

## *Relations Between Chile and Ireland: A Story of Four Moments*

### *A relação entre o Chile e a Irlanda: Uma história de quatro momentos*

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to carry out a historical reconstruction of four key moments in the relationship between Chile and Ireland. Basically, it seeks to highlight the Irish contribution to our country in three fundamental fields: political, military, economic and religious. This article is historical in nature and aims to highlight Irish contributions through four key historical moments, which, according to the author, are the most interesting and revealing within this relationship. The methodology used is secondary sources under the selection criterion if they mention Irish people and their descendants in the history of Chile.*

**Keywords:** *Chile; Ireland; Contributions; Relations; History.*

**Resumo:** *Este artigo tem como propósito realizar uma reconstrução histórica em quatro momentos-chave da relação entre o Chile e a Irlanda. Basicamente, busca-se destacar a contribuição irlandesa em nosso país em três áreas fundamentais: política, militar, econômica e religiosa. Este artigo tem um caráter histórico e pretende ressaltar as contribuições irlandesas através de quatro momentos históricos chave, que, segundo o autor, são os mais interessantes e reveladores dentro desta relação. A metodologia utilizada são fontes secundárias, sob o critério de seleção se mencionam irlandeses e seus descendentes na história do Chile.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Chile; Irlanda; contribuições; relações; história.*

## Introduction

The Irish contribution in Chile, although not as numerous as in other Latin American countries such as Argentina, has left a significant mark in various areas, especially in politics, military, economic and religious matters. These four fundamental pillars allow us to observe how Irish immigration has influenced the development of the Chilean nation throughout its history. This article is historical in nature and aims to highlight Irish contributions through four key historical moments, which, according to the author, are the most interesting and revealing within this relationship. I understand historical moment as a specific period in time that is characterized by significant events, processes, or changes that have a lasting impact on society, culture, politics, or the economy.

To begin, it is important to note that, although relations between Chile and Ireland are close, there is a paucity of information, especially regarding the Irish roots of Chileans (Cruset 2023; Soto Zárate, 2022; Griffin 2006). The information available about the Irish in Chile is usually scattered and, for the most part, is addressed tangentially in national literature. This means that information about the contribution of the Irish in Chile is not easily accessible. One way to approach this relationship is through genealogy, looking for traces of Irish ancestry, especially in military contexts, during the Spanish colonial period and the independence processes, as well as in the religious sphere, considering the arrival of Irish priests in the second half of the 20th century. Therefore, an effective method to investigate the presence of the Irish in Chile has been the genealogical and biographical method. Many of these biographical studies, some of which I have written for the *Society for Irish Latin American Studies* (SILAS), have been fundamental in this sense (Bustamante Olguín 2008). Although Irish immigration in Chile did not have as significant an impact as in Argentina (Murray, 2004; Wall, 2017), numerous Irish and their descendants played an important role at various moments in Chilean history (Soto Zárate, 2022; Bustamante, 2019). In that sense, it is necessary to carry out a study through interviews with all the descendants of Irish who exist in our country. This would be very useful to deepen the historical reconstruction of the Irish contribution in Chile and its descendants.

Consequently, the scarce presence of Irish people in our country effectively means that the sources are quite limited to carry out a historical reconstruction of their contribution. However, some notable Irish stood out in various fields, which ultimately gives some importance to Irish migration in Chilean history. It is likely that, given the geographical

conditions of Chile, with the Andes mountain range acting as a natural border, access has been much more difficult compared to the neighboring country of Argentina.

My interest is to be able to make a reconstruction around these three pillars mentioned above, and that in some way this article serves as a reference for researchers interested in the relationship between Chile and Ireland. Therefore, one of the safest approaches to address this is through this essay, supported by secondary sources, that is, specialized bibliography that tangentially mentions the Irish contribution in Chile.

## **1.First moment: the Spanish colonial period**

During the Spanish colonial period, several Irish figures played crucial roles in Chile, contributing significantly to the country's early history. Among them are John Clark, engineer John Garland y White, and Governor Ambrosio O'Higgins. These Irish were fundamental in the fortification of Valdivia, a crucial aspect for the defense and development of Chilean territory in those times. Ambrosio O'Higgins, in particular, stood out as governor of Osorno and promoted the arrival of Irish to that city with the aim of turning it into an industrial area. Although the colonization of Osorno faced challenges and difficulties, it marked an important milestone in the relationship between Chile and Ireland and in the history of Chilean colonization.

