should join Sucre as quickly as possible. Bolívar invaded Peru in September 1823.

Mission to Chile

Although O'Leary accompanied the Liberator to Peru as aide-de-camp, he did not stay in the Viceroyalty for long and did not take part in the battles of Junín and Ayacucho (1824), which sealed the liberation of Spanish America. Bolívar sent him on a diplomatic mission to Chile and on 26 October 1823 O'Leary left for Santiago in the *Aurora* (captain Prescott). His orders were to persuade the government of that republic to increase her contribution to the war effort and to do everything in his power to neutralise the intrigues of Riva Agüero, who

had now been deposed and replaced by Bolívar as President of Peru.

Chile had played a key role in the early stages of the liberation of Peru but had exhausted her resources and had been forced to scale down her contribution. Earlier in the year, Ramón Freire had replaced the hero of the independence, Bernardo O'Higgins, as Supreme Director. The new leader was uncooperative and this was understandable. Chile's financial situation was precarious and O'Higgins's fall had initiated a period of political instability. Freire extended O'Leary a friendly welcome, was polite and sympathetic and promised to do all he could, but it was clear that little real support would be forthcoming.

A few months before O'Leary's arrival, the Chileans had launched an expedition against Arica (Southern Peru) but this force had decided to return home after the debacle of Santa Cruz's campaign in the Puertos Intermedios and had refused to proceed to El Callao. O'Leary vainly attempted to persuade Freire to send these troops back to the Viceroyalty. Instead, they were used to launch an unsuccessful attack against the island of Chiloé. Chile played no significant role in this last stage of the war and the Colombian army remained the main actor in the final phase of Peru's independence.

O'Leary spent sixteen frustrating months in Chile and left the country at the beginning of February 1825, on board the *O'Higgins*. Although no fault of his, the mission was unsuccessful and the only thing that O'Leary achieved was to buy a cargo of arms. British and French merchants gave him money for his personal expenses but refused to provide any credits for the war in Peru. Interestingly in view of what happened later, during his time in Santiago Daniel O'Leary published several articles in the local press, defending Bolívar against charges of wanting to crown himself as king. By 1828, O'Leary himself had become favourable to the establishment of a monarchy in Colombia, with the Liberator as Simón I or a European Prince in his place.

Thanks to O'Leary's lobbying, the *O'Higgins* and other units of the Chilean Navy took part in the blockade of El Callao (1825-1826) but by then the war had been won and their contribution was not really needed. They were commanded by Admiral Blanco Encalada.

Madariaga accuses O'Leary of having mismanaged Patriot funds during his mission in Chile, but Perez Vila refutes the charge. Bolívar approved the accounts presented by O'Leary and proof of his trust in him is the fact that he kept him in his service and even promoted him to first aide-de-camp. The Spanish historian lets that nationalism and nostalgia for a lost empire clouds his judgement.

Bolívar's Last Years

Much to O'Leary's disappointment, the war had already ended when he returned to Peru. With the Spanish army gone, the fragile unity between the patriots began to break down and Bolívar was faced with growing opposition. In 1827, a revolution in Peru brought Bolívar's enemies to power. In Venezuela, General Páez led the movement which resulted in the secession of that country from Gran Colombia in 1830. A reluctant Bolívar assumed dictatorial powers in Bogotá in 1828 but relinquished those powers two years later and died in Santa Marta, on his way to exile in Europe.

During this melancholy period, O'Leary was entrusted with several political and diplomatic missions. In 1826, Bolívar considered sending him to mediate between Brazil and Argentina, which were on the verge of war, but nothing came of it. Instead, he was sent to restore harmony between Generals Santander in New Granada and Páez in Venezuela, whose feud threatened to destroy the country. This proved unsuccessful. In 1828, he acted as Bolívar's representative at the Ocaña Convention, where the different parties failed to agree on a new constitution. He was appointed Colombia's Minister Plenipotentiary to Peru but war broke out between the two countries before he could take up his position. Last but not least, he was chosen to be Colombia's Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States, but this appointment was also cancelled when, with

chaos looming, Bolívar decided that he could not dispense with his services.

O'Leary also took part in military operations, first against the rebels led by General Córdoba in Antioquia and later against the Peruvian invaders in Ecuador. He distinguished himself at the battle of Tarqui and was promoted to brigadier. Always a negotiator, O'Leary was one of the two Colombian signatories of the peace treaty that brought the war to an end.

In 1831, the new anti-Bolivarian government banished many supporters of the Liberator from the country and O'Leary fled to Jamaica, where he spent the next three years, working on his memoirs.

