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The Irish in Bolivia: An (almost) Unknown History

María Eugenia Cruset

National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET)-
National University of Quilmes-Catholic University of La Plata
(mariaeugenia.cruset@ucalpvirtual.edu.ar)

Abstract:

Irish immigration to Bolivia has been largely ignored by academia. However, although few in number, it has exerted its influence both in the country itself and in the cause of Irish nationalism. Whether they arrived with General Bolívar's liberating troops or collaborated in the development of the nation through their work in mining, commercial or railway companies, their contribution was significant. They were also important in the fields of culture, the press and domestic politics. Despite the political instability of the Andean country and the obstruction of the British Empire, they have left a mark that I intend to show in this article.

Keywords: Bolivia, Diplomacy, Ireland, Nationalism, Politics

1. Introduction

There is a broad consensus in academia on the low level of interest within Irish studies towards the Diasporas which settled in the southern hemisphere. While of course the largest number of Irish went to North America (both United States and Canada) and the most significant research and financial resources are understandably devoted to that migration, it has led to decreased resources being devoted to other geographical areas of importance, notably Australia, New Zealand and, particularly, South America.

Among recent academic publications we find Tim Fanning's work about the nineteenth century (2017) and the extremely valuable volumes by Dermot Keogh (2016 and 2021). However, both authors being Irish inevitably means that their perspective is from the island of Ireland. I hope that my presentation will prove an incentive to other academics, from both north and the south, to delve deeper, perhaps also through collaborative work would of course be even more fruitful.

In this paper, I intend to comment on the Irish who settled in Bolivia, their arrival to the South American country, their composition as well as their transnational political participation in support of the Irish republican cause. My hypothesis is that the activity of the Irish migrants in the latter regard was conditioned by certain factors – economic, quantity, political commitment, financial situation – and by guidelines sent by the Irish Government delegation in Buenos Aires. British opposition on the ground to the activity of these Irish individuals was undoubtedly also a factor.

2. *The Historical Context and the Irish*

The Republic of Bolivia obtained its independence from Spain on 6 August 1825, with the help of the General Simón Bolívar's armies. During the first years, the country struggled between civil wars and external invasions until 1837 when it joined Peru to form a loose confederation which was soon dissolved and which led to a military confrontation. However, the most serious challenge came from Chile in the Pacific War (1879) which ended with the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1904. Under the treaty, Bolivia's entire coastal territory became Chilean possession. While Bolivia was granted a right of commercial transit through Chilean ports, the country lost its full access to the sea and has since remained a landlocked state.

Between 1880 and 1900 the Conservative Party ruled the country and the mineral industry was the principal economic activity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the production of tin became more valuable than silver around the time that the Liberal Party took power. The owners of the mines, known as "the tin barons", became wealthy at a fast pace and enjoyed great political influence. Railway construction and the general modernization of the country took place under the latter government. In 1920 the Republican Party won the elections and social political parties with a Marxist orientation came into being. Enactment of the first labor law responded to the first social revolt. The 1929 Great Depression led to a sharp fall in influence among the political class and was followed by the outbreak of the Chaco War.

Irish migration was scarce and probably indirect. Bolivia might not have been a first option since it was distant, little known and, in contrast to many of the neighboring countries, it lacked an active policy to promote migration. It is highly probable that the vast majority of the migrants who arrived directly to Bolivia did so to work in British mining companies, which had first become active in Chile and later expanded to Bolivia¹. It was known that the British companies were in search of Irish managers and other mid-ranking employees. That was the case, for example, with the railway companies in Argentina, but it was the general practice throughout the empire.

Migrants also arrived from Argentina. Patrick Boland was one of them. Son of Matthew Boland, born in King's County (Cloghan, Ireland), Patrick had travelled from Australia in the ship "Light Brigade", around 1875. He was born in Amaroo (Australia) and was the youngest of Matthew's offspring. His first destination as a migrant was the USA and then Argentina, to finally settle in Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia) during the first decades of the twentieth century. There he dealt in mechanics and ice selling using a machine that he had designed for that purpose. Considering such humid and warm weather, he must have been a successful salesman².

According to the 1900 National Census, there were only 29 British residents in total: 27

¹ Frank Egan himself, representative of the Irish Republican Nationalism in Chile and close to the cause through his relationship with Ginnell, made his fortune in the mining industry (Cruset 2021).