Ambrosio O'Higgins, who later became viceroy of Peru, is perhaps the most emblematic figure of this period. His administration was characterized by significant efforts to improve Chile's infrastructure and economy. The construction of roads and bridges, as well as the implementation of policies to encourage agriculture and industry, are testament to his lasting impact on the region. O'Higgins' influence endures in Chilean historical memory, not only for his administrative achievements, but also for his legacy through his son, Bernardo O'Higgins.

### **1.1 John Clark and the fortification of Valdivia**

John Clark was one of the first Irish to leave a mark on the history of Chile. His work in the fortification of Valdivia was fundamental for the defense of the region against external attacks, especially from pirates and privateers. Valdivia, a city located in southern Chile, was a crucial strategic point due to its geographical location and its natural port. The fortification of the

city not only protected the Spanish settlers, but also facilitated the commercial and economic development of the region (Guarda 1994).

## **1.2 John Garland and White: pioneering engineers**

The engineer John Garland y White also played an important role in the early history of Chile. Garland, a military engineer of Irish origin, was responsible for numerous infrastructure works that helped consolidate Spanish control over Chilean territory. Their contributions included the construction of fortifications, roads and bridges, which not only improved security but also facilitated trade and transportation in the region. These infrastructural improvements were crucial to the economic and social development of Chile during the colonial period.

John Garland's impact in Chile was not limited to the physical works he supervised and built. His influence also extended to the way these projects were designed and planned. Garland brought with him advanced engineering techniques and knowledge that were unknown in Chile at the time. These innovations not only increased the efficiency and durability of buildings but also served as an example and a source of learning for local engineers. Through his work, Garland helped raise the standard of engineering in Chile, establishing practices that would continue to influence the country's infrastructure long after his departure.

In addition to his technical contribution, Garland played an important role in the formation of an engineering and construction culture in Chile. As one of the first professional engineers in the country, his presence and work served to legitimize and professionalize the discipline of engineering. This was particularly significant at a time when many of the constructions were carried out by workers without formal training, relying on traditional methods and empirical experience. Garland's arrival marked a shift toward a more scientific and organized approach to infrastructure construction and development.

The fortifications built under Garland's supervision were particularly important. In a time of frequent conflicts and threats, both internal and external, these structures provided a crucial defense for local communities and Spanish colonial interests. By strengthening defenses at strategic points, Garland helped secure trade routes and settlement areas, allowing for safer and more sustained growth. His work in the construction of fortifications is a testament to the importance of military engineering in consolidating territorial control during the colonial period.

The roads and bridges built by Garland also had a significant impact on the Chilean economy. Before their arrival, many areas of the country were isolated due to a lack of adequate transportation infrastructure. This not only made trade difficult, but also limited the movement of people and resources. The roads and bridges built by Garland connected communities and markets, facilitating the exchange of goods and services. This new connectivity boosted local and regional commerce, stimulating economic growth and improving the quality of life for many people.

Garland's influence extended beyond his time in Chile. The techniques and methods he introduced continued to be used and developed by local engineers and future immigrants. Its legacy can be seen in the infrastructure that continued to be built throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, its focus on planning and durability laid the foundation for a more modern and efficient infrastructure, contributing to Chile's progress towards a more developed and connected nation.

The story of John Garland and White is an example of the impact that an individual can have on the development of a country. Through his work and innovations, Garland not only helped consolidate Spanish control in Chile, but also facilitated the country's economic and social growth. His legacy is a reminder of the importance of engineering and infrastructure in the development of a nation. Today, his influence can still be seen in Chile's infrastructure, a lasting testament to his contribution to the country.

### **1.3 Ambrosio O'Higgins: governor and visionary**

Ambrosio O'Higgins is, without a doubt, the most prominent Irish figure in the colonial history of Chile. Born in Ballynary, Ireland, O'Higgins came to South America as a merchant and later entered Spanish military service. His talent and dedication led him to quickly rise through the ranks, and in 1788 he was appointed governor of Chile. During his administration, O'Higgins implemented a series of reforms that had a lasting impact on the region.

One of O'Higgins' most notable achievements was the construction of the Camino Real, a network of roads that connected the main cities and towns of Chile. This infrastructure not only improved communication and trade within the country, but also facilitated the mobilization of troops and resources in times of conflict. Additionally, O'Higgins promoted the construction of bridges and the improvement of ports, which further strengthened the Chilean economy.

