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The Irish Refuge

The Irish in Mexico and the Latin World

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Mexico, throughout its history, has been a country of endless change and with just as much conflict. Much has contributed to this country's identity through the contributions of both significant events and a strong, rich diversity of people. The Irish have been one of these clans, and has affected Mexico's dynamic existence in various ways. Yet the Irish have had reasons for leaving their native land and ultimately becoming a profound component within the Latino historical intrigue. With their presence and participation the Irish have developed a mutual influence with Mexico, backed by their reasons for emigration, the struggles for freedom and justice, along with social, economic, and political entities.

The Irish 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 English 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 their was a universally conventional opinion at that time that England deliberately and spitefully wanted to push the Irish from their homeland of Ireland¹.

A seemingly constant exploitation from the aristocracy, both English and some Irish, against lower classes only increased the poverty level rather than decrease it. Later the Great

¹ Patrick R. Ward, *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), 9.

Potato Famine of 1845-1849, decimating one of Ireland's primary food sources, brought the situation to its highest point, forcing the highest number of Irish to emigrate. At the same time an overall condition of complete ruin and siege of the land resulted from English battles of conquest from 1100 to 1850.²

Spain conversely recognized the Irish plight and position at the time. Though described much later during the nineteenth century by author Eduardo de Huertas in 1887, the acknowledgement and realization of what the Irish faced is evident in a portion of his quote: "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," later continuing, he explains how this related to the English ascendancy, "Fate, which has always been implacable with Erin green, cast it into the sharp claws of England where it has never found mercy."³

A very strong cultural exchange between Ireland and Spain had already been occurring since the Middle Ages, starting around 600, particularly in the areas of manuscripts and literature.⁴ Yet 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 Catholic, and stirred Spanish interest. Ireland retained a largely Catholic and cultural distinctiveness, along with their resistance towards Britain, evolving into their 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.⁵

Under the monarchy of Phillip IV, Spain felt that they needed to recruit additional people

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

³ Oscar R. Morales," International studies in Irish history 3," *Ireland and the Spanish empire 1600-1825*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press), 8.

⁴ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 33-36.

⁵ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 22

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 where they were in the depths of English oppression, 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.⁶

Irish were now becoming significant players within an expanding Spanish Empire and world. Among those that who predominantly helped the Spanish in these roles included Daniel O'Connell, an Irish Nationalist leader sent to fight in Venezuela, thousands of Irish volunteers who later fought with Simon Bolivar for Argentine independence, and later alongside the Spanish army when fighting Napoleon Bonaparte, actually allying with the British at the time.⁷ A certain Bernardo O' Higgins, who of Irish descent served as Supreme Director of Chile, 1817-1823, being the son of Irish born Ambrosio O'Higgins, also governor of the same country in the previous century and later a 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.⁸

But 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 eventually include the country as being a generator of sixty percent of the Old Country's income. Though still ruled by Spain until its independence in 1821, Mexico served as a place of escape and

⁶ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 48

⁷ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 292-293

⁸ Graham Davis, *Land! Irish pioneers in Mexican and Revolutionary Texas*. (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, no.92, 2002). 239

separation from Europe, with the Irish being no exception.

An important example includes William Lamport, a native of Wexford, Ireland. Lamport was involved in fighting the British navy early in his life, and later fled to Mexico amidst a personal scandal during the mid seventeenth century.⁹ With an ostracized reputation in Europe and a rebellious demeanor Lamport found Mexico to be an acceptable home as many others later would. Also thought to be the inspiration for the legendary character of Zorro, Lamport was recognized as one of the first precursors of Mexican independence¹⁰

Irish influx into Mexico did continue to occur through the eighteenth century, though often still with a partiality to Spain. This was demonstrated by a certain Lt. General Juan O' Donoju, of Irish lineage, who happened to be the last Spanish viceroy of Mexico. O'Donoju was strong advocate against Mexico's independence from Spain and attempted, unsuccessfully, to stop it through his persuasion.¹¹ Mexico still was able to rid itself of its Spanish burden, despite those who sought to continue it, much the same 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.

One Mexican independence had been essentially formalized the country's leadership hoped to establish a stronger population in its northern region. A plan was soon developed during the later 1820's in which the Mexican government provided massive land grants between the Nueces River and Rio Grande River, using Irish agents called "empresarios",

⁹ Gerard Ronan, *'The Irish Zorro' ; the extraordinary adventures of William Lamport (1615-1659)*. (London: Brandona2004) 7-8.

¹⁰ Ronan, *'The Irish Zorro' . 7*

¹¹ Morales, *Ireland and the Spanish Empire*. 293-294

who were given the task to attract settlers and colonize the land.¹² This effort attracted primarily Irish, not only from Ireland but from places such as New York, Kentucky, and Philadelphia, where they had already emigrated to but were experiencing a developing prejudice towards immigrants within the United States.

