

John Devereux (1778-1854), army officer and recruiter for the Irish Legion in Simón Bolívar's army

Devereux, John (1778-1854), army officer and recruiter for the Irish Legion in Simón Bolívar's army, was born in county Wexford but little is known of his family or his younger years. Thought by some to be a veteran of the 1798 United Irishmen's rising at New Ross, Devereux was living in the United States in the 1810s in voluntary exile and as a US citizen. He joined a merchant house in Baltimore, Maryland, and shipped a cargo of coffee from there to France throughout the British blockade in 1812. Arriving in Cartagena from the US in 1815 with a cargo of arms, just as Simón Bolívar was going into exile, Devereux made an offer to the patriots. He undertook to muster up support for them in Britain, where he claimed to have many friends in parliament, and to raise an Irish Legion of 5,000 men with the requisite arms, ammunition, and military stores. He was to be paid \$175 per soldier imported into Venezuela. Devereux untruthfully boasted that he was a general in the Irish army and had led the Irish Catholics in the fight for Emancipation. After a visit to Buenos Aires, where he endeavoured to convince the authorities that he could raise a loan of two million pesos backed by the US government, he arrived in Haiti to stay with Robert Sutherland, a British merchant in Port au Prince. In July 1817 Sutherland forwarded to Bolívar 'General' Devereux's offer to raise the Irish Legion, which he strongly recommended. Bolívar accepted the offer and Devereux travelled to Ireland in 1818 to commence recruitment for his legion.

Although many of the non-commissioned officers and privates recruited by Devereux were war veterans, little care was exercised in selecting the best men for the job and nearly all who applied were accepted. It was a force noted more for its bravery than for its discipline. Thousands of returned soldiers from the British army in France enlisted for service in Venezuela. They sought not only the certainty of an immediate livelihood, but also the prospect of further excitement and adventure, with the chance of making their fortunes in South America. With the Irish MP Daniel O'Connell's support and the aid of the 'Irish Friends of South American Independence', Devereux sold commissions in his legion by forging a letter from Bolívar to attach legitimacy to his project. O'Connell's son Morgan and a near relative from Ennis, County Clare, Maurice, were among the officers.

The first contingent of John Devereux's Irish Legion landed in Margarita Island between September and December 1819 and the rest arrived in Angostura (present-day Ciudad Bolívar) in April and May 1820. From the beginning the expedition was plagued with problems as the soldiers were given meagre food rations and no pay. There were a number of mutinies, particularly after an attack on the Legion at Rio Hacha soon after they landed. This left huge casualties and afterwards most of the Irish were evacuated to Jamaica for transport home.

Devereux, as commander of the Irish Legion, remained in England and Ireland, living sumptuously off the profits of his subterfuge, until the return of some of those whom he had cheated exposed him to danger of being arrested or shot. Devereux was ultimately forced to travel to South America. He landed on Margarita many months after his Legion had departed. The Irish blamed the Venezuelan authorities for the terrible hardships which they had been forced to endure, though the responsibility should have been placed entirely on Devereux, who sent his troops off without making any arrangements for their reception, designated Margarita as their destination without consultation with, or notification of, the military authorities of Venezuela, and above all, failed to accompany his men to cater for their needs.

In Margarita, Devereux was received with great pomp and ceremony by the governor Arismendi. At a banquet in his honour, Devereux is reported to have spoken for two hours, promising that all Ireland was roused to the cause of the South American patriots. It was an eloquent speech, yet its effect was somewhat marred by the fact that Devereux spoke in English, a language which no member of his audience understood. In 1821 Bolívar confirmed John Devereux in the grade of Major General. He remained in military service for two more years, and in December 1823, John Devereux was appointed Colombian envoy extraordinary to the courts of northern Europe. In 1825 he was arrested by the

Austrian authorities and imprisoned in Venice. Devereux was eventually released and, returning to the US, lived there on a pension which he received from the government of Venezuela until his death in 1854.

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