O'Higgins' vision was not limited to improving infrastructure. As governor, he also cared about education and public health. Understanding the importance of an educated and healthy population for the development of a prosperous society, O'Higgins promoted the creation of schools and hospitals in various regions of Chile. These institutions not only improved the living conditions of Chileans, but also laid the foundations for a more balanced and sustainable development of the country.

In the economic sphere, O'Higgins implemented policies that promoted the growth and diversification of the Chilean economy. He promoted agriculture and livestock, introducing new techniques and crops that increased productivity. In addition, it promoted the development of mining, a sector that would become one of the main sources of wealth for Chile in the centuries to come. Their efforts to strengthen the local economy contributed to the creation of a solid economic foundation that allowed Chile to face future challenges with greater resilience.

O'Higgins was also noted for his focus on justice and order. During his term, he carried out important reforms in the judicial system, seeking to guarantee a more efficient and equitable administration of justice. These reforms included the training of judges and officials, as well as the implementation of more transparent and accessible procedures for the population. Their commitment to justice and order contributed to the creation of a safer and more predictable environment, which in turn facilitated economic and social development.

Another relevant aspect of O'Higgins' administration was his focus on defense and security. Aware of the external and internal threats that Chilean territory faced, O'Higgins strengthened the military forces and improved fortifications at strategic points. These measures not only ensured greater protection for the population, but also consolidated Spanish control over the region. His ability to combine infrastructure with defense was a testament to his skill as a leader and strategist.

In addition to his tangible achievements, the figure of Ambrosio O'Higgins left an intangible but equally important legacy. His leadership and vision inspired future generations of Chileans, including his own son, Bernardo O'Higgins, who would become a key figure in Chile's fight for independence. Ambrosio's influence on the training of his son and on the configuration of the political and military thought of the time is undeniable. His legacy endured in the values and principles that guided the independence leaders and in the administrative and military structure that contributed to the success of Chilean independence.

O'Higgins' impact in Chile was not limited to the colonial period. The reforms and projects he implemented laid the foundation for the future development of the country. The network of roads and bridges he built continued to be a key piece of national infrastructure for many years, facilitating economic growth and regional integration. Likewise, its educational and health policies contributed to the formation of a more equitable society prepared for the challenges of the future (Bustamante Olguín 2019).

#### **1.4 Osorno and Irish colonization**

The colonization of Osorno is another example of Ambrosio O'Higgins' impact in Chile. As governor, O'Higgins promoted the arrival of Irish settlers to Osorno with the aim of developing agriculture and industry in the region. Although this effort faced numerous challenges, including conflicts with indigenous peoples and logistical difficulties, it marked an important milestone in the history of Chilean colonization.

The arrival of Irish settlers in Osorno also reflects O'Higgins' vision of a more industrialized and economically independent Chile. By promoting the immigration of skilled workers and farmers, O'Higgins sought to diversify and strengthen the local economy. Although the colonization of Osorno was a failure in its objectives, it at least laid the foundations for an effort to develop an industrial city (Bustamante Olguín 2019).

#### **1.5 Viceroyalty of Peru and the legacy of O'Higgins**

The impact of Ambrosio O'Higgins was not limited to Chile. In 1796, he was named viceroy of Peru, a position of great power and influence in the Spanish empire. During his tenure as viceroy, O'Higgins continued to promote administrative and economic reforms that benefited the entire Andean region. His focus on improving infrastructure and economic development left a lasting legacy in Peru and beyond (Bustamante Olguín 2019, 1-2).

As viceroy of Peru, O'Higgins faced a number of significant challenges, including the need to strengthen the economy and improve colonial administration. One of his first initiatives was to improve tax collection, combating corruption and ensuring that resources effectively reached the coffers of the colonial government. This measure not only increased revenue but also improved government efficiency and transparency.

O'Higgins also focused on improving infrastructure in the viceroyalty of Peru. Modeled on what he had done in Chile, he promoted the construction of roads, bridges and



canals, facilitating trade and communication in a geographically challenging region. These works not only improved the economy, but also helped to more closely integrate the various regions of the viceroyalty, promoting a sense of unity and cohesion (Barros Arana 2000).

