

The St. Patrick's Battalion

The Irish Soldiers of Mexico

Jaime Fogarty*



Carlos Nebel, *The Battle of Churubusco*, 1851 (color lithograph).

On September 12, 1997, the Mexican government paid special tribute to the soldiers of the San Patricio Battalion who were tortured and hanged at the San Jacinto Plaza, San Angel, in 1847.

Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo presided at the ceremonies marking the sesquicentennial of that tragic event and declared, "One hundred and fifty years ago, here in San Angel,...members of the

St. Patrick's Battalion were executed for following their consciences. They were martyred for adhering to the highest ideals, and today we honor their memory. In the name of the people of Mexico, I salute today the people of Ireland and express my eternal gratitude."¹ The president concluded, saying, "While we honor the memory of the Irish who gave their lives for Mexico and for human dignity, we also honor our own commitment to cherish their ideals, and to always defend the values for which they occupy a place of honor in our history."²

Irish Ambassador to Mexico Seán O'Huighinn emphasized the bonds of friendship that the "San Patricios" have forged between the two countries, and which continue to grow and prosper. He

noted that Ireland and Mexico shared a common history of struggle to preserve their cultural identities and political liberties, often threatened by powerful and aggressive neighbors.

He also paid tribute to the humanitarian insights of the San Patricios who, "despite the confusion and animosities of war, were able to discern the admirable qualities of the Mexican people, unclouded by preconceived notions of racial prejudice." In this context, he quoted the leader of the San Patricios, John O'Reilly (also written Riley) who wrote: "Do not be deceived by the prejudice of a nation at war with Mexico, because you will not find in all the world a people more friendly and hospitable than the Mexicans."³

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HISTORICAL REVIEW

Following the U.S. declaration of war against Mexico in 1846, an Irish-born deserter from the U.S. army, John O'Reilly, organized a company of soldiers at Matamoros to fight on the side of Mexico against the invading U.S. forces. These foreign volunteers became known as "Las Compañías de San Patricio," and were renowned for their skill as artilleryists as well as their bravery in battle for the duration of the war (1846-1848). Not all the

Gaelic "*Erin go Brágh*" (Ireland for Ever). On the other side of the banner Saint Patrick was depicted holding a pastoral staff resting on a serpent.

A U.S. soldier described it as "a beautiful green silk banner [that] waved over their heads; on it glittered a silver cross and a golden harp, embroidered by the hands of the fair nuns of San Luis Potosí."⁴

Historian Robert Miller also cites another reference to the San Patricio banner by an American observer: "Among the mighty host we passed was O'Reilly and his

1846. Liberating Army of the North, as well as a special artillery unit manned by the San Patricios. This unit was commanded by Colonel Francisco Rosendo Moreno and played an important role in the Mexican victory at the Battle of Angostura in February 1847. According to Miller, "Two six-pounder cannon of the U.S. Fourth Artillery were captured by the enemy due to intense fire from the San Patricio cannoneers, aided by support troops."⁶

General Francisco Mejía cited the San Patricios in his report as "worthy of the most consummate praise because the men fought with daring bravery."⁷

As a result of their heroism in battle, O'Reilly, among others, was promoted to the rank of captain and was given the Angostura Cross of Honor.

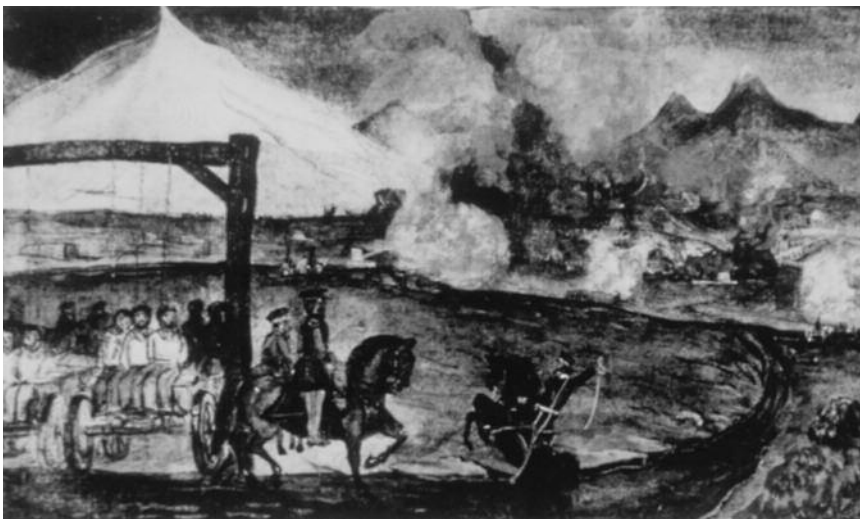
Despite the apparent victory of the Mexican forces at Angostura, Santa Anna decided to abandon the field of battle and retreated to San Luis Potosí. According to Miller, about a third of the San Patricios were killed or wounded at Angostura.⁸

Only two weeks after the battle of Angostura, the main focus of the war shifted to the Mexican Gulf Coast with the arrival of General Winfield Scott at Veracruz with 9,000 troops.