² Interview with Julia Bowland carried out by Elisa Boland for *The Southern Cross*, March 2006.

men and 2 women, although it is not possible to determine which were of Irish origin. While the total foreign population was 2654, the United Kingdom's subjects were as few as 1%. This number drops notably when referring to women: 2 British women out of 374 foreigners. At the time, the overall population was 1.766.451.

3. *The O'Connors*

The arrival of the Irish migrants to Southern Latin America is multi-causal but their participation as mercenaries in the service of Simón Bolívar's army was one of the main reasons for choosing that destination. The long process towards independence, of what later would become Great Colombia, started on 20 July 1810. In 1813 Napoleon again recognized Ferdinand VII as King of Spain who returned to the country in 1814. In order to suppress the insurgent movement Ferdinand sent in 1815 Pablo Morillo with an army of 10.000 men in order to reconquer Nueva Granada, which had rebelled against the Crown and declared its independence.

Bolívar, who was at the head of the revolt and was defeated by the royalist forces, had to go into exile in Jamaica. There, and with little hope, he prepared his well-known letter dated 6 September 1815. At the time, the only place on the continent that still enjoyed independence was Río de la Plata. Bolívar, without any resources, contacted John Devereaux, who committed to recruit soldiers to the cause and send them to the other side of the Atlantic in exchange of a payment. Within that group, that later became an Anglo-Irish troop, was Francis Burdett O'Connor.

Burdett O'Connor born in Cork in 1791, he joined the cause of independence of the former Spanish. After taking part in the Battle of Junín, where the Royal army was finally defeated, he decided to settle in the recently created Republic of Bolivia and acquired citizenship of the new state by naturalization. There, O'Connor helped General Sucre to annex the region of Tarija and, for this reason, was appointed governor of the new territory. From this position and through a proclamation published in 1827, he tried to promote Irish migration.

Tarija, 24 de junio de 1827
Mis queridos compatriotas:

Después de nueve años de luchas y penurias, he tenido el placer de ver estas hermosas provincias libres del yugo hispánico y gozado de una forma republicana de gobierno, de verdadera felicidad e independencia. El país es bello: hay gran abundancia de la mejor tierra del mundo, pero muy pocos hombres y mujeres para cultivarla.

He escogido esta provincia como mi residencia; aquí quiero fundar la colonia de New Erin – tan verde, fértil y floreciente – como nuestra pobre tierra nativa. La provincia de Tarija es mucho más grande que Irlanda y nuestra colonia puede ser tan extensa como el más grande condado de allí o quizá como dos condados.

Hombres de Irlanda: aquí está el sitio de todos los que quieren hacer de New Erin un hogar. Los más pobres de mis compatriotas serán recibidos por mí con los brazos abiertos, ellos son mi carne y mi sangre. Y después de trabajar corto tiempo para hacerse una casa, ellos serán provistos con una propia con todo lo necesario, una vaca, un caballo, un cerdo, patos y gallinas y semillas en el depósito. Esa casa y tierras será para ellos para siempre y no habrá hombre con el poder de expulsarlos. No se les pedirá renta, más que una ayuda en algún día de apuro para el bien general. Ellos serán sus propios amos para siempre.³

³ Although the letter is most likely in English, the source found is in Spanish at: Gumucio 2016, 162. "My dear compatriots: After nine years of struggle and hardship, I have had the pleasure of seeing these beautiful provinces free

Being considered one of the liberators, he was given a pension of 5.000 pesos by the Bolivian Congress as a reward for his services (Murray 2006b). Tim Fanning describes him by saying: “he seems to be the image itself of the Victorian mid-class respectability. In his last years, he was a fervent Catholic and a famous Bolivian hero who had served as a Commander in Chief” (2017, 354).

Only one child survived from his marriage to Francisca Ruyloba, Hercilla O’Connor. She married Charles Adolphe Adhemar D’Arlachy and they had several children, Tomás O’Connor D’Arlach among them, who was born in Tarija in 1853. A lawyer, journalist, poet and politician, Tomás wrote Tarija’s anthem, the region that his grandfather had annexed to Bolivia. He kept the Irish tradition of placing his mother’s surname in first place, followed by that of the father.

One of his poems was published in MacManus’ nationalist newspaper, *Fianna*⁴. More than a political text, the poem reflects on the fragility of life with a pessimist tone and it recalls the deaths of Tomás’ mother and daughter.

