

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

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**Ambrose [Ambrosio] O'Higgins (c. 1721-1801),
governor and captain-general of Chile, later viceroy of Peru**



Ambrosio O'Higgins (c. 1721-1801)
(Diego Barros Arana, *Historia general de Chile*, 1999)

O'Higgins, Ambrose [Ambrosio] (c. 1721-1801), governor and captain-general of Chile, later viceroy of Peru, and probably the eighteenth-century Irish emigrant who attained the highest position in the Spanish empire. Son of Charles O'Higgins and Margaret O'Higgins of Ballinarty, County Sligo, and later of Summerhill, County Meath. Ambrose O'Higgins was educated in Ireland, with an early instruction in mathematics, and later he was trained to become a surveyor or draughtsman.

O'Higgins went to Spain around 1751 and worked for the Irish merchant firm of Butler in Cádiz, on whose behalf he undertook a commercial journey to South America in 1756. He visited his younger brother William, who was living in Asunción, Paraguay, with a wife and two children. In 1761 Ambrose O'Higgins was back in Spain, where he joined the army as 'ingeniero delineador' (engineer draughtsman, with the rank of lieutenant). Three years later he was sent again to South America as assistant to the military governor of Valdivia, the Irishman John Garland. On his first journey across the Andes, O'Higgins conceived the idea of improving the route by constructing a chain of brick-built shelters, and by 1766 an year-round postal service was operating between the Atlantic coast and Chile. He returned to Spain and wrote the *Description of the Realm of Chile*, a memorandum containing recommendations about the indigenous population, agriculture, trade, and administration.

Again in Chile in 1770, Ambrose O'Higgins was named captain, lieutenant-colonel, and field-marshal. In the 1770s his troops were engaged in wars with the Llanos and Pehuenches, indigenous people of the region, and he was twice wounded. In 1780 he was appointed commandant-general of the Spanish army in Chile, defending the town of Concepción against the attacks of the British army. O'Higgins' highest titles were attained in 1787 as governor and captain-general of Chile, and in September of 1795 as viceroy of Peru. He was also granted the titles of Baron of Ballinarty (of questionable Irish origin) and Marquis of Osorno by the King of Spain. Among his most important achievements was the abolition in 1789 of the

cruel 'encomienda' system, whereby landowners kept indigenous labourers in conditions close to slavery. He also pushed reforms in the Catholic church to benefit the poor, eliciting the antagonism of the reactionary Creole elite. He performed his duties as viceroy most ably for nearly five years.

Ambrose O'Higgins never married and his titles died with him. In his late fifties he had a romantic and illegitimate liaison with María Isabel Riquelme de la Barrera, an attractive eighteen-year-old Chilean woman from a well-known local family. Their son, Bernardo O'Higgins, was born in Chile and was educated by, but not with, his father, with whom he was never on intimate terms. Bernardo was a leading figure in the Chilean war of independence and is remembered as the emancipator of Chile.

Ambrose O'Higgins died on 19 March 1801 at Lima, Peru, where he was buried in the church of San Pedro.

Edmundo Murray

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