

Michael Hogan. *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico.* Guadalajara, Mexico: Fondo Editorial Universitario, 1997. 268 pp. \$49.00, cloth, ISBN 978-968-7846-00-2.



Reviewed by Hans Vogel

Published on H-LatAm (September, 1997)

Among the smaller wars of the United States, the one fought against Mexico remains one of the most interesting. Like most wars, the Mexican War was shaped by the particular characteristics of the belligerent countries and its study may help understand both U.S. and Mexican society of the 1840s. There is a considerable body of literature on the Mexican War, much of it extolling the real or imagined virtues of U.S. soldiers, but somehow—perhaps for being rather straightforwardly "patriotero"—this literature has not earned the war a major place in "official history." As Michael Hogan rightly points out in his introduction, many American textbooks scarcely devote attention to this war. "Coverage," he writes, "generally consists of a two or three page section entitled 'Westward Expansion' or 'Manifest Destiny.'"

In an effort to analyze a number of fundamental characteristics of 1840s U.S. society, and in the hope of contributing to a revision of Mexican War historiography, the author has made a detailed study of the small San Patricio Battalion (never consisting of more than 204 individuals). This Battalion was named in honor of Ireland's

patron saint, Patrick, since it was made up basically of Irishmen, some of whom had been living in Mexico since before the war, but most of whom were recruited among Irish deserters from the U.S. ranks. As a matter of fact, as Hogan repeatedly makes clear throughout the book, he sees it as his task as a historian to clarify the darker sides of history and to do justice to those who have been wronged by past compatriots. As he puts it on the last page of the text, "people are indeed responsible for the sins of their fathers, they are not guilty, but responsible for setting right the wrongs done in the past, "which is, one has to admit, at the same time an exhortation to *comprometida* historiography.

The facts, about which both U.S. and Mexican historians tend to be in agreement, are rather simply told (which might be another explanation for the scant space devoted to the Mexican War in U.S. textbooks). In 1847, the U.S. and Mexico went to war over what may be termed a border dispute brought about essentially by Westward Expansion, notably in Texas and California. Invading Mexico from the North (the columns of General

Kearny and of General Taylor) and landing forces at Veracruz under the command of General Winfield Scott, the U.S. never had forces exceeding the 20,000 mark. The Mexicans on the whole enjoyed superiority in numbers, but they were short of ammunition and supplies, they did not have a well-coordinated leadership, and most Mexican soldiers were not as well-trained as the invaders. Gripped by continual political crises ever since the proclamation of an independent government in 1810, Mexico could simply not muster the wherewithal to ward off a calculated and well-planned aggression. For all his personal valor and charisma, Mexico's war leader, General Santa Ana, could not make up for what his army lacked and certainly was not able to lead a country long plagued by political upheaval and civil war to victory.

At the end of the war, the U.S. forces had 1,722 men killed in action, and 11,550 dead through disease, accidents, etcetera. There were more than 9,200 deserters, more than in any war the country has fought since. The U.S. army was far from a faithful reflection of the nation's demographic structure. More than half of all soldiers were European-born, among them several thousand Irishmen. Most of these soldiers faithfully served the flag of their adoptive country. Hogan makes it abundantly clear that the overwhelming majority of Irishmen in U.S. uniforms never left the ranks and continued serving till the end: there were over 5,000 of these. Nor did Irishmen make up any majority of the more than nine thousand deserters, unlike what numerous textbooks would have us believe.

A key question to be asked is, why was the number of deserters in the Mexican war so high? Hogan suggests several explanations. In the first place, U.S. society in the 1830s and 1840s was gripped by rabid anti-Catholic sentiment, giving rise to riots and street violence against Roman Catholics. Violence in Philadelphia in 1834 and 1844 caused the death of several dozens of people.