De esas tardes grises la fatal melancolía,
 Y el recuerdo persistente de mi hija y madre muertas.
 Y el recuerdo de mis yertas
 Esperanzas e ilusiones,
 ¡Ay! En esas tardes grises
 Me destroza el corazón! (*Fianna*, January 1912)⁵

4. *The Nationalist Connection*

From the first decades of the twentieth century, a small group of Irish people in Bolivia were committed to the Irish cause in different ways and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. They were organized and directed by Jaspas Nicolls, better known as Gaspar, as he preferred to be called as soon as he arrived in a Spanish-speaking country. His leadership was not accepted by all owing to difficulties which arose and which were explained by Nicolls himself in his numerous letters.

Nicolls had already gained experience as a secretary in Ireland and, once in Bolivia, he continued working in a similar administrative position. He lived in Oruro and was hired by a Bakelite

from the Hispanic yoke and enjoyed a republican form of true happiness and independence. The country is beautiful: there is a great abundance of the best soil in the world, but very few men and women to cultivate it. I have chosen this province as my residence; here I wish to found the New Erin colony – as green, fertile and flourishing – as our poor native soil. The province of Tarija is much larger than Ireland, and our colony may be as large as the largest county there, or perhaps as large as two counties. Men of Ireland: here is the place for all those who want to make New Erin a home. The poorest of my countrymen will be welcomed by me with open arms, they are my flesh and blood. And after working a short time to make a house for themselves, they will be provided with a house of their own with everything they need, a cow, a horse, a pig, ducks and chickens and seeds in the storehouse. That house and land shall be theirs forever and no man shall have the power to drive them out. No rent shall be asked of them but a help in some day of trouble for the general good. They will be their own masters forever”. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

⁴ There are two important newspapers among Irish immigrants to the Southern Cone: *The Southern Cross* and *Fianna*. The former was founded in 1875 and had the largest circulation. It was founded by Bishop Dillon and, from 1896, was edited by William Bulfin, father of Eamon. The *Fianna* began publication in 1912 under the editorship of Patrick McManus, William’s brother-in-law and Eamon’s uncle, and was radically nationalist.

⁵ From those grey afternoons, the fatal melancholy / And the persistent memories of my dead mother and daughter / And the memories of my frozen stiff / Hopes and illusions / Oh! In those grey afternoons / It breaks my heart!

mine⁶, but it closed down in 1918. As a result, Nicolls' financial situation collapsed dramatically. Although this unfortunate event gave him more free time to fight for the Irish cause, it also prevented him from buying the propaganda material that was sent to him from Buenos Aires.

In September 1920 Laurence Ginnell settled in the city of Buenos Aires. He had been sent from Dublin by the provisional government and he was asked to perform several duties: informal diplomacy,⁷ selling of a patriot bond to finance the cause, advertising and intelligence in South America – with special focus on Argentina. These activities were already being carried out by Eamon Bulfin, the son of William Bulfin, who was well-remembered for his participation in the 1916 Easter Rising. The incorporation of Laurence Ginnell was intended to reinforce the strategic value of support for the Irish cause from Argentina itself and from the Irish-Argentine diaspora. Ginnell was convinced of the importance of networking and the synergies that could be derived from it. For this reason, he tried to foster links with Irish community leaders in Chile, Uruguay and Bolivia, with uneven success.

The political and economic situation in Bolivia was complex as indeed was the position faced by the Irish migrants. They were few, spread over a vast territory with ineffective means of communication, they showed different degrees of commitment to the cause and, finally but not least importantly, they faced the serious obstacle of British influence and power on the ground.

In 1906 “The Boys” in Dublin had helped Nicolls to emigrate to Butte (Montana, the USA)⁸ and work there. However, for some unknown reason he preferred to head south. When he lost his job and faced a critical financial situation, he wrote to Ginnell: “To be frank, I am penniless at the present time” (11 October 1921).⁹ Considering that only his family knew about his economic problems, he also called for discretion. On top of that, the British warned him that he would never get a job and should therefore leave the country. He also received a clear warning from the British Charge d’Affaires: he would be taken to court or directly to jail due to his connections with the Irish Volunteers. In Nicolls’ own words: “English railway company here declared that Sinn Feiners were worse than Germans” (25 October 1921) and if an Irish man was in need of a job, then he would be asked to sign a declaration claiming not to be a supporter of Sinn Féin’s ideas¹⁰.