In the economic sphere, O'Higgins promoted the development of agriculture and mining, two fundamental pillars of the Peruvian economy. He introduced advanced agricultural techniques and promoted the cultivation of products that could be exported, generating additional income for the colony. In mining, he encouraged the exploration and exploitation of new deposits, ensuring that Peru maintained its position as one of the main producers of precious metals in the Spanish empire.

O'Higgins' focus on education and health also became evident during his tenure as viceroy. He promoted the founding of schools and universities, as well as the construction of hospitals and the improvement of health services. These initiatives reflected his belief in the importance of an educated and healthy population for the sustainable development of society. By investing in education and health, O'Higgins contributed to the creation of a more solid foundation for the future progress of the viceroyalty.

In addition to his economic and administrative reforms, O'Higgins also showed notable sensitivity toward the indigenous populations of Peru. He recognized the importance of protecting their rights and improving their living conditions, promoting policies that sought to integrate indigenous communities into the colonial economy in a more fair and equitable manner. Although their efforts in this regard faced resistance and did not always achieve the desired results, they reflected a genuine commitment to social justice and equity.

Ambrosio O'Higgins' legacy also lives on through his son, Bernardo O'Higgins, who would become a key figure in Chile's fight for independence. Bernardo O'Higgins is remembered as one of the fathers of the Chilean country, and his leadership and bravery in the fight for independence are deeply linked to the influence and example of his father. The education and values instilled by Ambrosio in his son were crucial in forming the character and determination that Bernardo would show during the war of independence (Murray 2006).

The influence of Ambrosio O'Higgins on the education of his son Bernardo was not limited to values and principles. It also included a deep understanding of military strategy and the importance of efficient administration. Bernardo applied many of the lessons learned from his father into his own leadership, allowing him to play a crucial role in liberating Chile from Spanish rule and consolidating the country's independence.



The Spanish colonial period in Chile was marked by the significant contribution of several Irish figures. From the fortification of Valdivia to the administrative and economic reforms implemented by Ambrosio O'Higgins, the Irish played a crucial role in the early development of Chile. Its influence was felt in various aspects of colonial life, including defence, infrastructure and the economy. The fortification of Valdivia, for example, was an engineering work that ensured Spanish control over a strategic region, protecting sea routes and coastal settlements from possible foreign incursions.

The administrative and economic reforms implemented by Ambrosio O'Higgins transformed the colonial administration, making it more efficient and effective. These reforms not only benefited Chile, but also served as a model for other regions of the Spanish empire. The implementation of a more professional and transparent administration contributed to improving governance and laying the foundations for economic and social development.

In conclusion, the story of John Clark, John Garland and White, and Ambrosio O'Higgins is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Irish in foreign lands. Through their work and dedication, these figures not only left a lasting mark on Chilean history, but also helped forge the ties between Chile and Ireland that endure to this day. The Irish contribution during the colonial period is an integral part of Chilean history and a reminder of the country's rich multicultural heritage.

## **2.Second moment: the Independence process**

The independence process of Chile (1810-1818) also had the significant participation of Irish people. Prominent figures such as John Mackenna O'Reilly, John O'Brien and Carlos María O'Carroll joined the patriot cause. However, the most relevant figure in this context is Bernardo O'Higgins, a key leader in the Chilean independence process of Irish descent.

Bernardo O'Higgins, son of Ambrosio O'Higgins, is considered one of the fathers of the Chilean country. His leadership and bravery in the fight for independence were crucial to the success of the independence movement. O'Higgins not only stood out as a soldier, but also as a statesman, playing a fundamental role in the consolidation of independence and the formation of the new Chilean state.

The participation of these Irish in the independence process highlights the fundamental role they played in one of the most significant moments in Chilean history. His influence and

leadership in the fight for Chilean independence not only evidence his commitment to the cause, but also the deep connection between the two nations in this critical period.

### **2.1 John Mackenna O'Reilly: Engineer and strategist**

John Mackenna O'Reilly, born in Clogher, Ireland, in 1771, is one of the most prominent figures among the Irish who supported Chilean independence. Mackenna, a talented engineer and military strategist, was invited by Bernardo O'Higgins to join the Chilean independence movement. His military engineering experience and strategic skill were invaluable to the patriot forces.

Mackenna participated in several key campaigns and her role in defending the independence cause was vital. One of his most notable achievements was the fortification of the city of Valdivia, a crucial strategic position for the control of Chilean territory. In addition, Mackenna was fundamental in the organization of the Chilean Army, contributing to the formation and training of the troops that would fight for independence.

