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Brian D. Reese

Western Oregon University, bdr88@q.com

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Forgotten Bravery

The San Patricio Battalion and the Irish Experience

By
Brian D. Reese

Primary Reader: Dr. John L. Rector
Secondary Reader: Dr. Penelope Brownell

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There are times within a historical event that certain significant elements of that transforming occasion can be overlooked or not realized. This can be said for a group of soldiers who defected from the United States Army and went to fight for the Mexican forces during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. The Saint Patrick's Battalion, or San Patricio Battalion, was a band of over two hundred men, of predominantly Irish decent, who are seldom recognized and stand apart during this event. These men represent not only the unique and little known incident amongst the past of both the United States and Mexico, but the particular reasons and motivations that drove them to take the actions that they did.

Viewpoints and attitudes that others held towards these men, who were principally Irish immigrants, contributes to these motivations and reasons. It also can be asserted that the oppression that their Irish homeland had been enduring for centuries, being a part of their circumstances and the old country's own rich background, was a major component of this episode. Mexico itself has been a country of endless change and with just as much conflict, identifying in many ways to Ireland and its people during their history, and affecting one another in various dynamic ways.

According to Edward Huerta "There exists in Europe a nation called Ireland, which for most of seven hundred years had been the victim of the most terrible injustices and inequities,". Huerta's quote later continues "Fate, which has always been implacable with Erin green, cast it into the sharp claws of England where it has never found mercy"¹. This is an encompassing statement that indicates the actuality of the

¹ Oscar R. Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire, 1600-1825*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 8.

Irish situation denoted by Oscar R. Morales. The historian assesses the Spanish relationship with the Irish, that involved a strong, correlated history. Also the events that bring the Irish under English oppression, and the resulting ascendancy are brought into discussion, explaining elements of the Irish circumstances and background factors for the men of the San Patricios.

Nicholas Masergh also offers powerful reasons towards the Irish misfortune that prompted diminished lives, an increased subjugation by the English, and resulting emigration. Masergh indicates the seemingly constant exploitation of the lower classes from the aristocracy, both English and some Irish that did exist, which only increased poverty levels. At the same time, he elaborates on the overall condition of the complete ruin and siege of the land resulting from English battles of conquest from 1100 to 1850.² This will provide a comprehensive account of how the English ascendancy affected Irish immigrants along with the San Patricios and how difficult it would be to fit into the expectations in a newer country.

The subsequent prejudice towards people of Irish Catholic heritage, as it was with foreigners in general, was building to a rampant height during the early part of the nineteenth century, according to Paul Spickard in *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. This historian is able to help define what the term and attitude of 'nativism' that had developed and within the American mindset of those people who responded towards the influx of immigrants. He illustrates the perpetual fear that Catholics had only one true servitude would be towards the pope and not the United States.³

² Nicholas Masergh, *The Irish Question 1840-1921*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 89.

³ Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*.

As Spickard's writing, along with other contemporary sources, will recognize and help explain nativism, it is a source that is completed within recent decades. It addresses the prevalent mindset that many expressed at that time. Other sources in the many decades between the defection of the San Patricios and the more recent period, do not yet recognize the San Patricio Battalion and the coinciding events.

The opinion of native white dominance was still celebrated as described by J.O. Cunningham several years before this in 1912 within his article "Evolution of the American People". This ties strongly to the idea of nativism as still present in 1912 and not yet recognizing the factors that led to the San Patricio defection. Cunningham utilizes examples as emphasizing the lack of Scotch-Irish heritage among the signers of the Declaration of Independence as well as the Pilgrims of 1620,⁴ and again without any indication of a 'nativist' line of thought.

The Catholic faith element of the San Patricios as part of who they were as Irishmen is touched on by Richard Blaine McCornack in his essay, "The San Patricio Deserters in the Mexican War." It is one of the few early accounts to mention the San Patricio and is done more in an objective form, bringing into question the nativism that may have still been present in 1951. McCornack indicates early in the essay that the event of the San Patricio Battalion desertion, as he titled it, had been one of the very complex issues of the Mexican-American War.⁵ The idea that the men of the San Patricios were influenced heavily by the Mexican clergy is prevalent in McCornack's view and still gives indication of an importance of Irish heritage and motivations, but continues to

(New York: Routledge, 2000), 124.

⁴ J.O. Cunningham, "Evolution of the American People", *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. Vol. 5, No.3. (October 1912), 370.