In his private life, Nicolls married a Bolivian woman, Francisca Guzmán in Chayanta, Potosí, on 7 August 1912. From the marriage certificate it was possible to obtain additional information: he had been born in 1880, his parents were Juan A. Nicolls and Maria Laffa and he was an engineer by profession. He had three children: Eduardo Patricio in 1914, Evelina Constans in 1916 and, once in Oruro, Eduardo Donaldo (Eamonn)¹¹ in 1919. His strong national bonds and deep feeling towards his native country were well demonstrated with the

⁶ It must have been tin and not Bakelite.

⁷ Traditionally, diplomatic activity is considered to be an attribute of the Nation-State sovereignty. At the time, Ireland could not be strictly defined as such. This is the reason for using here the concept of informal diplomacy.

⁸ The city of Butte in Montana was born in 1864 as a mining camp and, thanks to copper extraction, it rapidly grew throughout the nineteenth century. As a result, it became a promising destination for migrants, especially for Irish ones. Nowadays, the proportion of American-Irish citizens per capita in Butte is larger than in any other city in the USA (Pocock 2017).

⁹ All these dates correspond to correspondence between Ginnell and Nicolls. National Library of Ireland

¹⁰ From 1900 to 1929, 40% of the foreign capitals – the British ones among them – was absorbed by the railway. By 1925, more than 50% of the railways tracks had been installed by British capitals (Contreras 1993).

¹¹ Although the names were translated into Spanish, the Irish version was also included in the birth certificate (between parenthesis). However, it was not common practice and it could have been a deferent on behalf of the priest in charge of the baptism.

birth of his daughter Evelina. She was baptized on 29 September 1916 and her Godmother was Countess Constance Markievicz¹². We will probably never know how he managed to get that privilege, but it is clear that he retained close connections to Nationalists in Ireland.

As regards the rest of the Irish migrants in Bolivia, in his report to Ginnell he says there were sixteen whom he knew or had contact with.

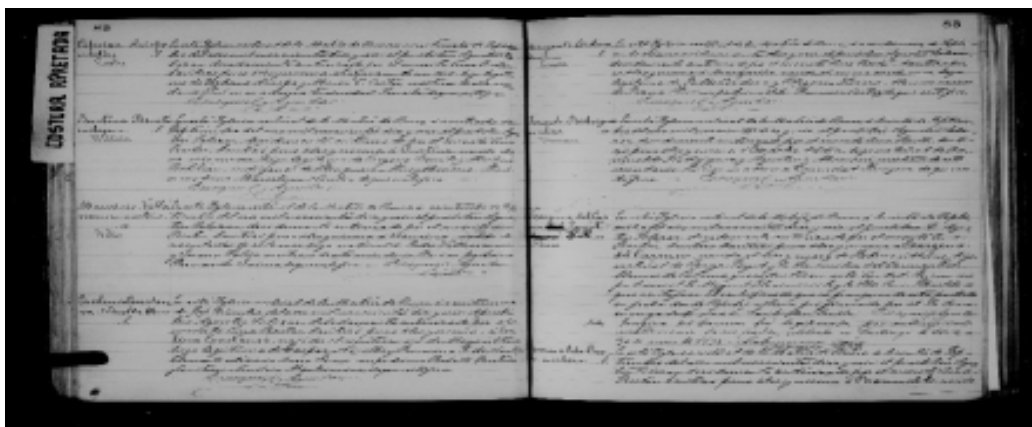


Figure 1 – Baptisms Book, Matriz de Oruro Church, book number 1916-1919, 82

5. *The Nicolls' Report or The Sixteen from Bolivia*

Nicholls had promised the delegation in Buenos Aires a detailed report on the situation in Bolivia, containing a list of the Irish people settled in that country with whom he had contact or was aware of. The information provided would be related to the cause and level of commitment (27 September 1921).

From 1906 to 1926, the migrants' names were: D.E. O'Kelly, C.J. Bowden, J. Kennedy, J. Vize, A.B. Casey, G.O. O'Shaughnessy, E. Nicolls and J. Nicolls. As regards M. MacCarthy, T. Donaghy and Burns, they had arrived in Bolivia fairly recently and, up to the date of the report, they had not taken action of any kind. Mrs Ugarte was a resident in Cochabamba. Mr Ryan and Mr Donaghy were not taken into account considering their advanced age.