Two of the foremost empresarios were James McGloin and John McMullen started the San Patricio colony in the predestined region, that would later become part of Texas. A secondary colony of similar importance within Northern Mexico, called Refugio, also became a predominant area for Irish settlers. Both areas had been described by the business and entrepreneurial empresarios as a promise of renewed life and earthbound utopia¹³ This promise was one that gave hope to the Irish to start again in their own way, apart from the limitations that they had so often experienced for so many previous generations. Still difficulties followed them in their journey atypical of immigrants that included disease, disasters at sea, among other dashed hopes. But still others arrived and began anew.

The particular mix between the native Mexican population and the incoming Irish was of a somewhat dynamic and beneficial nature. As explained in an encompassing statement by Graham Davis in his work *Land! Irish Pioneers in Mexican and Revolutionary Texas*, both groups “had much in common: a shared Catholic religion and mind set, trials involved in establishing title to their lands, and tough conditions in founding a frontier settlement”.¹⁴ Bringing with them skills and traits from their native lands the Irish showed that they could be productive in the new environment. This is evidence of their determination to separate themselves from the old repression and become the people that they had hoped to be within

¹² Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish - A History*. (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2000) 59-60.

¹³ Davis, *Land!* 238

¹⁴ Davis, *Land!* 105

these new settlements that they were now a part of.

There was the transference of cultures that occurred amongst the Mexicans and Irish in these colonized areas and beyond that is considered of prime importance. This sometimes included events as Irish marriages conducted by Mexican priests, and occasional intermarriage as well between the two cultures, speaking Spanish, and basically becoming “mexicanized”. The forming of colonies of Irish Mexicans, as well as some American, plus additional European colonists proliferated this trend well.¹⁵ As Irish males often were the majority of the settling populations marrying women of other culture groups throughout Latino world, not only in Mexico, happened rather often. These unions produced Irish Hispano-Creoles that favored a merchant based existence, or others between Irish and Amerindians among the poorer, agricultural Irish laborers.¹⁶

Cattle ranching and sheep farming, in general had become one of the most successful industries, and an important part of cultural exchange. This occurred not only within the newly settled Texas territory but among the Spanish territories of the Spanish America where the Irish had settled, such as Argentina as well as an area called California.¹⁷ Within the South American countries Irish settlers were commonly referred to as Irish Yankees, often after coming from the United States or Canada after their native Ireland.¹⁸ The Hispanic ranching tradition was not only successful with this assimilation, but became one of the strongest bonding points between the Irish and the Latino neighbors, and also further proliferated the idea of diaspora

¹⁵ Davis, *Land!* 166,105

¹⁶ Edmundo Murray, *Ireland and the Americas, Culture, Politics, and History*, Vol. 1 (Santa, Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008) 310

¹⁷ Davis, *Land!* 239

¹⁸ Murray, *Ireland and the Americas, Culture Politics, and History*, Vol.2, 472

Still as successful as the San Patricio, Refugio, and other lesser sized colonies had been, the need that many Texas territory settlers felt to be independent from Mexico itself dominated their minds by the mid 1830's. The Texan battles for independence took a large toll though upon these Irish colonies. Both San Patricio and Refugio were decimated from battles that occurred and very little remains to the present day. Yet the Irish in a contrast to benefiting from the Mexican government, now in this case wished to manifest their determination for identity and freedom. After the battle at the Alamo, the Irish colonists who had participated and lived through it were moved to a profound sense of loyalty towards Texas, and the ingrained tie to the land that they had been granted earlier by the Mexican government, viewed as a shared "blood sacrifice".¹⁹

Though many men of Irish descent fought defending the Alamo, and many others were involved in the later Battle of San Jacinto, the attachment often remained between the Irish and their Mexican friends and neighbors, apart from the government. It may be viewed that their stance had been traitorous, but land and sense of autonomy separate from what they felt was again a restrictive form of being.

Perhaps among the most important contributions that the Irish had within Mexico's history can be attributed to the San Patricio Battalion. This event is about a group of over two hundred privates, composed of mainly Irish immigrants, who deserted from the United States Army during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, and fought for the Mexican side.²⁰ The reasons, motivations, and consequences of this episode, can be realized through the attitudes of people within the United States and those members of its military at the time.

¹⁹ Davis, *Land!* 152

²⁰ Michael Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*. (Guadalajara, Mexico: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997) 40

Prejudice against Irish Catholics, those of Catholic faith itself, and other non-Anglo foreigners was at a rampant height during this period. It had come to a point that there has since been a speculation that Irish were not even considered white and put on a similar level that Afro-Americans were placed upon, for the first seventy-five years that the United States existed as a sovereign entity. The perpetual fear that regularly prevailed was that Catholics had only a one true servitude towards the pope and not the United States best interests.²¹

This opinion had developed vehemently during the preceding two decades into a reaction known as “nativism” or the “nativist movement”. This encompassed those from a Protestant and English lineage seeing themselves as the most absolute form of American, and directly descended from those of the colonial period, thereby excluding anyone else as lesser individuals.²² Many affiliates of the United States Army boldly held this same opinion and most often encouraged the regular practice of it. This was especially the true for officers when associating with their recruits who rather often 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 a excruciating punishment known as bucking and gagging was implemented for a private committing the slightest infraction, such as a flaw in a uniform or maybe a misstep during drills.²³