⁵ Richard Blaine McCornack, "The San Patricio Deserters in the Mexican War", *The Americas*, Vol.8,

represent a particular viewpoint that existed in the 1950s. Catholic writers however deny the Irish putting faith before patriotism,⁶

Edward S. Wallace goes further through in his article “The Battalion of Saint Patrick in the Mexican War” just prior to McCornack’s essay in 1950. Wallace provides an earlier narrative of the San Patricio situation, giving additional detail of the events that unfolded not only on the U.S. side, and with the San Patricio men, but what the Mexican military leadership undertook to influence the Catholic and other foreign born soldiers to defect. He also brings into consideration the question of the Saint Patrick’s Battalion not being a group of predominantly Irish ethnicity. Wallace indicates that the further one investigates the event the more it can be realized that a given title “Irish Deserters” can be a contradiction, as there possibly were larger strains of different ethnic groups.⁷

By 1989 historian Robert Ryal Miller was able to establish an account of facts that occurred with the San Patricios. *Shamrock and Sword* is able to convey a much larger and more thorough look at the surrounding events of the Battalion as well as the Mexican War. Miller is able to expand greatly on not only the facts that occurred within the exchange, but provides a broader if not more focused perspective of the Mexican reaction. Describing the Mexican recognition of the sacrifice that the men of the San Patricios made is a strong component of Miller’s narrative, with ceremonies happening twice a year since 1959 at the Mexico City memorial in San Angel, and provides a view of the historical meaning of these Irishmen’s actions.⁸

Michael Hogan’s work in 1989, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, continues to

No.2, (October 1951), 131.

⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁷ Edward S. Wallace, “The Battalion of Saint Patrick in the Mexican War”, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 14 ,No.2, (Summer 1950), 89.

seriously uncover the myths of the San Patricio defection to fight in the Mexican army. Viewing the event with an objective sense Hogan realized that the depictions of this interesting event were indeed scant if not biased, particularly from the past American point of view.

Hogan is able to describe the atmosphere of the time of the Mexican-American War of the anti-Catholicism within the United States, that coincided with such a massive immigration of the Irish during that period of the nineteenth century. It is here as well that Hogan provides a detailed narrative of the actions of the event involving the San Patricio Battalion, as he also admits that he will go beyond what the earlier account of Miller had done.⁹ He describes how the San Patricios had developed into the driven and organized group that they were, contributing to the view that the Mexicans held towards the unit.

Both accounts of Miller and Hogan are important and we see the certain progression towards what can be considered important and critical in examining the San Patricio defection.

Peter F. Stevens brought an additionally comprehensive explanation of nativism and how it was directly related to the San Patricio Battalion experience, with his book *The Rogue's March* in 1999. The work uses a similar manner that Spickard has since explained the nativism inflicted upon the Irish, particularly how it was utilized towards the San Patricios. Stevens utilizes up to forty-seven pages of his work to give a comprehensive if not meticulous approach and clarification to what nativism was in America and how it affected the men of the Battalion. He indicates that within the U.S.

⁸ Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 182.

⁹ Michael Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, (Guadalajara: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997) 17.

Army the Protestant officers maintained some of the worst nativist attitudes towards any sort of Irish Catholic immigrants.¹⁰

Recognizing the San Patricio's heritage while they later became victims within the United States, is a base for understanding why this group would pledge their lives and honor, and have the strong and enduring effect on those that they would come to support. Their defection and experience occurs at a pivotal period within the history of the United States and Mexico. It coincides with simultaneous and major events of the Mexican-American War and the political dynamics that accompanied it, which included the Manifest Destiny philosophy. The nativism mindset was rising towards its peak within America, and the simultaneous Great Potato Famine of Ireland and northwestern Europe prompted the largest wave of immigration into the United States up to that point. That nativist attitude, often proliferated by officers of United States Army in this period, prolonged a difficult existence for the men of the San Patricios, and other foreigners, who had intended to pursue better lives in America. Through this paper I want to initially describe the background of the Irish heritage, from the centuries long oppression from England to the relationship that developed between Ireland and the Spanish and later Mexico. This heritage, the nativist and anti-Catholic abuses that extend into the treatment of the immigrant San Patricios, inconsistencies within the army that they deserted, along with the affinity that was present between them and Mexico are the factors that need to be identified as motivations for this unique event.