The San Patricios were transferred from San Luis Potosí to Jalapa and took part in the Battle of Cerro Gordo which ended in defeat for the Mexican forces.

THE FOREIGN LEGION OF SAINT PATRICK

In June 1847, Santa Anna created a foreign legion as part of the Mexican army, and the San Patricios were transferred from the artillery branch to the infantry and merged into the Foreign Legion. They



Sam Chamberlain's rendition of the execution of legionnaires near Chapultepec Castle, ca. 1867 (water colors, pencil and gouache).

San Patricios were deserters from the U.S. army. Their number also included Irish and other Europeans already settled in Mexico, and some historians use Mexican army records as a basis to state that the majority were not deserters. The San Patricios did, however, have a distinctly Irish identity since their namesake, St. Patrick, is the patron saint of the Irish people. The group's banner displayed an Irish harp surrounded by the Mexican coat-of-arms with a scroll reading, "Freedom for the Mexican Republic," and underneath the harp was the motto in

company of deserters bearing aloft in high disgrace the holy banner of St. Patrick."⁵

FROM MATAMOROS TO CHURUBUSCO

The San Patricios took part in the fighting at Matamoros and Monterrey where they earned a reputation for their expertise in handling heavy weaponry. Following the U.S. victory at Monterrey, the Mexican army retreated to San Luis Potosí, where General Antonio López de Santa Anna reorganized the Mexican forces in late

then became known as the First and Second Militia Infantry Companies of San Patricio. Colonel Francisco R. Moreno was made commander, with Captain John O'Reilly in charge of the First Company and Captain Santiago O'Leary of the Second. The companies were also referred to as "The Foreign Legion of San Patricio."

THE BATTLE OF CHURUBUSCO

Dr. Michael Hogan, the Irish-American author of *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, provides a detailed, well documented account of the heroic defense of the "convento" (monastery) at Churubusco when it was attacked by the invading U.S. forces on August 20, 1847. The monastery, surrounded by huge, thick stone walls, provided a natural fortress for the defending Mexican forces. The San Patricio Companies together with the Los Bravos Battalion occupied the parapets of the building which was to become the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

Though hopelessly outnumbered, the defenders repelled the attacking U.S. forces with heavy losses until their ammunition ran out, and a Mexican officer, realizing the hopelessness of the situation, raised the white flag of surrender.

According to Hogan, Captain Patrick Dalton of the San Patricios tore the white flag down, and General Pedro Anaya ordered his men to fight on with their bare hands if necessary.

Mexican historian, Heriberto Frías described the heroic last stand of the San Patricios:

Only the soldiers of St. Patrick, brave Irishmen who spontaneously defended our standard,

passing to our ranks out of sympathy for our ideals and religion, were able to use the munitions; and they continued their spirited volleys, until the enemy's rain of fire brought death to those valiant marksmen.⁹

History records that following the surrender, when U.S. General Twiggs asked General Anaya where his ammunition was stored, he replied bitterly, "If I had ammunition, you would not be here."¹⁰

Undoubtedly, the tenacity and skill of the San Patricio companies at Churubusco earned them the everlasting esteem

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and affection of the Mexican people; and their willingness to fight to the death for their commitment to Mexico forged an indelible seal of honor on that commitment. Mexicans are also justly proud of the heroic stand of their national guardsmen, "green civilian recruits, fighting to the death against Scott's well-equipped veterans."¹¹

According to General Anaya's written report, 35 San Patricios were killed in action, O'Leary and O'Reilly were wounded and Francis O'Connor lost both legs as a result of his heroic stand against the invaders.

Eighty-five of the San Patricios were taken prisoner, while the other survivors (about 85) managed to escape, and appar-

ently were later able to rejoin the retreating Mexican forces.

Seventy-two were charged with desertion from the U.S. army, and General Scott ordered that two courts-martial be convened to try them.