### **2.2 John O'Brien and Carlos María O'Carroll: heroes of Independence**

John O'Brien and Carlos María O'Carroll are two other Irishmen whose participation in the Chilean independence process deserves to be highlighted. John O'Brien, a native of Wexford, Ireland, arrived in South America attracted by the possibility of joining the independence struggles that were developing on the continent. In Chile, O'Brien stood out as an officer in the patriotic army, participating in various battles and demonstrating his courage and commitment to the cause (Figuerola 1904).

Carlos María O'Carroll, although less known than O'Brien and Mackenna, also played a significant role in the independence movement. Their participation in the war and their support for patriot forces reflect the spirit of solidarity that many Irish felt towards the people of Latin America who were fighting for their freedom.

### **2.3 Bernardo O'Higgins: leader and statesman**

However, it is Bernardo O'Higgins who stands out as the most emblematic figure of Irish influence on Chilean independence. Born in Chillán in 1778, the son of Ambrosio

O'Higgins, Bernardo was sent to England for his education, where he soaked up the liberal and revolutionary ideas that were ascendant in Europe at the time.

Upon his return to Chile, Bernardo O'Higgins quickly joined the independence movement. His leadership and military skill became evident in crucial battles such as Chacabuco and Maipú, where his strategies and bravery led to decisive victories for the patriot forces. These victories not only consolidated Chile's independence, but also reinforced O'Higgins' position as the undisputed leader of the new state.

As supreme director of Chile, O'Higgins implemented a series of reforms that laid the foundations for the country's modernization. He promoted education, improved infrastructure, and established institutions that strengthened the Chilean state. His vision of a free and progressive nation was fundamental to the construction of modern Chile.

## **2.4 Cultural and political connections**

The participation of the Irish in Chilean independence also had cultural and political implications. The influence of Irish ideas and values was reflected in the Chilean independence movement, contributing to the formation of a national identity that valued freedom and self-determination.

Furthermore, the connection between Chile and Ireland during this period laid the foundation for future diplomatic and cultural relations between the two countries. The shared heritage of the struggle for independence and the common values of freedom and justice continue to be an important bond between Chile and Ireland.

Chile's independence process is a crucial moment in the country's history, and the participation of Irish people such as John Mackenna O'Reilly, John O'Brien, Carlos María O'Carroll and, especially, Bernardo O'Higgins underlines the importance of the Irish influence on this historic event. His leadership, bravery and commitment to the independence cause not only contributed to the success of the movement, but also forged a lasting connection between Chile and Ireland.

The history of Chilean independence, enriched by the participation of these Irish, is a testament to the interconnectedness of freedom struggles in different parts of the world. Through their contribution, the Irish helped shape the destiny of Chile, leaving a legacy that continues to be remembered and celebrated today. This historical connection highlights the

importance of recognizing and valuing multicultural influences in the formation of nations and their identities.

### **3.Third moment: integration and trade in the nineteenth century**

During the nineteenth century, some Irish immigrants integrated into the Chilean elite through marriages to prominent women and became successful merchants. This stage highlights the evolution of the identity of the Irish in Chile, as some chose to identify themselves as British, which allowed them a better reception by the national elite.

The case of Juan Mackenna, who became a prominent member of Chilean society and a successful merchant, is a clear example of this integration. The ability of these immigrants to adapt and thrive in their new environment reflects their resilience and ability to take advantage of the opportunities available in the Chilean context.

This period is also linked to the colonial matrix of conquest societies and the racial hierarchy, in which white skin conferred social advantages. The integration of the Irish into the Chilean elite and their success in trade are framed in this context, providing an important framework for understanding the social and economic dynamics of 19th century Chile.

#### **3.1 Marriages and Strategic Alliances**

The integration of the Irish into nineteenth century Chilean society was not an isolated process, but was deeply influenced by social and marital strategies that facilitated their acceptance into the local elite. These marriages not only offered social and economic stability to immigrants, but also allowed them to form strategic alliances that were beneficial to their business ventures.