Understanding where the Irish people, and the men of the San Patricios, have come from is a key component in beginning to comprehend their perspective. The Irish

¹⁰ Peter F. Stevens, *The Rogue's March, John Riley and the St. Patrick's Battalion, 1846-1848*, (Washington D.C.: Brassey's 1999) 23.

have been victims of a certain prejudice and were bestowed a stigma as outcasts for a large part of their history. This most notably started when the only English Pope Adrian IV granted the Norman King Henry II permission to invade Ireland in 1155 bringing it under British domination and rule, beginning what is viewed as a continuing period of difficulty for Ireland within the British relationship. This has involved domination with past land ownership and tenant issues, perpetual ignorance and indifference from England, and in large part a thought process that looks at the Irish as a lesser people, especially with the later religious separation between a predominantly Catholic Ireland and Protestant Britain. When recognizing causes for Irish emigration it can be supported by the factor that there was a universally conventional opinion at that time that England deliberately and spitefully wanted to push the Irish from their homeland of Ireland.¹¹

Along with the perpetual English oppression and exploitation against the Irish the Great Potato Famine of 1845-1849 decimated one of Ireland's primary food sources. This brought the situation to its critical point forcing the highest number of Irish to emigrate, a large amount to the United States.

Previous to this pivotal period in both U.S. and Irish history, Spain had already been in a certain realization of the Irish plight since the Medieval period. A very strong cultural exchange between Ireland and Spain had already been occurring since around 600, particularly in the areas of manuscripts and literature, which indicates a forming affinity between the ethnicities.¹² The bond only increased as England's Henry VIII switched his country's state religion to Protestant from Catholicism in the mid sixteenth century, further alienating the remaining Irish Catholics and increasing Spanish interest.

¹¹ Patrick R. Ward, *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), 9.

¹² Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 33-36.

Ireland retained a largely Catholic and cultural distinctiveness, along with its resistance towards England, evolving into its own sense of nationalism. Spain a frequent enemy of England, held its attention towards Ireland and was fueled by its own persevering objective of defending the mutual Catholic faith.¹³

Under the monarchy of Phillip IV, Spain felt that they needed to recruit additional people to help participate in foreign conflicts and conquests. Huge efforts were made to ascertain Irish support, particularly after 1601 when Spanish military aid repeatedly went to help the Irish within the depths of English tyranny, such as with the Battle of Kinsdale during that same year. As a result the Spanish-Irish relationship was emboldened from that time onwards by a mass arrival of Irish exiles into Spain.¹⁴

Irish were now becoming significant players within an expanding Spanish Empire and world. Such figures as Daniel O'Connell, an Irish Nationalist leader sent to fight in Venezuela, or Bernardo O'Higgins who served as Supreme Director of Chile, 1817-1823, but later fought for Chilean independence from Spain. Going further O'Higgins was the son of Irish born Ambrosio O'Higgins, also governor of Chile in the previous century and later viceroy of Peru. These instances give a strong indication of how the Irish had become involved with the Spanish agenda at that time. This can be labeled as "Irish diaspora" which ultimately involves the extensive connection that the Irish and Spanish possessed with business, political matters, and military actions.¹⁵

Mexico had indeed become a major asset for Spain since its native Aztecs had been conquered and the area occupied in the 1500's. The importance of Mexico would

¹³ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁵ Graham Davis, *Land! Irish Pioneers in Mexican and Revolutionary Texas*. (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, no. 92, 2002). 239.

eventually include the country as being a generator of sixty percent of Spain's income. Though still ruled by Spain until its independence in 1821, Mexico served as place of escape and separation from Europe, with the Irish being no exception.

Irish influx into Mexico did continue to occur through the eighteenth century, though often still with a partiality towards Spain. The last Spanish viceroy of Mexico Lt. General Juan O' Donoju, of Irish lineage, was a strong advocate against Mexico's independence, and attempted, unsuccessfully, to stop it through his persuasion.¹⁶ Mexico still was able to rid itself of its Spanish burden, despite those who sought to continue it, much in the same way as the Irish were perpetuating their quest for an improved existence, widening the chasm between them and European power, and gravitating at a more noticeable increase into this reintroduced land.

As the Mexican-Irish relationship was increasing its development, the United States was becoming a desired destination for Irish immigrants trying to establish better lives. Yet nativism had already taken hold as by the 1820's as the Catholic population had grown to 200,000, and by the time of the Mexican-American War it had reached over a quarter million.¹⁷ As a major component of nativism, anti-Catholicism was growing just as much as the related violence. A convent was burned in 1834, two Catholic churches in 1844, and months long riots occurred in Philadelphia with numerous deaths and injuries.¹⁸ The prejudice against Irish Catholics, any of those of the Catholic faith itself, and other non-Anglo foreigners had come to a uncontrolled height by the mid-eighteen forties.

The level of nativism between the 1820 and 1840 was similar to that of

¹⁶ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 293-294.

¹⁷ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*. 129.