O'Kelly was a Gaelic League's enthusiastic member and an Irish Language National Fund's contributor but he had remained inactive until 1916. As was the case of Ireland and many other places, the Rising and subsequent British repression fanned the flames of nationalism. As a consequence, O'Kelly became a donor to the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents' Fund, although his fluent Spanish was his major contribution to the cause. Within a group whose members could barely keep a conversation in that language, he was considered "a fine Spanish and good Irish scholar", "and actually prepared the Spanish version of the appeal" for the Bonne subscriptions for raise money (*ibidem*). However, the British Minister's threats together with O'Kelly's fear of having his businesses somehow affected, obliged him to abandon not only the translation work but also his commitment to the cause.

¹² Baptisms Book, Matriz de Oruro Church, book number 1916-1919, 82.

O'Kelly was not the only one. The fear of retaliation was also shared by Vize, Kennedy and Bowden. Bowden was the Dublin Priest Bowden's brother, but since his arrival in South America he had lost contact with Ireland.

Both Casey in La Paz and O'Shaughnessy in Cochabamba had on a few occasions contributed economically at Nicolls' request, but the truth is that they were not very active in the movement.

Nicolls sadly complained about his own brother's lukewarm attitude:

My own brother Eamon, who is stationed in La Paz, is an old member of the Republican Party, but he is exceedingly apathetic or indolent when it comes to working in any way for Ireland. He is, and has been for several years, one of those who causes most unnecessary trouble by his slackness in the matter of replying to letters and supplying information which it is power to obtain. He could do a good deal if he exerted himself, but he does very little indeed. (*Ibidem*)

He also expressed his discomfort with other migrants who showed affection towards the motherland and gave fervent patriotic speeches but who failed to make any practical contribution.

In the report, he added that he had been unable to locate Mrs Ugarte, who seemed to be a strong supporter of Sinn Féin. Although he knew she was somewhere in the Department of Cochabamba he was not able to get the exact address. Long distances, inadequate means of transport and communication made the organization of the nationalist campaign much more complex.

A new list with twenty Irish and six Irish-American people living in Bolivia was sent on 28 October 1921. The idea was that Ginnell would send each a letter to ask for some collaboration, in particular to buy the bond.

More information is derived from the same message: Mrs Clara Eagar de Ugarte had previously written to Nicolls to express sympathy with the cause, although she admitted not being well informed about developments in Ireland. This lack of information is fairly understandable considering that Ugarte, as were Casey and O'Shaughnessy, descended from Irish parents but they all were born in England.

Thus, he concluded by saying: "From the foregoing you can form an idea of the various types which constitute 'the Irish of Bolivia' to-day" (*ibidem*).

6. *The Issue of the Congress in Paris*

1918 was an important year in the global context and, particularly, in Ireland. 11 November marked the end of the First World War leaving behind death and destruction. The British army had nearly lost seven hundred thousand soldiers, most of them young men who might have contributed to national economic development. Without doubt, a major humanitarian tragedy and the beginning of the end of the British Empire.

Once the prisoners from the Easter Rising's were granted amnesty, London convened parliamentary elections in Ireland. Sinn refused to take part in an election to the Parliament in Westminster and decided to form a national parliament in Dublin. After a huge victory, the First Dáil was established.

On 28 June 1919, The Treaty of Versailles was signed. American president Woodrow Wilson had presented "The Fourteen Points", a list of principles for a postwar peace settlement. The declaration served as a moral base for later negotiations on what actions or reparations would be imposed on the defeated.

The fifth point referred to decolonization and the right of the self-determination of people:

5. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

Although this principle was applied to the defeated – Poland gained independence and the nationalities within the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empire had to be considered – the British Empire, one of the clear winners, was treated on an unequal and partial basis.

However, the Dáil saw the possibility of making the Irish cause known through an international congress in which delegates on behalf of the Diasporas would participate.

On 9 September 1921, Nicolls received this telegram:

President de Valera and Ministry of Dáil Eireann hereby invite five delegates from the Irish in Bolivia as delegates to the Irish Race Conference to be opened Paris or Dublin January 21st., 1922. We entrust arrangements for the Bolivian Delegation to you.