One of the most interesting aspects of this phenomenon is how these marriages helped consolidate the position of Irish immigrants in Chilean society. By marrying prominent women of the Chilean elite, the Irish were able to access social and economic networks that would have been inaccessible to them otherwise. These marriage alliances also helped smooth out cultural differences and facilitate the integration of immigrants into Chilean social life. Here the names of the Irish Timothy Cadagan, James Glover, James Hogan, John MacKenna, Peter Smith, William Taylor and Charles Emanuel Webar stand out. (Guarda 2006, 674).

### **3.2 Identification as British**

Many of the Irish immigrants chose to identify as British to integrate more easily into the Chilean elite. This decision was based in part on the social and economic advantages that came with association with the British Empire, which at the time had significant influence on global trade and international relations.

Identifying as British not only allowed the Irish to access certain trade advantages, but also helped them avoid the stigma associated with being Irish at a time when Ireland was under British rule and suffered from political and economic instability. This identification as British, therefore, was a pragmatic strategy that facilitated the immigrants' integration and success in their new environment.

### **3.3 Trade and Prosperity**

The ability of Irish immigrants to prosper in the 19th century Chilean trade is another crucial aspect of their integration. Many of these immigrants brought with them knowledge and business skills that allowed them to establish successful businesses and contribute to the economic development of Chile.

Import-export trade, in particular, offered significant opportunities for these immigrants. Chile, with its expanding economy and growing demand for imported goods, provided an ideal environment for Irish merchants. Furthermore, the ability of these immigrants to establish trade connections with other countries, especially the United Kingdom and the United States, gave them a competitive advantage.

### **3.4 Example of Juan Mackenna**

Juan Mackenna is a leading example of an Irish immigrant who managed to integrate and prosper in 19th century Chilean society. Mackenna was not only a successful merchant, but also became an influential figure in the social and political life of Chile. His ability to establish relationships with the Chilean elite and his success in trade reflect the opportunities available to Irish immigrants and their ability to adapt and prosper in their new environment.

Mackenna's story highlights the importance of adaptability and resilience in the immigrant integration process. His success was not only based on his business skills, but also on his ability to form strategic alliances and navigate the social complexities of his new

environment. Mackenna's story, therefore, is a testament to the ability of immigrants to overcome challenges and achieve success in a foreign context.

### **3.5 Racial hierarchy and social advantages**

The integration of the Irish into the Chilean elite and their success in trade were also influenced by the racial hierarchy of the time. In the colonial and postcolonial context of Chile, white skin conferred significant social advantages. The Irish, by being considered white, were able to benefit from this racial hierarchy and access opportunities that would have been inaccessible to other racial groups.

This racial hierarchy not only facilitated the integration of the Irish into the Chilean elite, but also allowed them to establish themselves as successful merchants. Association with Chile's white elite and access to exclusive social and economic networks were crucial factors in the success of these immigrants (Guarda 2006).

The integration of Irish immigrants into 19th century Chilean society is a clear example of how social, marital, and commercial strategies can facilitate immigrants' adaptation and success in a new environment. Through strategic marriages, identification as British, and taking advantage of the social advantages conferred by the racial hierarchy, the Irish were able to integrate into the Chilean elite and prosper in trade.

The history of the integration of the Irish in Chile highlights the importance of adaptability and resilience in the immigration process. Despite the challenges and barriers, these immigrants managed to establish themselves and contribute significantly to the economic and social development of their new country. Their story is a testament to the ability of immigrants to overcome obstacles and achieve success in a foreign context, and offers valuable lessons for understanding the dynamics of immigration and integration in the nineteenth century and beyond.

### **4. Fourth Moment: religious influence in the twentieth century**

In the 20th century, the Irish influence in Chile manifested itself notably in the religious sphere, with the arrival of Irish Catholic priests who played a significant role in the parishes and base ecclesial communities in the peripheral areas of Santiago. The relationship of the Irish religious with Latin American liberation causes, in line with the liberation theology of the Catholic left, is notable.

These priests not only contributed to the strengthening of the Catholic faith in Chile, but also became involved in social and political movements that sought justice and equity. The historical oppression experienced by Ireland under British Protestant rule could have influenced the affinity of these religious with the liberation struggles in Latin America. Thus, this stage shows how the history of oppression can influence the participation of Irish people in social and political movements in Chile and throughout the region.

The work of these Irish priests in Chile highlights the spiritual and social dimension of their contribution, underscoring how the history of a people can resonate in geographically distant but similar contexts in terms of struggle and resistance.

