

# Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

## Thomas Charles James Wright (1799-1868), officer in Simón Bolívar's army and founder of the Ecuadorian naval school

**Wright, Thomas Charles James** (1799-1868), officer in Simón Bolívar's army and founder of the Ecuadorian naval school, was born on 26 January 1799 in Queensborough, Drogheda, County Louth, the son of Thomas Wright and Mary Montgomery. In 1810 Thomas was sent to the naval college at Portsmouth, and two years later joined the H.M.S. *Newcastle* under the command of George Stewart. He sailed in that vessel to serve with the squadron under Borlase Warren, engaged in blockading the Atlantic coast of the United States. He was promoted and went home on leave in 1817. Dating from that time Thomas Wright seems to have been under the influence of the same radical and republican ideas that had inspired the French Revolution.

In November 1817 Wright enlisted as officer in the British Legion of Bolívar. He sailed on the brigantine *Dowson* with 200 other volunteers and valuable ammunition, and after a series of delays, dangers, and adventures landed on Margarita Island off the Venezuelan coast on 3 April 1818. Nine years later, Wright and another Irishman, Harris, were the only survivors of the thirty-two officers who had left on the *Dowson*.

At Angostura (present-day Ciudad Bolívar), Wright first met Simón Bolívar, for whom he quickly developed boundless admiration. His first action was at Trapiche de Gamarra on 27 March 1819. His victory there inspired Bolívar to undertake his audacious New Granada campaign and the march across the Andes.

Wright played important roles in the battles of Pantano de Vargas and Gamesa in July 1819, and in the decisive victory at Boyacá in August of the same year, after which he was promoted to captain. In 1820 he was sent back with his Rifles regiment to the coastal plain to operate in the jungle east of the Magdalena against the Spanish forces based on Santa Marta. The battle at Ciénaga de Santa Marta on 10 November 1820 resulted in the fall of this town. Conveyed by sea to Maracaibo, the Rifles participated on 21 June 1821 in Bolívar's decisive victory at Carabobo. Cartagena was taken and the Rifles were brought in boats up the Magdalena en route to Popayán. They formed part of the contingent led by Bolívar in the second of his legendary Andean campaigns. After winning the battle at Bomboná on 7 April 1822, Wright was twice mentioned in Bolívar's order of the day for his exceptional skill and courage. From February 1822 Wright was acting lieutenant-colonel, a rank which was confirmed early in 1823, when he was serving under Sucre, who joined forces with Bolívar at Quito, Ecuador.

Wright was sent to Guayaquil in order to improvise a naval force and patrol northwards between that Ecuadorian city and Panamá. In September 1824, after Bolívar's great victory at Junín and Sucre's at Ayacucho, the Spanish made their last bid to turn the tide and sent a fleet to break the republican blockade in the Peruvian stronghold of Callao. Wright had had a busy year assuring supplies by sea for Bolívar's and Sucre's armies. He had greatly impressed Bolívar, who had appointed him commodore of the Pacific squadron that joined the patriot naval force off Callao. Trying to force their way out, the royalist ships became closely engaged with the blockaders. The brigantine *Chimborazo* sustained three water-line hits and was in collision with the ship of the line *Asia*, but by virtue of his consummate skill Wright manoeuvred himself free and avoided being driven ashore. In January 1826 Callao capitulated and Spanish rule in South America was ended. Meanwhile Wright on the *Chimborazo* had ferried Bolívar from port to port all along the liberated Pacific coast as far as the Chilean border.

Thomas Wright settled in Guayaquil in 1826, and founded the nautical school that is still functioning there. In 1828 the Peruvian government sent the corvette *Libertad* to blockade Guayaquil. Wright had studied intimately the unique swells and currents of the Gulf of Guayaquil and he used his knowledge to drive off the *Libertad*. Wright's *Guayaquileña* suffered sixty casualties out of the ninety-six men onboard.

Wright took part at sea and land in the fighting that ended with the delimitation of the Ecuador-Peru boundary, and he was specially commended by Sucre after the victory at Portada de Tarqui. Ecuador achieved independence on 8 August 1830, and Wright became one of the new republic's leading citizens. He married María de los Angeles Victoria Rico, the niece of Vicente Rocafuerte, president of Ecuador in 1835-1839 and 1843-1845. Wright converted to Roman Catholicism before the wedding. After María's death, Wright took her sister Pepita as his second wife. He was then commander of the Ecuadorian navy and governor of Guayaquil. His courage during a yellow fever epidemic in 1840 was remarkable.

A military plot in 1845 overthrew the liberal regime supported by Wright and he went into exile in Chile for fifteen years. In Chile he met and exerted a great influence upon the Ecuadorian exile Eloy Alfaro, who would be president in 1897-1913. Wright returned to Ecuador in 1860 and was involved in various liberal conspiracies against the despot Moreno. With his house still surrounded by police, Thomas Wright died on 10 December 1868.

Edmundo Murray

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