

William Cotter Irish officer in Dom Pedro's army of imperial Brazil

Within the ambit of the Brazilian scheme to encourage European immigration, mercenaries and colonists were recruited in the 1820s in Germany and Ireland. In 1823 the German governments banned emigration to Brazil to thwart the enterprises of Gregor von Schäffer, a colonel in Brazil who had enlisted as many as 2,000 soldiers and 5,000 colonists from the northern and western German regions. Dom Pedro then turned to Ireland, with equally poor results.

William Cotter, an Irish-born colonel in the service of the Brazilian army, proved as unscrupulous as Schäffer. He was sent to Ireland in October 1826 and on arrival in Cork he hired between 2,400 and 2,800 Irish farmers with no military experience of any kind. The number of immigrants who sailed from Cork to Brazil (Rio, Espírito Santo, and São Paulo) in ten ships totalled 3,169 passengers, comprising 2,450 men, 335 women, 123 young men and women, and 230 children. Most were army recruits who enlisted because the contract promised them pay and allowances equal to one shilling per day plus victuals, as well as a grant of fifty acres of land after five years of service in the army.

They arrived in Rio de Janeiro between December 1827 and January 1828. Learning that the men would be press-ganged into the Imperial army and realising that Cotter's promises were a bunch of lies, they complained to the British ambassador, Robert Gordon, who lodged a strongly-worded protest but to no avail. Fortunately the diplomat did not give up and continued to apply pressure on the Brazilian government on the Irishmen's behalf. This resulted in minor improvements in their situation and allowed most to refuse enlistment. Eventually, less than four hundred of them joined the Imperial army and any plans for creating an Irish Legion had to be abandoned. Too few to become a separate unit, the Irishmen were integrated into the Third (German) Battalion of Grenadiers. They were thus integrated with a band of men who were equally unhappy with their lot.

War with Argentina over the 'Banda Oriental' (present-day Uruguay) had broken out in 1826 but the Irishmen never made it to the front. In 1827 Argentina and the rebellious province of Banda Oriental defeated the Brazilian forces. The British mediated the conclusion of the conflict, and the province became the independent state of Uruguay. The Irish remained in Rio de Janeiro on garrison duty, but living conditions were precarious and many died of diseases. Applications for medicines directed to the Brazilian officials fell on deaf ears. Doctors Dixon and Coates of the British Legation provided medicines for the sick, largely at their own expense.

Enslaved Africans, - called *moleques* - who formed the majority of the population of the Imperial capital, profoundly disliked the German and Irish mercenaries. As they were themselves the poorest class of people in Brazil, they took a fiendish delight in tormenting the Irish at every opportunity, calling them 'escravos brancos (white slaves)'. There were constant scuffles and brawls in the streets. The Irish were unarmed, and when they were attacked by the slaves they had only sticks and their fists with which to defend themselves.

On 15 March 1828, men, women, and children, 101 families in all of the Cork emigrants, left Rio on the *Victoria* for Salvador, a town on the Atlantic coast. They arrived on 28 March and on 3 August settled as farm labourers in Taperoa, near Valença. For those who remained in Rio, the sorry saga came to an end when in June 1828 seventy or eighty Irishmen serving in the Third Grenadier Battalion mutinied. The mutineers took to the streets, where many Irish civilians swelled their ranks. Alcohol was flowing freely in a matter of minutes and there was an orgy of destruction in the centre of Rio, where enslaved Africans took advantage of the chaos to settle scores with the hated foreigners. In desperation, the authorities issued arms to the civilian population, including the slaves. Ferocious street combat followed and lasted for a whole day and a night. Eventually, the mutineers withdrew to their barracks. Brazilian troops were rushed to the capital and the authorities asked the British and French naval commanders to land sailors and marines to help them. On 12 and 13 June the rebel barracks were put under siege. The episode ended in carnage, with as many as 150 soldiers of fortune, both German and Irish, killed during the mutiny.

Many of the military and civilian Irish recruited by William Cotter were repatriated in July 1828 and at least 1,400 of them returned to Britain and Ireland. The voyage home was organised at the insistence of Robert Gordon and was paid for by the Brazilian government. Perhaps as many as four hundred others remained in Brazil as farmers and eventually settled in the southern provinces of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. This leaves some six hundred Irish immigrants unaccounted for, most of whom probably met their death in South America.

The emperor Dom Pedro blamed the entire incident on the minister for war, Barbozo, whom he accused of inciting the mutiny and doing nothing to suppress it. Barbozo was dismissed from office. There were no further accounts of Colonel William Cotter.

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References

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