

# *Reflections on The Invisible Experience. Irish Immigrants in Peru*

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**Abstract:** *Through the study of a variety of primary sources such as letters, wills, birth, marriage, and death certificates, the author examines Irish immigration to Peru in mid nineteenth century. In this sense, McEvoy focuses on some of the most representative examples of Irish immigrants. That is, both workers and peasants who were part of one of the first migration projects to Peru and to successful immigrants such as John Patrick Gallagher O'Connor and William Russell Grace, who shortly after reaching Peru, became businessmen and prestigious professionals. By recovering Irish immigrant voices, this book reconstructs part of the story of men and women that printed their culture in Peru and contributed with the construction of modern Peru.*

**Keywords:** *Irish diaspora; immigration projects; mobilized and proletariat diaspora; assimilation; transnationalism.*

*The Invisible Experience. Irish Immigrants in Peru* was published by the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos Fondo Editorial (Lima, Peru) and launched on Monday, July 23, 2018 at the International Book Fair held in Lima. After many years of work, this book has reached the end of a long research process, and it can at last begin the work of bringing greater attention to the history of Irish immigrants in Peru, a group that has been invisible for many years, as the title suggests. Though this book gives this group of immigrants more visibility, many questions remain about their integration into Peruvian society. For this reason, I consider this work as the beginning of a broader investigation of an immigration process that is still largely uncharted.

This work would not have been possible without the valuable collaboration of the many people who provided me with information, documents, and sites essential for my research. My task for this project was to analyze various primary documents in order to assemble a narrative that reflects the Irish experience in Peru. In what follows, I would like to talk about three points central to it: firstly, I will briefly discuss the motivation behind and the origins of my research; I will then cover the main themes of the book as well as its structure; finally, I will address the representation of Irish immigration within the socio-cultural context of Peruvian studies.

The topic of immigration is of great interest to me. Most of us are products of migrations, and I, particularly, have thought extensively about why my ancestors left their country of origin for Peru, which, to them, was a distant and unknown country. As a child, I listened to somewhat idealized stories about my paternal ancestors' arrival in Peru. Later on, in my capacity as an immigrant and as a PhD student at the University of California, San Diego, I pursued my interest on this topic at an academic level. Unfortunately, there is very little work on this topic; I remember my thesis adviser telling me that I would have to conduct many years of research in order to finish my dissertation. For this reason, I focused on literary analysis (which is my area of expertise) and more specifically on the nineteenth-century

immigrant novel from the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile and Paraguay. After completing my dissertation, I became more interested in sociological questions pertaining to the study of Irish immigration in Peru. In other words, I shifted from fiction to reality and from literature to lived narrative and primary sources.

Later, I joined the Society for Irish Latin American Studies (SILAS), and as part of this research institution, I published a couple of articles in the Irish Migration Studies in Latin America (IMSLA), SILAS electronic magazine. I also presented my research at various international conferences, which gave me a channel through which I could continue working on this project. The articles published in that journal connected me with scholars and other important contacts from all over the world who kindly offered their assistance. I remember, Dr. Robert Keeler, Professor of Clackamas Community College in Oregon (United States), suggesting that I visit the Indiana Historical Society since it contained letters written by Irish immigrants with connections to Peru. Without thinking twice about it, I got on a plane, and shortly after arriving at this research institution, I was thrilled by the letter contents of the archive, which would become key for the assembling of one of my chapters.

The main focus of my book is on the characteristics that define the Irish presence in Peru. Migration is a social, often traumatic, phenomenon that involves a dimension of human displacement due to economic, political, religious and/or other forces. In this process, the immigrant experiences family separation, nostalgia and, in many cases, disappointment after being able to contrast the previously idealized world with the lived reality of the host society. It also involves living between "two worlds" ranging from cultural resistance to full assimilation. If immigration is, in many cases, a personal decision, certain expulsion factors (hunger, poverty, and wars) and attraction factors (work or land) are vital to the study of the Irish diaspora.

This book is organized thematically and divided into five chapters: The first chapter consists of a brief historical review of the Irish during major epochs of Peruvian history, including the times of Spanish rule, Peruvian independence, and the modern state. Additionally, this chapter examines the intrinsic relationship between diaspora, transnationalism, and identity. Because immigration leads to identity reconstruction, various customs, traditions, and characteristics of the culture of origin are mixed with those of the host society's. In brief, new identities are born and incorporated into the national collective memory.

The second chapter is based on the study of traditional and non-traditional archives. The intention of this chapter is to recount the lives of anonymous Irish immigrants. Birth, marriage, and death records as well as personal letters are among the documents that allow for the reconstruction of the history of the Irish immigrant. The study of these sources suggests that the invisibility of these immigrants in Peruvian society is due mainly to a lack of representation; many Irish immigrants did not become "prominent historical figures" and were instead ordinary citizens who were positioned in the middle and lower classes of Peruvian society. To demonstrate this aspect of their stratification, this section examines aspects of the daily lives of Irish immigrants in the different contexts of Peruvian national life.