Churches were burned and convents attacked. Yet the total number of Catholics was still very small: only some 250,000 in the mid 1840s, when the total population stood at some 20 million. The sudden influx of poverty-stricken Irish Catholics and the swelling ranks of Roman Catholic immigrants from Germany and other continental lands, caused feelings of insecurity and fear among Americans who firmly believed that Protestantism was quintessential to their nation's and their own identity. Irishmen were the butt of discrimination on two accounts: because they were Roman Catholic and because they were deemed an inferior race. Soldiers of the U.S. army routinely desecrated churches, chapels, convents and monasteries and otherwise engaged in cruel behavior to the Mexican people in many cases. Many soldiers decided to desert after witnessing such excesses, which mostly went unpunished.

Hogan attempts to demonstrate that the United States was in the midst of a process of nation building, with the Mexican War clearly functioning as a catalyst. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, United States nationalism could largely be summed up in the notion of Manifest Destiny. The Irish soldiers in the U.S. army in Mexico were somehow caught by the events. The author makes quite a lot out of the cruel and unusual punishment meted out to the handful of San Patricio soldiers who fell into the hands of the U.S. invaders. After the heroic defense of the town of Churubusco by the San Patricios, more than two dozen Irishmen were hanged (whereas the normal penalty for deserters was death by firing squad) and the remainder were whipped and branded in the face. Hogan asserts that Mexicans were horrified at the cruelty of the U.S. army. Perhaps one should not entertain too exalted a notion of the civilized nature of the Mexican penal system, but it is probably true that in the eyes of Europeans, the U.S. army was hardly a pleasant organization when it came to punishment. Such at least was the opinion of Frederick Zeh and his German immigrant comrades serving in the U.S.

army in the Mexican campaign. (See Frederick Zeh, *An Immigrant Soldier in the Mexican War*, translated by William Orr and edited by Orr and Robert Ryal Miller, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995, reviewed in H-LATAM).

Hogan makes it appear quite likely that General Winfield Scott purposely left the punishment of the Irish prisoners in the hands of ruthless and cruel officers, one of whom moreover was an Irishman himself. However, it remains to be seen if the U.S. army was indeed meaner and crueler towards its prisoners and deserters than other contemporary armies. It should be interesting to compare the details described by Hogan with the punitive regimes of other armies fighting foreign wars in the 1840s, such as the French in Algeria, the British in New Zealand and Afghanistan, or the Russians in Chechnya. I would not be surprised if such a comparison would be favorable to the U.S. army.

Hogan has certainly not attempted to take a dispassionate look at his subject. Unlike other historians, who make solemn statements as to their unquestioned impartiality, Hogan squarely recognizes his commitment to salvage and restore the historical image of the San Patricio soldiers. As such this volume is a unique and courageous specimen of *histoire engagee*. As anyone who has ever done serious military historical research will know, it is hard not to sympathize with long-dead soldiers and their often terrible ordeal. There often comes a point where one identifies with those men, for whom the archaic expression "poor devils" seems a particularly appropriate one.

This volume is sound military history, taking into account both major currents of the discipline as it is nowadays being practiced. However, as an attempt at writing "battlefield history" it is probably not as good a performance as it might have been, given the micro-level of a small Mexican army unit. As so often in such cases, it is unfair to be too critical on this point, since obviously, the author was handicapped by the lack of first-hand

accounts by members of the batallion. Any reconstruction of the daily life of the unit must therefore be full of gaps. On the other hand, the volume is a lot better from the point of view of the "army and society" approach. It is on this level that Hogan proves to be a shrewd observer, providing the reader with valuable insights into the mentality of the United States in the 1840s. It is, however not to be expected that this volume will cause a sudden revision in U.S. historiography of the role played in the Mexican War by both deserters in general, and the Irish San Patricios in particular. Such hopes may prove to be illusory and perhaps naive.

The Irish Soldiers of Mexico is quite a pleasant read, but it is to be feared that not very many people will eventually partake of its enjoyment. Unfortunately, the subject does not seem broad enough to captivate a numerous public. Nor does it seem that a book published in Mexico and marketed through the University Press of the South, to my knowledge not a major player in the field of academic publishing, would guarantee substantial sales. However, about the intrinsic merits of this fine, passionate monograph there can be few doubts. Finally, as a monument to the San Patricios, Hogan's monograph is, I am sure, unsurpassed.

Copyright (c)1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit, educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Hans Vogel. Review of Hogan, Michael. *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1294>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.