

Reviews:

Timothy Fanning: *Paisanos: The Forgotten Irish who Changed the Face of Latin America*, Gill Books, Dublin, 2016, 280 pp., 16 pages of illustrations

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This book consists of 18 chapters. These cover a lot of the standard topics in this field – the Irish Legions, the San Patricios of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), a wide cast of characters from Chile’s Bernardo O’Higgins to Simón Bolívar’s aide-de-camp Daniel Florence O’Leary. Fanning concentrates on the great men, the generals and the politicians. And men they are in the main, since the only women given any attention are Eliza Lynch, the mistress of the President of Paraguay, and the Argentinian victim Camila O’Gorman (Lynch to my mind is treated with more sympathy than she deserves.) The coverage of the ‘great’ figures will make Fanning’s study attractive for readers with little grounding in the subject, but one of the merits of the book is that it fleshes out stories of other figures often mentioned in the literature of the Irish in Latin America, but who rarely get more than a sentence or two in these histories. These are familiar names to those of us with an interest in the field, but our knowledge of these figures usually peters out after two or three sentences. They are what one might call the second rank—not *próceres* such as Admiral Brown, Daniel Florence O’Leary or Bernardo O’Higgins, but rather men such as Pedro Campbell, Thomas Charles Wright, Arthur Sandes and others. Fanning does us a great service in adding to our knowledge of such figures and making their stories available in one volume. Quite a few such individuals have been covered or at least mentioned in articles in IMSLA (indeed the author recognizes his debt to the SILAS materials).

Quite a lot of the early book is rooted in Spain. Fanning starts for some reason with a fairly long section on Richard Wall, eighteenth century diplomat and minister in the Spanish government. Wall is of course an important figure, but his relevance to Latin America is never made clear. Similarly, extensive coverage is given to José María Blanco White, another person who, as far as I know, never set foot in Latin America. Others will disagree, but in my view Wall and Blanco White are external to the focus of this book. Nevertheless, I did find very interesting Fanning’s introduction of a figure I knew little about, namely Bernard Ward, Monaghan-born economist, and his efforts to adopt the (Royal) Dublin Society model to Spain.

It is really only in Chapter Three that the author engages with Latin America. This is where he narrates the story of Meath-born Alexander O’Reilly, commander of Spanish forces in eighteenth-century Cuba and Louisiana, providing an excellent essential biography of this controversial figure. From O’Reilly we move on to Ambrosio and Bernardo O’Higgins, John Devereux

(veteran of the Wexford Rebellion who later came to command, mostly from afar, an Irish legion in Venezuela / Colombia), Francis Burdett O'Connor (an officer under Bolivar who later became associated with Bolivia) and an array of other personalities. The narrative ranges wide, from Mexico to Chile, from the Andes to the Caribbean. Fanning operates a fairly elastic definition of Irishness, accepting both the native born, such as Ambrosio O'Higgins, as well as those several generations removed, such as Camila O'Gorman. No one can come away from the book without an appreciation of the richness and diversity of the experience of Irish-born people and their descendants in Latin America.

In his introduction, Fanning states that Brazil "requires its own separate study". That decision is the author's prerogative, but I believe it is mistaken. Brazil may be a huge country, but the Irish involvement in Brazil is not that huge. It is quite amenable to inclusion in a book such as this. It is disappointing and puzzling that Fanning offers no account of General William Cotter's expedition to Brazil in 1827. Cotter, an officer of the Imperial Brazilian Army recruited several thousand people in Munster—men, women, children, soldiers and settlers—to travel to Brazil. Ostensibly, they were to be given land to settle, in return for light military duties. As is the norm in Irish forays into Latin America, the reality was quite different, and the aspiring colonists found themselves penniless and landless. The Irish 'soldiers', using the term loosely, mutinied in Rio de Janeiro and the rebellion was only put down by native forces after quite vicious street-fighting. This expedition bookends that of Devereux in the north of Latin America, and the outcome was, if anything, worse. The episode surely warrants inclusion in a book such as Fanning's. Another lacuna, less problematic perhaps, is the neglect of Irish settlement efforts in Mexico. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, *empresarios* such as James Power were behind projects to import Irish settlers from Waterford and Wexford into that part of Mexico around what is today Corpus Christi, Texas. We will never know how that community would have developed, as the course of Texan history was changed by the secession from Mexico in 1836.