#### **4.1 Irish priests and liberation theology**

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century as a response to the conditions of poverty and oppression that prevailed in the region. This theological current, which combines Christian principles with a critical approach towards unjust social and economic structures, found an echo among many Irish priests who arrived in Chile.

Irish priests, many of whom had experienced or knew the history of British oppression in Ireland, found in liberation theology a way to connect their faith with social justice (Dillon, 2006). Their commitment to this theology led them to become involved actively in the most disadvantaged communities of Santiago, where they worked to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants and advocate for social and economic reforms.

In Chile, starting with what was known as the General Missions in 1962-63, a plan by the Catholic Church was implemented to insert itself into the poor neighborhoods of Santiago and the entire country, in response to the new rulings of the Second Vatican Council. During this period, many priests settled in the so-called Chilean towns, and among them there were several foreigners, including some Irish, belonging to the Irish-origin congregation of San Columbano (Sánchez Gaete 2014).

The insertion of priests into popular neighborhoods was a significant experience, because, as the Chilean historian Maximiliano Salinas points out, it deeply affected the religious identity of the priests. As they integrated and got to know the popular world, they began to question their role as priests and their faith. Being among the poor, following the example of Jesus, led many of them to question the hierarchy of the Church. As a result,



several priests withdrew from their clerical roles and began participating in social movements, as will be discussed in another section.

However, the relationship between European priests and the popular classes was not free of tensions. At first, some sectors of the population looked at these foreign priests with distrust, perceiving them as alien to local reality. Furthermore, certain sectors of conservative Catholicism saw the General Missions and the insertion of priests in the neighborhoods as a foreign intervention. By getting involved in leftist social movements and popular struggles, these priests were accused by the most conservative Catholicism of propagating an alleged Marxist infiltration in the Catholic Church, a thesis defended by organizations such as Tradition, Family and Property, especially during President Salvador Allende's government.

#### **4.2 Involvement in social movements**

The work of these priests was not limited to spirituality; their influence extended to the social and political arena. In the peripheral areas of Santiago, Irish priests participated in the organization of base ecclesial communities, which became spaces of empowerment and resistance. These groups not only promoted the Catholic faith, but also promoted participation in the fight for human rights and social justice.

As I pointed out previously, the experience of British occupation in Ireland and the differentiation with the British through the Catholic religion is a very important factor to understand the commitment that some priests of Irish origin had with the social struggles in our country. There is an interesting intersection between the priestly insertion in the popular neighborhoods and the struggles of the settler movement, which sought liberation from state oppression and, above all, from the political right.

Here the community and the congregation of San Columbano played an important role, especially in the western area of Santiago, which we have investigated mainly through the *Dios con Nosotros* (God with Us) community and the role of the Irish priest Kevin O'Boyle, better known as Father Miguel for the residents (Bustamante Olguín 2011). He introduced the Catholic charismatic renewal in Chile, especially in the popular sectors. Also in the northern area, such as in Huechuraba, testimonies are recorded from residents who highlight the role of San Columbano in the grassroots communities, resisting repression, persecution and shortages during the civil-military dictatorship. Also, according to specialized literature, some Irish priests participated in the Christian Movement for Socialism, a group of priests and

lay people committed to the socialist option and, therefore, to the government of President Salvador Allende and Popular Unity.

I argue that the “Irish Catholic *habitus*,” which developed over many centuries in the Republic of Ireland as liberation Catholicism, may have influenced commitment and sensitivity to issues linked to popular social struggles in Chile. Bourdieu (1971) defines *habitus* as a set of durable and transferable dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization and that guide their perceptions, thoughts and actions. These dispositions are the result of personal and collective history. In the case of the Irish Catholic “habitus”, we can consider how the history of Ireland, marked by British colonization, resistance, the fight for independence and strong religious traditions, has shaped a particular set of dispositions and sensibilities.

### **4.3 Context of repression and dictatorship**

The political context of Chile in the 20th century, particularly during the civil-military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), also shaped the role of Irish priests in the country. During this period, repression and human rights violations were common, and many priests found themselves on the front lines of resistance against the dictatorship.

And as I mentioned in previous pages, if in the period prior to the military coup foreign missionaries had penetrated the spaces of the settlers, now it was the settlers who penetrated the missionary spaces available to sustain their social, political and cultural organizations. All of this occurred in a context of conservative militarization of society and its traditional local institutions. In this sense, the Catholic Church once again revalued its institutional weight and its assistance capacity to welcome civil society.

