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The Irish Soldiers of Mexico, Part 1

by Michael Hogan

One of the least-known stories of the Irish who came to America in the 1840s is that of the Irish battalion that fought on the Mexican side in the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846–1848. They came to Mexico and died, some gloriously in combat, others ignominiously on the gallows. United under a green banner, they participated in all the major battles of the war and were cited for bravery by General López de Santa Anna, the Mexican commander in chief and president. At the penultimate battle of the war, these Irishmen fought until their ammunition was exhausted and even then tore down the white flag that was raised by their Mexican comrades in arms, preferring to struggle on with bayonets until finally being overwhelmed by the Yankees. Despite their brave resistance, however, 85 of the Irish battalion were captured and sentenced to bizarre tortures and deaths at the hands of the Americans, resulting in what is considered even today as the “largest hanging affair in North America.”

The war begins

In the spring of 1846, the United States was poised to invade Mexico, its neighbor to the south. The ostensible reason was to collect on past-due loans and indemnities. The real reason was to provide the United States with control of the ports of San Francisco and San Diego, the trade route through the New Mexico Territory, and the rich mineral resources of the Nevada Territory — all of which at that time belonged to the Republic of Mexico. The United States had previously offered \$5 million to purchase the New Mexico Territory and \$25 million for California, but Mexico had refused.

U.S. President James K. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to take a position south of the Nueces River in Texas with a force of 4,000 men. By January 1846, the general had built a fort in what was Mexican, or at least disputed, territory on the northern banks of the Rio Grande in an effort to put pressure on the Mexicans to agree to a settlement. Historian Bernard Devoto notes,

Polk's intention was clear. This was a show of force intended to give the Mexicans a sense of reality in the settlement of various matters he intended to take up, among them the purchase of California.

On April 26, 1846, a Mexican cavalry troop crossed the Rio Grande upstream of Taylor's army. A patrol sent by Taylor to intercept them was attacked, and in the skirmish, 11 Americans were killed and 5 wounded. When Polk received word of the attack, he delivered his war message, declaring that since the Mexicans had "shed American blood on American soil," a state of war existed between the United States and Mexico.

Before the declaration of war by the United States, a group of Irish Catholics headed by a crack artilleryman named John Riley deserted from the American forces and joined the Mexicans. Born in Clifden, County Galway, Riley was an expert on artillery, and it was widely believed that he had served in the British army as an officer or a non-com in Canada before enlisting in the American army. Riley's charge was to turn this new unit into a crack artillery arm of the Mexican defense. He is credited with changing the name of the group from the Legion of Foreigners and designing their distinctive flag.

Within a year, the ranks of Riley's men would be swelled by Catholic foreign residents in Mexico City, and Irish and German Catholics who deserted once the war broke out, into a battalion known as Los San Patricios, or "Those of Saint Patrick."

The San Patricios fought under a green silk flag emblazoned with the Mexican coat of arms, an image of St. Patrick, and the words "Erin Go Braugh" [sic]. The battalion was made up of artillery and was observed in key positions during every major battle. Their aid was critical because the Mexicans had poor cannon with a range of 400 meters less than the Americans. In addition, Mexican cannons were inexperienced and poorly trained. The addition of veteran gunners to the Mexican side would result in at least two major battles being fought to a draw. At the Battle of Buena Vista, for example, the San Patricios held the high ground and enfiladed the Americans. At one point they even wrested a cannon from the Yanks and led General Taylor's advisors to believe that the battle had been lost. Several Irishmen were awarded the Cross of Honor by the Mexican government for their bravery in that battle, and many received field promotions.

At the Battle of Churubusco, holed up in a Catholic monastery and surrounded by a superior force of American cavalry, artillery, and infantry, the San Patricios withstood three major assaults and inflicted heavy losses on the Yanks. Eventually, however, a shell struck their stored gunpowder, the ammunition park blew up, and the Irishmen, after a gallant counteroffensive with bayonets, were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. They were tried by a military court-martial and then scourged, branded, and hanged in a manner so brutal that it is still remembered in Mexico today.

In almost every Mexican account of the war, the San Patricios are considered heroes who fought for the noble ideals of religion and a just cause against a Protestant invader of a peaceful nation. In U.S. histories, however, they are often portrayed as turncoats, traitors, and malcontents who joined the other side for land or money.

Reasons for defection

It seems odd that anyone would defect from a superior force sure of victory to join an obviously inferior one certain to be defeated, even if, as most U.S. accounts assert, there were offers of money and land from the Mexicans. There was plenty of free land to the west, much easier to come by than risking one's life in combat against a Yankee army. Simple desertion and refuge in the rich valleys of California would have accomplished that purpose. To determine the true causes of the defection of these men, it is necessary to reflect on the temper of the times.

The potato blight that began in 1845 (roughly coinciding with the Mexican War and lasting for its duration) brought a devastation to Europe more horrible than the Black Death. For the Irish, it was the beginning of massive evictions, starvation, sickness, and death. Of the many fortunate enough to afford the fare for an escape to the New World, tens of thousands would die en route as a result of the inhuman conditions aboard Great Britain's vessels.