Venezuelan Diplomat

In 1833, O'Leary's brother-in-law, General Carlos Soublette (then Secretary of War), persuaded the Venezuelan government to authorise O'Leary to settle in the country. In spite of his intense dislike for José Antonio Páez, the Republic's strongman, Daniel O'Leary and his family moved to Caracas and on 11 July he was incorporated into the Venezuelan army with the rank of Brigadier General. His talents as a diplomat could not be ignored and he did not stay idle for long. On the following year, the government sent General Mariano Montilla on a mission to Europe with the purpose of obtaining diplomatic recognition for the new republic (proclaimed in 1830 after the dissolution of Gran Colombia) and of negotiating a Concordat with the Holy See. O'Leary accompanied him as his assistant and secretary.

The envoys arrived in London on 5 May 1834 and on 25 October the Palmerston government recognised Venezuela. O'Leary then took a short leave of absence to visit his native country and travelled to Dublin and Cork. His father had died four years before but his mother was still alive. O'Leary also met the Liberator Daniel O'Connell, who had always been favourable to the independence of South America.

In November 1834, Montilla (who was suffering from asthma) returned to South

America and O'Leary stayed in Britain as *de facto* ambassador of his adopted country. Shortly afterwards, he travelled to Paris where he published a small book about Bolívar (*Retrato Moral del Libertador*, published in Spanish, English and French). On 12 February 1835, Carlos Soublette arrived in London as the new Head of Mission and the two men left for Spain, to obtain the diplomatic recognition of the mother country.

They had powerful allies. The Duke of Wellington (then Foreign Secretary) put a Royal Navy ship at their disposal for the voyage (the somewhat inappropriately-named HMS *Royalist*). In Madrid, the British and French Ambassadors (Villiers and De Rayneval) did all they could to help them for London and Paris wanted to see the relationship between Spain and her colonies normalised. Unfortunately, in spite of the strong support of these countries, the mission failed. The Peninsulars were in the middle of the First Carlista War and had other concerns. Moreover, Madrid wanted financial reparations in exchange for her recognition, something which was unacceptable to the young republic. Pride and principle were at stake. Venezuela had paid for her freedom in blood but there were also practical reasons: Caracas had no money.

During their visit to the Peninsula, the two Venezuelan soldier-diplomats had the opportunity of meeting their old adversary: General Pablo Morillo, now Captain General of Galicia. The 'Pacificador', honoured by his sovereign with the titles of Marquis of La Puerta and Count of Cartagena but remembered in South America as a butcher, had a generous side to his character which has often been overlooked. A royalist, he was convinced that Spain should accept the loss of her empire, he agreed to use his limited influence with his Government on behalf of Venezuela. Nothing, however, came of his efforts. More importantly, on learning that O'Leary was working on a book about Bolívar, Morillo gave him many of his papers. He had always admired the Liberator, the worthiest of his adversaries in the battlefield. The envoys also met General La Torre (Morillo's successor

in Venezuela), the former Royalist commanders in Peru (Generals Canterac, Valdes and Rodil) and many other officers. All these veterans believed that Spain should recognise her former colonies but the politicians proved impossible to convince.

Soublette and O'Leary returned to Britain empty-handed in January 1837 and in February the former went back to Venezuela (where he became President shortly afterwards). O'Leary was again left in London representing his adopted country.

The mission to Spain failed but proved vital for O'Leary's future. The British Ambassador in Madrid, George Villiers (later Lord Clarendon) was much impressed by O'Leary's diplomatic skills and when the time came used his influence to help him join the Foreign Office.

O'Leary next left for Italy and Pope Gregory XVI received him on 10 April 1837. As O'Leary had always been a practicing Catholic, this must have been a very intense moment. Unfortunately, his negotiations with the Vatican proved unsuccessful and after two years of efforts in 1839 he returned to London empty-handed. The Holy See had neither recognised Venezuela nor agreed to a Concordat. Caracas had expelled Archbishop Mendez twice, first in 1830 for having refused to swear the Constitution and two years later for declining to appoint two prelates nominated by the government. This was only the most visible manifestation of the deep difference which existed between Church and State on the issue of ecclesiastical appointments. The problem was not solved until many years later and it was so serious that some in Venezuela even considered breaking away from Rome and establishing an independent national church.

In April 1839, the Venezuelan Government appointed O'Leary to represent it in an international commission charged with negotiating Gran Colombia's outstanding debts with British creditors. The successor republics (Caracas, Bogotá and Quito) had to divide these obligations between themselves and in the end New Granada assumed 50 per cent of the combined debt and Venezuela and Ecuador

25 per cent each. O'Leary fulfilled his responsibilities loyally and efficiently but unfortunately nationalist circles opposed his appointment on the grounds that he was a British subject and thus had an implicit conflict of interests. They forgot that O'Leary had spent more than half of his life and his entire career in South American service. As a result of this, he (following Soublette's advice) resigned but was asked to continue as commissioner until the arrival of his successor, Alejo Fortique, on 16 October 1839.