The next chapter focuses primarily on the study of the Irish working class. Following the line of thought of John A. Armstrong (1976), I argue that the group of Irish immigrants who arrived in Peru between 1849 and 1853 corresponds with the "proletarian diaspora" (or diaspora of the working class, in a broader sense), since many immigrants were incorporated into the Peruvian working class as many began from the bottom of the social ladder.

Furthermore, in the absence of agricultural projects, immigrants were incorporated into domestic and industrial trade work. In addition, the archives indicate that there was, in fact, a group of Irish immigrants who left their native land during the historical period known as the Great Famine. As such, both adventurous immigrants as well as individuals seeking alternative forms of survival make up the Irish diaspora.

The fourth chapter explores the life of John Patrick Gallagher O'Connor (1801-1871), that of some of his descendants and that of William Russell Grace (1832-1904). John Patrick Gallagher O'Connor was an Irish doctor who stood out both in the field of medicine and business and who became a major landowner. William R. Grace arrived in Peru in 1851 jointly with a group of fellow nationals. These immigrants forged a successful future in Peru; however, they followed different paths: Gallagher O'Connor became well established in Peru, and both he and his future descendants participated in the construction and consolidation of the main financial and commercial institutions in the country. Meanwhile, Grace built an integrated business structure that included the commercialization of guano, sugar, cotton, and oil. His most controversial commercial and financial projects took place as negotiations on the bonds of the Peruvian state as a way of rescuing the country, which was experiencing an economic crisis exacerbated by the effects of the Pacific War (1879-1883).

The last chapter focuses on the epistolary discourse as the structural core of the narrative on the part of Irish immigrants. Letter writing was a popular discursive practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it was a form of evidencing daily life in the host society. Today these letters serve as a fundamental tool for preserving family connections and for exploring of the everyday life of the Irish immigrant. This chapter suggests that the communication triangulated between John Dowling, his brother Patrick, and his son James Edward provides personal stories that demonstrate familial solidarity as well as the socio-economic status of immigrants. The letters reflect emotions that are usually not expressed in person, a fact that allows the reader to have a better understanding of the immigrant's subjective experience. In this case, the letters show the progression of middle class immigrants who endeavored to improve their lives and achieve upward mobility through various business possibilities (first generation) and through their own professionalization (second generation).

Then, the book highlights the importance of Irish participation in various sectors of Peruvian society. From the construction of the railway, to the development of financial and social institutions of high society, and through the evolution of artistic and literary appreciation, immigrants and their descendants have amply contributed in the construction of modern Peru. Many have worked as servants, butlers, coachmen, and carpenters, while others with better education and social connections entered the high strata of society to become part of the Peruvian bourgeoisie and oligarchy.

Although many Irish immigrants in Peru did not achieve the equivalent of the "American dream," they laid the groundwork for subsequent generations to participate in the construction of modern Peru. For this reason, it is imperative to reexamine the historical processes and socio-economic structures of Peruvian society. In addition, I examine the ideologies in conflict with personal progress (main feature of capitalism), the failed modernization of the Peruvian state, and the use of cheap labor through the import of foreign labor force. Through this study, it can be noted that there was no "tragic end" since over the years spaces were created where the descendants of the Irish began to participate in the economic, political and cultural spheres, therefore contributing in the reconfiguration of new

political and economic identities.

Many had considered Irish immigration to be a historical tragedy; however, as time has progressed, this migration has begun to take on new meanings. Indeed, notions of victimization were supplanted by themes of adventure and courage; moreover, after arriving in the host country, Irish immigrants achieved full assimilation through a series of private daily practices, and many experienced horizontal and vertical intergenerational mobility. In this sense, I posit that the Irish presence in Peru is akin to a game of perceptions since its reevaluation shows that many unforeseen factors were involved in the time of departure, arrival and final settlement in Peruvian society. There is a strong emotional charge (i.e. nostalgia, the feeling of loss and the lack of belonging) involved in immigration; in contrast, Irish immigrants instituted families that initiated their gradual integration into Peruvian society through different modes of membership.

In conclusion, this book creates a bridge between the past and present by incorporating the Irish immigrant narrative into the Peruvian national imaginary. By recovering the voices of Irish immigrants, it writes part of the history of men and women who, with their choices and actions, made their mark on Peruvian society.

### **Works Cited**

Armstrong, John A. "Mobilized and Proletarian Diaspora". *The American Political Science Review*, 70 (2) 1976. 393-408.