Afro-Americans prejudice previous too, and during the same period. The prevailing nativist attitude towards religion was a perpetual fear which believed that Catholics had only one true servitude towards the pope and not the United States.¹⁹ Nativism, or the “nativist movement” was embraced by those from a Protestant and English lineage. Those individuals saw themselves as the most pure form of American, and directly descended from those of the colonial period, thereby excluding anyone else as lesser people.²⁰ This indicates the possible natural reaction within the time of increased fervor within the Protestant sphere, and that some individuals displayed a serious resentment toward the main contender of their own church.²¹

The English superiority mentality still existed into the twentieth century, as any recognition of nativism, particularly against the San Patricios, had yet to be noted. An example of this is through J.O. Cunningham’s article that indicates the mindset an infusion occurred of ‘foreign blood’ that was contrary to the English ‘heritage blood’ early in the eighteenth century.²² Though stating that the massive influx by 1730 included those who were in search of freedom of religion, Cunningham elaborates that there were not ‘Macs’ or ‘Vans’ included in the signers of the Declaration of Independence, or amongst the Pilgrims. There was no mention of a Catholic contribution in his analysis, but a point about the Irish not wanting to live along the coast but rather in the interior is made.²³

Immigration into the United States essentially had no legal limitations prior to

¹⁸ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, 128.

¹⁹ Spickard, *Almost All Aliens*, 124.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²² Cunningham, “*Evolution of the American People*”, 363.

²³ *Ibid.*, 370.

1882. Without any restrictions anyone who wished to come into the United States were able to, and could enter at any location as well until 1855.²⁴ There existed minimal challenges to this within U.S. citizenry until the 1830's when concerns over the rising number of immigrants, that included an increasing amount of Catholics and unskilled people.²⁵ The lack of restrictions would enable a certain level of initial liberty for immigrants whose sought it, allowing some, such as those who would be a part of the San Patricios, to pursue the option of joining the military. At the same time it proliferated the nativist ideas for citizens of the United States towards any foreigners.

Many affiliates of the United States Army boldly held a strong nativist opinion and most often encouraged the regular practice of nativism. This was especially true for officers when associating with their recruits who rather often were of an immigrant background. Harsh treatment of privates as well as meager food rationing was frequent and often considered standard within the army that went to fight Mexico. Flogging was a continued practice, while excruciating punishment known as bucking and gaging was implemented for a private committing the slightest infraction. This could include a flaw in a uniform or maybe a misstep during drills.²⁶

By mid-June 1845 approximately one month prior to the annexation of Texas and six months before statehood, President James K. Polk relayed to his Secretary of War, William Marcy, to order General Zachary Taylor to set up his army of about 4,000 men south of the disputed Mexican border of the Nueces River.²⁷ A major component of this

²⁴ Raymond L. Cohn, "Immigration to the United States". Illinois States University. EH.Net, Economic History Services, (nd), 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Robert Selph Henry, *The Story of the Mexican War*. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1950), 45.

²⁷ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, 33.

move was to wait under the pretense to react to aggression from the Mexican army, with the ultimate goal being to gain the nearly entire north half of Mexico and put it under U.S. ownership.

Taylor had an appearance unexpected as a general. He was of shorter unimposing height, heavy, bearing congenial facial expressions, and rarely donned the standard uniform. Instead he was partial to wearing casual clothing, a worn straw hat and a bandana around his neck.²⁸ Being of atypical dress, his identity could be occasionally mistaken by his own men of lower rank who did not yet know Taylor. He was still highly respected by those who did, as he was a veteran of the War of 1812 and the Seminole War.²⁹

The General did not have the reputation as a hard line nativist, as most of his officers did, but was a rigid advocate of the military drilling. Being the appointed leader of the U.S. forces, however he had to carry out his orders from Polk. This included commencing a conflict that Mexicans then, as many do today, believe to be an unjustified invasion of their country.³⁰

As it is still known in Mexico as “The War of Intervention”, but still called “The Mexican-American War” in the United States instigates a debate within itself. Most U.S. historians, while hesitantly concede that Mexico was invaded, still support the argument that the Mexican forces began the aggression.³¹ There were those within the American population that did not agree that the complaints used to validate the conflict with Mexico were adequate. Some such as the Whig party labeled it “Mr. Polk’s war or the

²⁸ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

³⁰ Carlos M. Jimenez, *The Mexican American Heritage*. (Berkeley, Calif.: TQS Publications, 1993), 77.

³¹ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, 22.