British Diplomat

O'Leary left London in November and was back in Venezuela in early January 1840, after six years of absence. At the age of thirty-eight or forty, his prospects looked somewhat bleak and life on his modest military pension promised to be uncomfortable. He spent the next few months working on his memoirs but fortunately he did not have to remain unemployed for long. In June, Sir Robert Kerr Porter, British chargé d'affaires and consul general in Venezuela, requested a leave of absence and recommended that O'Leary should replace him until his return to the country. This was accepted and O'Leary assumed these positions *ad interim* from 1 January 1841. Kerr Porter was not his only supporter in Whitehall. In Britain, Daniel O'Connell (the Irish political leader) and Lord Clarendon (formerly George Villiers, Ambassador to Madrid) intervened on his behalf. On 14 August, O'Leary was appointed Consul in Puerto Cabello (this time on a permanent basis and not *ad interim*) but continued doing Kerr Porter's job in Caracas and did not move to this port until 1843. The hapless Kerr Porter never returned to Venezuela and died of an attack of apoplexy on 3 May 1842, while visiting his daughter in St. Petersburg.

Understandably but somewhat unfairly, the Foreign Office hesitated in making these appointments because of O'Leary's long service to the South American republics. Like the Venezuelan nationalists of 1839, the British Government feared a conflict of interests. As in the previous case, the suspicions were

groundless and O'Leary's activities proved beneficial to both countries.

In 1842, O'Leary helped to organise the repatriation of Bolívar's remains from Santa Marta to Venezuela and arranged for a British corvette (the *Albatross*) to join the naval escort which accompanied the brig *Caracas* in the journey. Other European nations also sent ships for this purpose: France (the *Circe*), the Netherlands (the *Venus*) and Denmark (the *St Croix*). As the senior diplomatic representative of the United Kingdom, O'Leary was present at the burial ceremonies in Caracas cathedral... but one cannot help thinking that he occupied the wrong seat during these events. His true place was not among the foreign diplomats but among the Venezuelan Generals who had fought under the Liberator. At about the same time, O'Leary wrote to the sculptor Pietro Tenerani (whom he had met in Italy) and on behalf of the Venezuelan Government commissioned a monument to Bolívar, to be placed in the cathedral. These were, of course, extremely satisfying tasks.

On 11 April 1843, Belford Hinton Wilson replaced O'Leary as British chargé d'affaires and consul general in Caracas and O'Leary finally moved to Puerto Cabello as Consul. General Páez, now reconciled with his former enemy, had been much impressed by O'Leary's activities and had written to Lord Aberdeen (the Foreign Secretary) respectfully suggesting that he be permanently appointed in Kerr Porter's place. The British declined, probably thinking that O'Leary was too close to the Venezuelans and fearing a conflict of interests. Moreover, Wilson had been requesting the job for some time and had been in the British diplomatic service for longer. He had been chargé d'affaires and consul general in Peru and had the support of his influential father, General Sir Robert Wilson.

Caracas did not have to regret the Foreign Office's choice, for Belford Wilson also behaved as a true friend and gave total satisfaction to both his home country and his hosts. O'Leary was, of course, disappointed since the climate in Puerto Cabello was unhealthy and the job much less interesting.

Fortunately, Wilson and others intervened on his behalf and on 1 January 1844 O'Leary received a dispatch from Lord Aberdeen naming him chargé d'affaires and consul general in nearby Colombia, where his predecessor Robert Stewart had died in July 1843.

O'Leary presented his credentials to the Bogotá government on 14 April 1844 and retained the appointments until his death, ten years later. As we have mentioned, his brother-in-law General Soublotte had helped him to settle in Venezuela in 1833 and it soon fell to O'Leary to return the compliment. When his hapless kinsman was banished from Caracas in 1848, O'Leary gave him shelter in Bogotá.

O'Leary's health started deteriorating in 1851 and in 1852 he travelled to Europe to obtain medical advice. In London, the doctors found nothing seriously wrong with him and O'Leary went back to Colombia via the United States, after having visited France, Italy and Ireland. Unfortunately, the physicians were wrong. Daniel Florence O'Leary died in Bogotá soon after his return, on 24 February 1854. He was given a state funeral in the cathedral and received full diplomatic and military honours. In 1882, his remains were moved to the *Panteón de los Héroes* (National Pantheon) in Caracas, where he lies close to Simón Bolívar, the man he so loyally served.

O'Leary and the Monarchy Scheme

In 1826, while in the Peruvian capital, O'Leary sent a significant private letter to his friend Field Marshal Sucre. This document (quoted by Perez Vila) is important in two respects. First of all, it contains a very lucid analysis of the political situation in South America and warns of many of the calamities which later happened. It therefore shows O'Leary as a first-class diplomatic observer. Secondly, it makes clear that O'Leary was convinced of the need for a strong regime, a monarchy if necessary.