As General Zachary Taylor led his army to set up along the disputed Mexican border of the Nueces River, and wait under the pretense to react to aggression from the Mexican army,

²¹ Paul R. Spickard, *Almost all aliens: immigration, race, and colonialism in American history and identity*. (New York: Routledge, 2000) 124

²² Spickard, *Almost all aliens*, 121

²³ Robert Selph Henry. *The Story of the Mexican War*. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1950) 45

it was under a goal to gain the nearly entire north half of Mexico and put it under U.S. ownership. Taylor himself was not of a reputation as a hard line nativist, as most of his officers were, but was a rigid advocate of the drilling. Being the appointed leader of the U.S. forces though he had carry out his orders from President James K. Polk commencing a conflict that Mexicans then, as many do today, believe to be an unjustified invasion of Mexico by the Americans.²⁴

By April 1846 Private John Riley, an Irish born recruit, who earlier also had served in the British military, and suffered the abuses of this racism throughout his life in both Europe and now the United States, had finally come to 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 river during the night of April 1-2 and joined the Mexican lines.²⁵ Amidst the ordered pickets, volleys of gun fire by the U.S. army towards the deserters as they swam, the total came to forty-eight deserters 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 vice with, but also shared the same Catholic religion, was counter intuitive and unreasonable to the Irish privates. Furthermore supporting a Protestant army, who on the whole heaped its contempt and maltreatment towards them, certainly, they felt, was not justified.²⁶

Once a part of the Mexican army, adopting the name of the San Patricio Battalion, and

²⁴ Carlos M. Jimenez, *The Mexican American Heritage*. (Berkley, Calif.: TQS Publications, 1993) 77

²⁵ Peter F. Stevens, *The rogue's march: John Riley and the St. Patrick's Battalion, 1846-1848*, (1st ed. Washington: Brassey's, 1999) 81

²⁶ Howard Fast. "Revising the record," *Americana*. Volume 27, 6-8, June 6, 1993

flying a banner representing their Irish heritage, the San Patricios, or “Colorados” as many of the Mexicans called them, referring to their red hair, fought predominantly in the artillery section. 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 noticeable to the Mexican army.²⁷

The San Patricio were not entirely Irish though. Out of the over two hundred there were three Scotsmen already residents of Mexico, Americans and Englishmen who joined the Battalion in Mexico City, as well as some Germans and Poles.²⁸ While in service for the Mexican army the San Patricios learned about and became accustomed to Mexican culture, such as food and typical architecture of the nation, the caste and class arrangement, and many were also enticed by the sight of the Mexican senioritias. 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 at its core brought a nostalgia of their native land²⁹

The Battalion fought with the Mexican Army under General Santa Anna through all of the major battles of the war, until finally being overtaken and with several members arrested by the U.S. army at the Battle of 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, since they had deserted before hostilities had begun, and also received fifty lashes and the branding of a “D”. Others

²⁷ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*, 105-106

²⁸ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*, 58

²⁹ Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989) 35-37

were pardoned or commuted for other reasons, while twenty were sentenced to death. An additional thirty were tried at Tacubaya and ordered to hang.³⁰

Many members of the San Patricios did leave Mexico after about two years while others stayed in their new homeland. Records are scant and insufficient for these men and little is known about their fates, even about the ultimate outcome of John Riley, though he did rejoin the Mexican army for a time.³¹ A memorial plaque has been placed in San Angel listing many of the names of the San Patricio Battalion and commemorating what they had done. Many Mexican people consider this group heroic while the event and the Battalion has rarely been heard of by most Americans, deliberately forgotten about at the time for what was considered actions of treason. Later Santa Anna plaintively stated "Give me a few hundred more men like Riley's and I would have won the victory".³²

Other personalities of Irish ancestry have affected Mexico within the previous century and come into the present day. These include artist Juan O'Gorman, and an Edmundo O'Gorman, a noted historian. Certain people in past politics such as Alvaro Obregon, his surname derived from his paternal O'Brian side. Former Mexican president Vicente Fox mentioned during a visit to the Western Oregon University campus in 2011 that he was a descendant of a member of the San Patricio Battalion. While another has actually found Ireland to be a refuge, in place of residing in Mexico, as is the case of Carlos Salinas who moved there upon being exiled during the mid 1990's.

Both Mexico and Ireland have indeed shared much between their cultures. The Irish have found a place in the past and into the present that they can express themselves in the

³⁰ Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers*. 172-173

³¹ Miller, *Shamrock and Sword*. 131

³² Stevens, *The rogue's march*. 243

manner that they choose. An alternative from the arduous, if not tragic, background that darkens the history of their native land and its people. Mexico has been able to gain an unfathomable amount of benefits from what the Irish brought to its being, involving not only a culture, but a spirit. This essence used from both perspectives helps, in its own exceptional way, to give Mexico such a unique soul.

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