Democratic party's war, arguing for the dispute to be ended through peaceful talks.³²

Of the Irish who had already come to the United States and experienced the nativism, some had already went to the territory of Texas, California, and the northern regions that bordered the Kansas plains and a mountainous Colorado for new opportunities. Other Irish victims of prejudice, who could not obtain work in the North would join the U.S. Army. Included in the ranks were the men who would soon comprise the San Patricio Battalion.³³

There existed no military conscription or any type of draft in the United States during the Mexican-American War. At the same time every regular enlistee understood that they were to serve for five years while the terms for the volunteers varied could alter from six months to the extent of the war.³⁴ Various factors contributed to the recruitment of many Irish and others into the regular army. The inherent need for the United States Army to man its peacetime forces instigated practical recruiting officers to recognize the experience of large amounts of incoming European military veterans. This in turn prompted the expansion of companies from 64 to 100 men each by mid-1845, as well as the strong push to attract immigrants.³⁵

Recruiters often would entice the immigrants with allurements of nice barracks, handsome uniforms, top medical care, along with opportunities of promotion. This was relayed particularly towards those men who were concerned about the potential harsh treatment within the army.³⁶ Added to this were the attractions said by officers to include good food, women, and plenty of pay. Later promotions went on to describe "Roast beef

³² Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 21.

³³ Hogan., *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, 21-22.

³⁴ Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 24.

³⁵ Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 30-31.

and two dollars a day, plenty of whiskey, golden Jesuses, pretty Mexican gals”³⁷ becoming a significant way to appeal to the immigrants amidst their situation. This also appealed towards the Catholic traits yet coinciding with a height in the nativist movement.

Beyond this was the component of many Irishmen’s idea of retribution towards Great Britain. Recruiters would encourage the Irishmen to read the proof from any newspaper that the United States would shortly be at war with the ancient tormentor of the Irish, regarding the control of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.³⁸ The idea of revenge attracted many Irish recruits who were unaware, as were most inborn Americans, of the secret negotiations between the United States and Great Britain over the Oregon Question by the summer of 1845.³⁹

Apart from the contrived assurances of excitement and grandeur of younger recruits, was the comparably successful luring towards older recruits of an extra three months pay and 100 acres of land in the West. This would coincide with the required five-year naturalization process of the 1840s, for American citizenship, to be relinquished,⁴⁰ furthering the illusion for the hopeful immigrant and his family. Soldiers could earn seven dollars a month, yet two of those dollars would be held back until the fulfillment of the recruits first enlistment term. Re-enlisting soldiers gained three months extra pay.⁴¹ Essentially an immigrant, such as the men of the San Patricios, could join and fight with the American army without being a citizen during this period.

³⁶ Stevens, *The Rogue’s March*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹ Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 24.

By April 1846 Private John Riley, an Irish born recruit, suffering the abuses of ethnic hatred, had finally reached his breaking point. Despite the fact that two other recruits had attempted desertion on March 31, and had been captured by the Mexican army and returned, a group totaling thirty-six men led by Riley, swam across the Rio Grande River during the night of April 1-2 and joined the Mexican lines.⁴²

Sergeant John Riley, the undisputed leader of the San Patricios, had earlier been a sergeant in the 66th regiment of the British Army, then stationed in Canada, after emigrating from Ireland. After deserting that group he had joined U.S. military and served for a time as a drill sergeant at West Point before becoming a part of Company K, 5th U.S. Infantry in Taylor's force.⁴³

While still performing the constant drilling and repetitive artillery exercises, the strenuous routine did not actually dishearten Riley and the other men who had once been a part of the British army. For Riley and his European compatriots, the army's routines were uncomplicated and attainable. Yet at the same time the officers in the United States army that they served under had no experience in managing units any larger than a company.⁴⁴

The European soldiers were stunned by the officers ineptness with the necessary battalion maneuvers and formations. Many of the officers and non coms felt humiliated when some of the immigrant soldiers knew how to accomplish the grander Napoleonic-model set ups, much better than their own American commanders. This happened amidst a mix of Gaelic, German, and other European languages within the immigrant ranks

⁴² Stevens. *The Rogue's March*, 81.

⁴³ Wallace, "The Battalion of Saint Patrick", 85.

⁴⁴ Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 44.

during the practice drills.⁴⁵ This exponentially aggravated the nativist officer's attitudes towards the Irishmen or Germans who immediately would adjust correctly to a faulty ordered move, sometimes prodding a neighboring American soldier into the right position.⁴⁶

Nativist elements of many of the United States army officers were immersed within all of their orders towards their men. This was in spite of being under the command of Taylor, whose assessed his soldiers not by their heritage but by their ability and accomplishment.⁴⁷

Amidst the ordered pickets, volleys of gun fire by the U.S. army towards Riley and the deserters as they swam, the total came to forty-eight defectors in the ensuing days while the remainder fled during the next five months.