Victims of oppression in the Old World, they were to experience it again in the New. Confronted by enormous numbers of Irish-Catholic immigrants in the 1840s, American nativism reared its ugly head. "All the world knows," wrote historian Thomas Gallagher, "that Yankee hates Paddy." And so it seemed to those who had survived the perilous journey to America only to be labeled inferior by demagogic politicians and feared by Anglo-American workmen. Victims of prejudice in the New World, it should not be considered strange that they would shortly find themselves becoming sympathetic to the Mexicans. Here was another Catholic people being invaded by Protestant foreigners. According to a contemporary account, "On reaching Mexico they discovered they had been hired by heretics to slaughter brethren of their own church. On top of this they were confronted with the hatred of their fellow soldiers."

The intense prejudice of many of the American soldiers, especially the volunteers, has been commented upon by at least one careful historian. According to K. Jack Bauer, author of *The Mexican War, 1846-48*,

The majority of American soldiers were products of a militantly Protestant culture that still viewed Catholicism as a misdirected and misbegotten religion. Although the regulars included a significant number of Catholic enlisted men, the volunteers did not. This strengthened the tendency to ignore the rights and privileges of the Church in a Catholic country as well as increase the harassing of that Church. Some of the volunteers' acts, like the stabling of horses in the Shrine of San Francisco in Monterrey, so upset the Mexicans that they still mention it in modern works.

Origins of anti-Catholicism in the United States

America was a nation founded by Calvinists who, in rejecting the Church of England, had rejected the hierarchy of both Anglican and Catholic institutions and, in throwing off the spiritual hierarchy, had done so with the temporal as well. Free to elect their own ministers, they were equally free to elect their own governors. To most Anglo-Saxons living in the United States, this is what it meant to be an American: free of European authority, both that of the pope and that of the king. Those who still clung to a hierarchical model were considered regressive and unfit for self-government.

The Catholic Church was, to the Calvinist way of thinking, connected politically to a repressive and antiquated system, even more than the Anglican model they had rejected. Catholics, it was widely believed, had not developed a habit of independent thought. They were still chained to a religion that accepted the pope, a foreign power, as their authority, rather than their individual consciences. It was believed that not only were Catholics unable to think for themselves in matters of faith or morals, they were equally incapable of being part of a democratic system. Thus, by the early 1800s the Catholic religion was seen at best as retrograde and — at worst — inimical to a democratic republic.

As early as 1830 the American Bible Society urged the unity of Protestant sects to combat Rome's influence in the West and expressed the belief that "His Holiness the Pope, has, within his larger grasp, already fixed upon this fair portion of our Union and knows full well how to keep his fold." While in the early Republic there was some tolerance of Catholic minorities, this was to change quickly with the increase in immigration of Irish Catholics during the 1830s and 1840s, reaching its crest during the years of the Irish famine as poor, rural Catholics flooded into the American towns and cities. Anti-Catholic riots broke out in Philadelphia in 1844, and when they were over, the Irish ghetto lay in ruins, hundreds of homeless Irish roamed the streets, and two Catholic churches were burned to the ground.

Since solidarity in the face of commonly perceived oppression is a universal characteristic of any ethnic or religious group, it is hardly surprising that Irish Catholics would find unity among themselves in the military service. As the war progressed and they witnessed more depredations against their coreligionists in Mexico, it is understandable that some Irishmen felt they had more in common with the Mexicans than the invading Americans. The destruction of Catholic churches in Mexico by the invading U.S. army and other depredations by Protestant volunteers had also been well-documented by both sides. And, just in case they needed a reminder of the connection between the Americans' treatment of the Irish at home and the abuse of Mexicans abroad, leaflets written by the Mexican general Santa Anna were widely distributed. They read in part,

Can you fight by the side of those who put fire to your temples in Boston and Philadelphia? Did you witness such dreadful crimes and sacrileges without making a solemn vow to our Lord? If you are Catholic, the same as we, if you follow the doctrines of Our Savior, why are you murdering your brethren? Why are you antagonistic to those who defend their country and your own God?

Why indeed? Many Irishmen were quick to see that higher loyalties should prevail, and they joined the Mexican side. They simply had more in common with the Mexicans than with the invaders.

The Irish “race”

The Protestants certainly saw similarities and were quick to point them out. The Mexican, they asserted, like the Irishman, was unstable, ignorant, feckless, easily led, and incapable of participation in a republic. Using both the pseudoscience of phrenology and the more respectable science of physiology, contemporary American scientists determined that the short, full figures of the Irish indicated that they were “inactive, slothful and lazy.”

This was a stereotype also applied to the Mexican. The coarse red hair of the Irish showed that they were “excitable and gushing.” Their ruddy complexions indicated that they were selfish “with hearty animal passions.” Irishmen of this period are variously described as having a “hanging bone gait ... the low brow denoting a serf of fifty descents ... dark eyes sunken beneath the compressed brows” with a look of “savage ferocity.” By the 1840s this legitimization of negative racial characteristics had reached its apex.

*Michael Hogan is the author of 14 books, including **The Irish Soldiers of Mexico**, which was the basis for two documentary films and an MGM release titled **One Man's Hero**, starring Tom Berenger and Daniela Romo. He is the head of the humanities department at the American School of Guadalajara and historical consultant to the Irish Embassy in Mexico. Reprinted with permission from **Crisis Magazine**.*

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