Not only did Nicolls send out the invitation among the small group but also ordered its translation into Spanish to be later distributed to Tomás, Hugo and Amable O'Connor d'Árlach, all General O'Connor descendants, who had fought in Bolivia's War of Independence. Hugo had already visited the office of the Irish delegation in Buenos Aires.

Nicolls now faced a serious problem:

I presume that when the members of the Irish Government invited five delegates they based their calculation upon the amount of financial support which have been received from the Bolivian Group in former years. It is true that in that respect Bolivia did far better, not only relatively but positively, than others countries where Irishmen are far more numerous [...] But from my report you will see [...] we could never have been entitled to such heavy representation as that suggested; to-day, when we are doing nothing for Ireland, I doubt that we are entitled to any representation at all. (27 September 1921)

Moreover, in a letter dated 23 September, Nicolls had already explained that only two or three people had enough money to travel. On top of that, everyone was very busy with their business while others showed no interest in participating.

7. Intelligence, Propaganda and Lobbying

As already said, the Delegation in Buenos Aires undertook multiple activities including intelligence, advertising and lobbying¹³.

The activity of intelligence was highly important. It was vital to gather the most information possible about the enemy – Britain – which had such global influence. It was carried out by the members of the diaspora who reported to the delegations. This explains why Nicoll's contribution was crucial: he had worked as a secretary in Ireland before migrating and he was extremely precise when collecting information and sending the news. To assist him in his task, he was given a significant amount of money to purchase a typewriter in order to guarantee a regular supply of reports (12 October 1921).

¹³ It was also of huge importance the sale of the patriot bond in order to meet the expenditures of the new provisional government.

On enquiry from Nicolls about the use of a code to keep correspondence confidential to answer the cablegrams, he is told that there is none, but is advised to write via the United States if it is not urgent (13 September 1921).

The large majority of the correspondence was written in English and was sent by mail. The legend “confidential” was added on the envelope if Ginnell was the only one allowed to read its contents (9 September 1921). In cases of urgency, letters were replaced by telegrams, which were written in Spanish, probably with the aim of facilitating the task of the telegraphist.

As regards propaganda, a circular and pamphlets would be distributed. The idea was to make the Irish nationalist cause public known in the local press. The delegation was asked to become an “information agency”, mainly because Bolivian newspapers lacked their own correspondents and, therefore, only could reproduce news published in Argentina and Chile¹⁴ (30 September 1921).

Lobbying was of utmost importance to create alliances among countries with the aim of countering British power and influence. In the region, due to the international division of labour, Britain had an almost symbiotic relationship with the nation-states. British presence spread across nearly all social and economic spheres with the consequent loss of national autonomy (Cruset 2006 and 2009).

One rule for any successful negotiation is to know who is on the other side; internal political stability is always essential. The problem was that the Bolivian unstable context made lobbying very hard.

However, thanks to Gaspar’s contacts in La Paz, he managed to get a cover letter for Ginnell addressed to Jaime Freyre. Other potential recipients were José María Escalier and Daniel Salamanca, who were supporters of the Republican Party and with great influence within it. Despite the good relationship with Hugo O’Connor, it was not possible to ask him to obtain the letters since he was a member of the Liberal Party and such a request would not therefore have been considered.

8. *Conclusion*

Since the 1918 elections in Ireland, the provisional government, in general, and De Valera, in particular, concentrated their efforts on internationalizing the Irish cause as a way of countering the British Empire. De Valera himself started a tour of the USA with the aim of disseminating the message as widely as possible.

In this respect, the diaspora was crucial. But the migrant population was not homogeneous: they were spread across different countries and their political ideas were not uniform. However, there was always a hard nationalist group willing to commit to the cause, even when that involved putting at risk their wealth, business or their physical safety.

For this reason, Laurence Ginnell along with his wife Alice were sent to Buenos Aires to cooperate with Eamon Bulfin. This city became the “beachhead” to go to the interior of the country and neighbouring countries.

The existing migrant group in Bolivia had arrived at different times and was heterogeneous in terms of interests and goals. Ginnell found it difficult to work with them and, in the end, the results were meager. Bolivia’s economic dependency on Britain deprived them of autonomy and capacity for action.

¹⁴ To expand on how Great Britain collected information in the region, see Cruset 2021.

While the results of Nicolls' activities were meagre, and virtually irrelevant, his efforts must be recognized and studied.

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