The concept of being forced to fight an adversary with whom they were not acquainted and had no hatred, but also shared the same Catholic religion, was both illogical and unreasonable to the Irish privates. Furthermore, supporting a Protestant army, which treated them with contempt, certainly, they felt, was not justified.⁴⁸

Mexican people were well aware of the large divide that was present within the opinions of Americans, regarding the procurement of more land along with the institution of slavery. They were also very informed of the nativist attitudes that Irish and German immigrants had experienced in certain northern cities.⁴⁹ Also cognizant that the troops of the regular U.S. Army included a large amount of those same immigrants, the Mexican

⁴⁵ Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁸ Howard Fast, "Revising the Record", *Americana*. Vol. 27, 6-8, June 6, 1993.

⁴⁹ Wallace, "The Battalion of Saint Patrick". 85.

faction strived to instigate disagreements and discord among those men.⁵⁰

Mexican forces would do this through the use of the mutual Catholic faith of Mexico and the Irishmen. Once Taylor and his forces had made it to the opposing side of the Rio Grande, Mexico postponed any attack for a period in order to unleash a deluge of propaganda aimed at the foreign-born Catholic men within the U.S. ranks.⁵¹ Once hostilities had commenced, and a victory had been accomplished by Taylor and his army at Monterrey, local Mexican priests tried to persuade additional defectors. They were able to recruit fifty additional men to join the San Patricios, all weary of the condescending treatment of the U. S. Army.⁵²

Earlier, in April 1846, General Ampudia, leader of the Mexican forces at Mantamoros relayed a proclamation that attempted to influence the soldiers of English and Irish birth to deny American antagonism, comparing the war to the apprehension of Oregon as a scandal much as Texas had been. Ampudia's public statement went further in an effort to interest German, French, and Polish natives, guaranteeing superior treatment to anyone who defected, along with a free excursion to Mexico City.⁵³

A year later General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna issued an additional enticement to any Catholics who remained in Taylor's army, beyond the San Patricios. Santa Ana ensured a \$10 bonus and 200 acres of land to any deserters, with anyone of higher rank or who brought arms being bestowed a respectively greater reward.⁵⁴

McCornack's view of the Mexican Catholic clergy being a prime motivator for the San Patricio desertion, is added to by implying that through this perspective the men

⁵⁰ Wallace, "The Battalion of Saint Patrick", 85.

⁵¹ Ibid., 84-85.

⁵² Ibid., 85.

⁵³ Ibid., 85.

of the Battalion were essentially traitors. He elaborates to assert that the San Patricios were really a “group of bewildered and ignorant men” not seeing the full extent of their crimes until faced with the threat from the country that they had left.⁵⁵ This seems to agree with the perspective that Wallace offers about the Catholic elements that influenced the San Patricios, but only to that point. Though McCornack is offering a certain additional viewpoint, written during the 1950’s, does not address the serious nativist issues that the Catholicism was a part of, and how these factors affected the soldiers past. McCornack’s offers the perspective that put the San Patricios in a negative light, essentially not giving credit to the men’s own initiative.

After joining the Mexican army and adopting the name of the San Patricio Battalion, and flying a banner representing their Irish heritage, they fought predominantly in the artillery section. The name “San Patricios” was created by Riley, altered from the earlier Mexican given name of Legion of Foreigners, as the Battalion’s flag was of his design.⁵⁶ The title “Battalion San Patricio” was also bestowed to the soldiers by the Mexicans. Additional names included the “Colorados”, “The Foreign Legion” or “The Red Company”, because of some of the men possessing red hair or a ruddy complexion.⁵⁷ Riley and the others soon gained a status of affective competence with their fighting abilities, along with a powerful unity of the Battalion. The intense aggression that the San Patricios displayed when battling the Americans also became very noticeable to the Mexican army.⁵⁸

The San Patricios were not entirely Irish, however. Out of over two hundred there

⁵⁴ Wallace, “The Battalion of Saint Patrick”, 87.

⁵⁵ McCornack, “The San Patricio Deserters”, 142.

⁵⁶ Hogan. *The Irish Soldiers*, 41.