In recent years, there has been a welcome development of the historiography of Irish interconnections with Spain and Latin America. One impediment to such studies has been the fact that few Irish historians are proficient in foreign languages, and of those who sufficiently master a foreign language to conduct research in it, that language is rarely Spanish. Hence it is a pleasure to add Timothy Fanning to the small number of Irish historians who are equipped to come to grips with original materials in Spanish. He has used a wide range of sources, from archives in both Spain and Latin America. He has also availed of the standard classic military accounts, such as those of Alfred Hasbrouck and Eric Lambert. Fanning is familiar, too, with the recent work of Mathew Brown, the English researcher who has added greatly to our knowledge of the participation of foreign volunteers in the wars of independence in Gran Colombia. He uses Brown to good effect in his account of an inglorious episode for the Irish, the murder by an Irish supporter of Bolívar of the wounded anti-Bolívar General José María Córdova, near Medellín, Colombia.

The book offers interesting descriptions of the kinds of men who undertook the long journey to Latin America to become officers in one or other of the

armies in the field. Many of them were professional soldiers, demobilized following the Napoleonic Wars. This officer class was both Protestant and Catholic – indeed relations between the two traditions were good. They devoted much of their free time, of which there was a lot, to drinking and gambling. Usually these habits had been entrenched during the long sea voyages from Europe. Alcohol and gambling make a dangerous combination, and there are several recorded cases of pistol duels on board ship. Whether from the swaying of the ship decks or the effects of drink, such encounters produced far more misses than hits. Fanning is not as strong—perhaps the sources are poorer—in describing the rank and file, though here and there he does offer interesting information. For instance, he has details on men recruited for Bolívar in 1818 by the Irishman Colonel James English. These were predominantly from the east and north of Ireland. A large number of trades were represented, especially textile workers, and a few of the men were quite advanced in years, into their late 40s at least.

Fanning's book throws out interesting pointers for more specialized topics of future research. One fascinating element that he alludes to is the presence of agents and spies of Spain in Ireland, who were working to disrupt popular support for the Latin American independence movements. The topic represents surely an attractive topic for a PhD student. Indeed there are many matters that merit further enquiry. What one might call the Irish end of the migration, be it the process of recruitment for Devereux and Cotter, or for the 1820s Texas settlements, is a rich field for further investigation. And what links survived between the Irish in Latin America and their native country? As is well known, Admiral Brown paid a visit to his native Mayo during the Famine, but such a return to Ireland was probably a rarity. Only in Argentina does it seem that links with the homeland were preserved.

Indeed, Irish emigration to Argentina is the most researched element of Irish migration to Latin America, yet Fanning's treatment of the topic seems a little impoverished. For instance, he never mentions Thomas Murray's *Story of the Irish in Argentina*, a century after its publication still by far the best source on Irish life on the nineteenth century pampa, or indeed Irish daily life anywhere in Latin America. Fanning's focus is, as was mentioned, on the great actors on the public stage. Thus he covers the military exploits of Admiral Brown in far more detail than the day-to-day life of Irish sheep farmers. That is his choice, and one should not criticise an author for not writing a book that he did not set out to write. Yet, surely, there is another book to be written, which recounts the daily grind far away from the battlefields and military leaders, and chronicles such things as the interactions of Irish soldiers and settlers with the local population, with Indians, with other foreign settlers and with the alien landscape of Latin America itself. Fanning may well be the man to write such a book.

The overall production standard of *Paisanos* is admirable. It is attractively laid out, with a good number of illustrations. The control of Spanish names and place names is excellent; almost all are printed with their appropriate *tildes*. There are a few errors nevertheless; on page 214, Fanning has Father Fahy warning new arrivals about the “inequities” of Buenos Aires. Given what we

know about Fahy, the word should undoubtedly read “iniquities”. And in a footnote on page 250, from the *Archivo de Indias*, we have “Tómas O Gorman, solicita carta de nativaleza”. The written accent on the first word is definitely misplaced, but I am also very dubious about the word “nativaleza”. It appears to be a misprint for ‘naturaleza’. Given the often disparate and recondite sources that Fanning marshals, these rare slips can be overlooked. As regards the Spanish language sources, it is regrettable that Fanning nowhere, in text or footnotes, cites the original Spanish. All is translated to English. It may well be that this was at the behest of the publisher, but the failure to cite in the original does take away from the scholarly quality of the book. There surely was no reason why the English translation could not have been given in the main text, with the Spanish version in the footnotes, or vice versa.

A couple of years ago I was assigned a college course to teach, entitled “Ireland and the Hispanic World”. My first thought was to look for a general text that I could build my lectures around, one that covered all the essential ground but left room for some further graduate-level input. I found no such text, and so had to confect the readings for my course from disparate and sometimes rather inaccessible materials. Were I to be set the same task in the future, I would have no hesitation in setting Tim Fanning’s *Paisanos* as a central text. We have been waiting a long time for such a book, one that brings together in a readable fashion many important elements of the wide sweep of Irish interaction with the Americas.

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