Critics of the aide-de-camp (both then and later) have accused him of being a reactionary for holding such views. This is unfair. With hindsight, kingdoms in the western hemisphere

seem absurd but the idea did not look ridiculous or extremist in 1826. At that time, there were only two republics in the world: the United States and Haiti (the latter, an autocratic regime). Even France had restored the Bourbons after the fall of Napoleon and most European liberals favoured constitutional monarchies. O'Leary was not alone and an important body of Latin American opinion (particularly but not only in Mexico and Peru) shared his views. In Britain, Castlereagh and Canning would have preferred to see kingdoms and not republics as successors of the Spanish colonial regimes. It must be remembered that all the states born in Europe before 1914 opted to be constitutional monarchies, even those created by radical revolutions: Greece, Belgium, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Norway. Italy and Germany unified under a king and an emperor, respectively.

In 1826, monarchies were the rule rather than the exception and republics reminded many of the worst excesses of the French revolution. O'Leary saw anarchy looming ahead and favoured a strong hand, legitimised and tempered by the prestige of a crown. In the end, Spanish America did not get kingdoms but states run by *caudillos*. They were republics in nothing but name, and the continent had to suffer decades of chaos because of the rivalries between these strongmen.

Conservative historians believe that monarchies would have probably not survived for more than a generation but are convinced that they would have been a factor for stability in the critical early years of the infant states. They point to the example of the Brazilian Empire, ruled by the Braganzas until 1882, which achieved political and economic progress while her neighbours disintegrated into anarchy. O'Leary might have been wrong but his views were not at all extreme in the context of the time.

O'Leary's 'Memoirs'

The Republic of Colombia has built no memorials to Daniel O'Leary, probably because of his role in the death of her favourite son, General Cordoba. Her sister, the Republic of

Venezuela, has been kinder and her army still has a Staff Battalion 'Daniel Florencio O'Leary'. There is a 'Plaza O'Leary' (O'Leary Square) in Caracas and, of course, he is buried in the National Pantheon, a rare distinction. O'Leary's true monument, however coarse, are his memoirs, the essential source for the study of the period. Even the bitterest critics of Bolívar have rendered O'Leary the ultimate compliment: they have used his material.

O'Leary's memoirs consist of thirty-two volumes. Three of them are a *Narración* (an account of the events) and the remaining twenty-nine are supporting documents and correspondence between Bolívar and other men. Concerning the *Narración*, the author completed the first two volumes (which follow Bolívar's life until 1826) and the third one (an appendix) is composed of material which he intended to use for the period 1827-1830.

It is unfortunate that O'Leary's *Narración* comes to an end in 1826 as it would have been fascinating to have his account of the last three years of Bolívar's life (1827-1830). This period covers extremely important events in which O'Leary was directly or indirectly involved, the Liberator's reluctant dictatorship, Cordoba's rebellion and assassination at El Santuario, the September conspiracy, the demise of the Bolivarian party in Peru, the war between Lima and Bogotá, Sucre's departure from Bolivia and his murder at Berruecos, among others. O'Leary lived through the sad process of disintegration which led to the break-up of Gran Colombia and was not only a witness but also an actor in this drama.

Did he really have no time to complete the third volume of his *Narración*? He started working on his memoirs in 1830 but only died in 1854. As the loyal aide-de-camp himself declared, the purpose of his account was to defend the reputation of Simón Bolívar. The last three years of the Liberator's life were among the most controversial (the period of his reluctant dictatorship) and we have seen how O'Leary himself might have been enlisted in doing dirty work for his master. I do not doubt that these activities were essential for the preservation of the country and have no

sympathy for General Santander's party. Nevertheless, O'Leary might have found it difficult to explain certain facts to his readers and might have decided that total omission was better than occasional distortion. Although nobody has suggested it, I suspect that O'Leary did not complete his third volume on purpose.

Daniel O'Leary was aware of the controversies which his memoirs could cause. In his will, he asked his sons Simón and Carlos (entrusted with his papers) not to publish anything before the 1860s.

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Notes

1 Born in Colombia and educated in Britain, Moisés Enrique Rodríguez published *Freedom's Mercenaries: British Volunteers in the Wars of Independence of Latin America* (2006), and *Under the Flags of Freedom: British Mercenaries in the War of the Two Brothers, the First Carlist War and the Greek War of Independence (1821-1840)* (forthcoming, 2009).

2 Healy, Claire, 'O'Leary, Daniel Florence [Florencio] (c.1802-1854)' in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America*, 4:2 (March 2006), pp. 95-96. Available online (http://www.irlandeses.org/dilab_olearydf.htm), cited 12 March 2009.

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