⁵⁷ Wallace, “The Battalion of Saint Patrick”. 85.

were three Scotsmen already residents of Mexico, Americans and Englishmen who joined the Battalion in Mexico City, as well as some Germans and Poles.⁵⁹ While in service for the Mexican army the San Patricios learned about the Mexican culture, such as food and typical architecture of the nation, and the caste and class arrangement. Many were also enticed by the sight of the Mexican women. Beyond this, though, the San Patricios took notice of how Mexico was very similar to Ireland in the amount of shrines and Catholic churches that characterized the country. The social life and lively entertainment with the Catholic church being at its core brought a nostalgia of their native land.⁶⁰

The Battalion fought with the Mexican army under Santa Anna through all of the major battles of the war. During the Battle of Churubusco on August 20, 1847, the San Patricios fought with a superior intensity, aware of the potential consequences if apprehended by the U.S. force that they had left. The Mexican forces tried on three instances to raise the white surrender flag but had it pulled back down by the San Patricios.⁶¹

At the largest battle of the war at Buena Vista, an inordinate amount of casualties occurred on both sides. American losses included 272 killed, 387 wounded, 6 missing, or 14 percent, while the Mexican suffered a 25 percent loss of their 14,048 force, with 591 killed, 1049 wounded, and 1,584 missing. At the same time over one-third of the eighty men who belonged to the San Patricio Company, fighting for the Mexican side, would be killed or wounded here.⁶² American soldiers would discover at least 22 dead defectors, after Riley and other San Patricios had moved away any of their own wounded in fear of

⁵⁸ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*, 105-106.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*. 35-37.

⁶¹ McCornack, "The San Patricio Deserters", 132.

U.S. retribution.⁶³ Some of the San Patricio men were awarded the Angostura Cross of Honor by their Mexican commanders in recognition of their deeds during the battle of Buena Vista. This included Riley and several others who all, except one, were promoted to a new permanent rank. For Riley, this meant becoming a captain.⁶⁴

The battle at Churubusco would prove exceptionally destructive for the San Patricios. Three hours into the battle 60 percent of two companies, each of 102 men, had been killed or apprehended by the Americans.⁶⁵ Of the eighty-five who were taken prisoner, of which the wounded were a part, seventy-two were charged with deserting the United States Army. An estimated 84 to 90 men who were not managed to escape.⁶⁶

Finally they were overtaken and several members arrested by the U.S. army at Churubusco, near the end of the war. The now Major John Riley and twenty-eight others were tried at San Angel under the supervision of General Winfield Scott. Riley and four others had their sentences commuted, but received fifty lashes and the branding of a "D", since they had deserted before hostilities had begun. Others were pardoned or commuted for other reasons, while twenty were sentenced to death. An additional thirty were tried at Tacubaya and ordered to be hung.⁶⁷

When Scott had earlier obtained the verdicts for his endorsement, the Mexican people reacted with exclamations of anger at the intended fates of the men who had fought for them. Scott did listen to pleas from such authorities as the archbishop of Mexico, other foreign born citizens from Mexico City, and the British minister to

⁶² Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 55.

⁶³ Stevens. *The Rogue's March*, 197.

⁶⁴ Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, 57.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁷ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*, 172-173.

Mexico.⁶⁸ With these appeals within his consideration Scott reevaluated his court-martial orders from the original seventy who were to be hanged to the twenty at San Angel and the thirty at Tacybaya.in September 1847.⁶⁹ The hangings would coincide with the battle for Chapultepec Castle not to far away, as the hoisting of the United States flag over the Castle would signal the go ahead to proceed with the execution, enraging the Mexican populace even further.⁷⁰

The Texas Historical Association indicates that existence of the San Patricio had not finished here. Mexico maintained its attempt to conscript more deserters, gaining enough from the original San Patricios and others to make two new companies by March 1848.⁷¹ Mexico would also continue in its attempts to have the still incarcerated San Patricios released. The ultimate release of the remaining fourteen imprisoned San Patricios would not happen until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.⁷²

The remaining San Patricios actually maintained itself as a group, after the court-martial period, defending people against bandits and Indians in some areas of Mexico. Eventually the San Patricios were part of revolts in Mexico, and had to be stopped by the Mexican president General Jose Joaquin de Herrera. The San Patricios were brought to Mexico City where the men could be monitored, but were formally disbanded by Herrera in 1848.⁷³ Many of the San Patricios appealed the government of Mexico for assistance in returning to Europe. The majority would live out their lives in

⁶⁸ Pam Nordstrom, "San Patricio Battalion", *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association. June 25, 2010. 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Mexico, not being able to return to the United States.⁷⁴