As Salinas (1994) points out, the Church and the missionaries recovered an authority and prestige typical of another era, an authority and prestige that was fought, but at the same time recognized. In this period, unprecedented missionary bodies were created, such as the *Vicaria de la Solidaridad* (Vicariate of Solidarity) and the *Vicaría de la Pastoral Obrera* (Vicariate of Workers’ Pastoral) in 1976 and 1977, respectively. In addition, numerous foreign missionaries arrived who contributed to reversing the missionary crisis experienced between 1967 and 1973.

Ireland’s history, marked by resistance to British rule, resonated with the experiences of Chileans fighting against the dictatorship. Irish priests in Chile, familiar with the history of resistance in their own country, found a parallel in the Chilean struggle and became active

defenders of human rights. The Catholic Church, and particularly foreign priests, played a crucial role in protecting the persecuted and exposing the abuses of the regime.

#### **4.4 Connections with the opposition**

The affinity of Irish priests with liberation causes in Latin America also led them to form alliances with other opposition movements. In many cases, these priests became intermediaries between local communities and international human rights organizations, helping to bring global attention to the injustices committed in Chile.

In this sense, between 1983 and 1986, some missionaries more committed to the social and political situation of the inhabitants were expelled from the country, as in the case of the Irish missionaries Desmond McGillicuddy (St. Joseph's of Mill Hill) and Brandan Forde (Franciscan) (Aguilar 2006). It is important to remember that in 1986 the attack on General Augusto Pinochet by the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front (FPMR), a far-left organization, occurred.

That said, there is another connection between this far-left group and the Irish. In 1996, some members of the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front) (FPMR) escaped from the public prison in Santiago, Chile, with the help of two Irish sisters, Frances Mary Shannon and her sister Christie, both belonging to the IRA. Currently, Frances was detained by the police in Croatia during the month of June 2024.<sup>1</sup>

#### **4.5 The spiritual dimension**

The influence of Irish priests in Chile is not limited to social and political aspects; there is also a significant spiritual dimension to his contribution. These priests brought with them a deep spirituality that resonated in the communities they served. Its focus on liberation theology and its commitment to the poor and oppressed reflect a living and active faith that seeks to make a tangible difference in the world.

The spirituality of Irish priests was characterized by a deep sense of empathy and solidarity with the marginalized. Their ministry was not just about preaching, but about living the Gospel through concrete actions of love and justice. This integrative spiritual approach helped strengthen the communities of faith and inspire others to follow their example.

The arrival of Irish Catholic priests to Chile in the twentieth century and their influence on the country's religious and social communities represent an important chapter

in the history of relations between Ireland and Chile. These priests not only helped strengthen the Catholic faith, but also became active advocates for social justice and human rights. His work in the most disadvantaged communities and his commitment to liberation theology had a lasting impact on the lives of many Chileans.

The legacy of Irish priests in Chile is a testament to the power of faith and solidarity to generate positive change in the world. Their life stories and dedication to social justice continue to inspire new generations of religious and secular leaders in Chile and beyond. This historical connection between Ireland and Chile underlines the importance of multicultural influences in the formation of national identities and the fight for a more just and equitable world.

## Conclusions

Through these four historical moments – the Spanish colonial period, the process of independence, integration and trade in the 19th century, and religious influence in the 20th century – the depth and diversity of the Irish contribution to history can be appreciated from Chile. Although Irish immigration to Chile was not as numerous as in other Latin American countries, its political, military, and religious impact has been significant and lasting.

This historical analysis reveals not only the connections between Chile and Ireland, but also how the experiences and legacies of immigrants can shape and enrich the societies into which they integrate. The history of the Irish in Chile is a testimony of resilience, adaptation and contribution, offering valuable lessons for understanding cultural interaction and historical development in diverse contexts.

Chilean specialized literature rarely explores this contribution in detail, possibly due to the lower numerical significance of Irish migration compared to countries like Argentina. However, the historical division proposed in this text can serve as a starting point for future research that sheds light on the impact of the Irish community in Chile throughout different periods, thus enriching our understanding of Chilean history and the complex intercultural relationships that have shaped it.

## Notes

- 1 <https://interference.cl/articulos/detienen-en-croacia-irlandesa-que-participo-con-el-fpmr-en-la-fuga-desde-la-carcel-de-alta>

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