LASHING, BRANDING AND HANGING

A court-martial at San Angel September 8, 1847, upheld the death sentence for 20 of the 29 San Patricios tried there, while a similar court at Tacubaya ordered the death penalty for 30 more. The others, including O'Reilly, escaped the death penalty since they had deserted before war was declared. They, however, were condemned to "receive 50 lashes on their bare backs, to be branded with the letter 'D' for deserter, and to wear iron yokes around their necks for the duration of the war."¹²

Two Mexican muleteers were forced to administer the lashes, according to Hogan.

On September 10, 1847, 16 of the condemned San Patricios were hanged at the San Jacinto Plaza, San Angel, and 14 others received 59 lashes on their bare backs until, according to an American eyewitness, "Their backs had the appearance of a pounded piece of raw beef, the blood oozing from every stripe."¹³

After the flogging, the prisoners were branded the letter "D" with red-hot branding irons. Some were branded on the hip, while others were branded on the cheek, and O'Reilly was branded on both cheeks for good measure. San Jacinto Plaza thus became the scene of bloody and mangled bodies, mingled with the repulsive odor of the burning flesh of the tortured San Patricios.

According to Hogan, five Mexican priests who sought to give spiritual assistance to the victims were forced to witness the whippings and brandings and ordered to withdraw to the gallows to witness the final act of this “gruesome and carefully orchestrated spectacle.”

Eight mule-drawn wagons were brought up, and two prisoners were placed on each wagon. Sixteen nooses hanging from the crossbeam were placed around their necks, and the priests were brought forward to administer the last rites of the Catholic Church. Then, “the whips cracked, and the wagons drove off leaving the 16 victims dangling from their nooses.”¹⁴

Some, like Captain Patrick Dalton, had asked to be buried in consecrated ground, and were interred in nearby Tlacopac. The others were buried beneath the gallows, and O’Reilly and his tortured companions were forced to dig their fallen comrades’ graves. On September 2, four more convicted San Patricios were hanged at the nearby village of Mixcoac.

The final scene of this macabre and somewhat sadistic “hanging spree” took place near Tacubaya on September 13, when the remaining 30 convicted San Patricios were hanged. Francis O’Connor, who had lost his legs at Churubusco and was dying from his wounds, was nonetheless dragged from the hospital tent and propped up on a wagon with a noose around his neck. When the American flag was raised over Chapultepec Castle, the San Patricios were “launched into eternity as the wagons pulled away, and the nooses tightened on their necks.”¹⁵

Mexicans were shocked and outraged by this cruel and barbaric treatment of the San Patricios. *El Diario del Gobierno*

expressed its indignation, writing, “This day, in cold blood, these [American] Caribs from an impulse of superstition, and after the manner of savages as practiced in the days of Homer, have hanged these men as a holocaust.”¹⁶

IN MEMORIAM

1997 marked the sesquicentennial of a bitter and traumatic chapter in the history of the Irish and Mexican peoples. Mexico remembered the tragic loss of

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almost half its territory, “ceded” to the United States; and Ireland remembered the tragic loss of almost half its total population due to starvation and emigration brought about by the Great Famine of 1847. It has been wisely said that those who ignore the lessons of history are destined to repeat it, and that we do not need to savor the bitterness of the past in order to understand its lesson for the present and the future.

Each year, on September 12, Mexico pays tribute to the San Patricios at San Jacinto Plaza. The commemorative plaque on the wall facing the plaza was designed by Lorenzo Rafael, son of Patricio Cox,

who wrote the first book—a novel—in Spanish about the San Patricios.

The escutcheon at the top of the plaque depicts a Celtic cross protected by the outstretched wings of the Aztec eagle. The inscription on the plaque reads: “In memory of the Irish soldiers of the heroic San Patricio Battalion, martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Mexico during the unjust U.S. invasion of 1847.”

At the bottom of the plaque another inscription reads, “With the gratitude of Mexico, 112 years after their holocaust.”

The plaque was placed in 1959 and continues to remind visitors to the peaceful, tree-shaded plaza, of the tragic events that took place there on September 10, 1847. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *The News* (Mexico City), 13 September 1997.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Novedades* (Mexico City), 13 September 1997, Michael Hogan, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico* (Guadalajara: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997), p. 244.

⁴ Robert Ryal Miller, *Shamrock and Sword, The Saint Patrick's Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹ Heriberto Frías, *La guerra contra los gringos* (Mexico City: Ediciones Leega/Jucar, 1984).

¹⁰ Hogan, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-187.

¹⁶ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 111.