Riley was able to relay his feelings about the Mexican people through a letter of his to a former employer, Charles O'Malley of Michigan. He wrote the letter while in the U.S. military prison dated October 27, 1847. Riley's comments frankly indicates the Irish and Mexican relationship through his words when explaining to O'Malley to not be misled by the U.S. media deceit.⁷⁵ He continues to relay to O'Malley: "for a more hospitable or friendly people than the...Mexicans there exists not on the face of the earth. That is to a foriner [sic] and espetically [sic] to an Irishman and a catholic [sic]".⁷⁶ Riley continues with words of remorse over what he denotes as the death of fifty-one of his finest and courageous men who had been executed through the hanging for only being guilty of "fighting manfully against them...".⁷⁷

It can be seen as an example through Riley's comments to his friend in his letter of the deep kinship that the Irishmen possess at that time as well as in the present day, for Mexico itself and its people.⁷⁸ As Michael Hogan helps to relate, the choices of the San Patricios may not have been calculated well, following their compulsions and heightened passions. But the lasting devotion towards Mexico and a steadfast bravery, particularly after the punishments and incarceration can be seen as forming the enduring homage of their martyrdom. This can be supported by the San Patricios not being true citizens of the United States, forming a lack of national identity, while still earlier being a part of a force that had plans to attack and occupy a Catholic country.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Nordstrom, "The San Patricio Battalion", 2-3.

⁷⁵ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*. 244.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

In retrospect from the beginnings of troops movements at Fort Texas to Churubusco, John Riley and the men of the San Patricios had demonstrated a bitter reality to the U.S. army. The message would be that the Irish men would fight with so much more success under the leadership of men of their native heritage as well as under a flag of their own representation.⁸⁰ This would extend into the experience of U.S. veterans who would go on to fight in the Civil War. Union and Confederate officers alike, who had served under Taylor and Scott, showed that they had taken into account the anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant actions that occurred within the Mexican-American War.⁸¹ Even though nativist attitudes would not disappear, immigrants under the command of the Ulysses S. Grant or the Robert E. Lee would regard any immigrant soldiers as equivalent to their native-born American peers.⁸²

While yet lacking open admission that nativism had infiltrated the U.S. army officers during the 1840's, the American military did acknowledge the part that the harsh discipline had contributed towards the San Patricio desertions.⁸³ Only a very few of high level War Department officials would ever see the records of the court-martial transcripts or overall orders concerning the San Patricios written by General William O. Butler, who would replace Scott. The army did not wish the public to gain any knowledge of the incident much less the amount of men that had participated in the desertion.⁸⁴ Over a century passed until the records would be available to the public in the 1970's.⁸⁵

A memorial plaque was placed in San Angel in 1959, listing many of the names

⁸⁰ Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 297.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

of the San Patricio Battalion and commemorating what they did. The plaque denotes the day September 12, 1847, when the first of the San Patricios was hanged. On that day each year, since the memorial was put in place, around one thousand people gather to remember the names of the men who were executed there. Reviewing the inscription below the Celtic cross of Ireland upon which rests the Mexican eagle, whose wings embrace the cross, they will read: “In memory of the Irish Soldiers of the heroic Battalion of St. Patrick who gave their lives for the cause for Mexico during the unjust American invasion of 1847.”⁸⁶ The memorial does not list all of the around two hundred men who were estimated to have deserted, but seventy-one whose names were indeed know to be involved. Forty-eight are Irish surnames while the remaining thirteen are last names of German derivation.⁸⁷ Mexican people continue to consider this group heroic while the event and the Battalion has rarely been heard of by most Americans. Santa Anna plaintively stated “Give me a few hundred more men like Riley’s and I would have won the victory”⁸⁸

Realizing what the San Patricio Battalion accomplished coming from an arduous heritage and problematic environment, and defend a once perceived foe, is exceptionally notable, if not remarkable. What these men contributed towards their own history and Mexico’s past has not been viewed as substance for heroism in United States history, but innately seen as a traitorous movement. Despite this, Mexico from the instance that the event happened only held the occasion as a definite act of bravery, fortitude and essential heroics, on the part of the San Patricios, while holding the war as an imperialist movement. With a perpetual stigma within the United States as deserters, the San

⁸⁶ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*, 234-235.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 235-236.

Patricios reacted to a predominant attitude towards where they came from and who they were, those reasons not being seen for the vast majority between the events conception, until recent years. Not being citizens of the United States, but at one point being part of its army, which was hostile towards the Mexican people whom the San Patricios shared more similarities, demonstrates these motivations of these men. It has not been until the contemporary decades that the event of the San Patricios has been given realization and credit, not only seeing their heritage as a whole, but analyzing and conceding the motivations of their actions. This would become a major part of both the distinct soul of Mexico, but also establish a matchless legacy for the men of the San Patricio Battalion.

⁸⁸ Stevens, *The Rogue's March*, 243.

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