

Introduction

There is no denying the romance of Texas history. Few states of the Union can boast of a past that includes such a legacy of powerful images: the Spanish heritage of Catholic missions and the distinctive layout of town plazas, the frontier life of the early pioneer settlers from the United States and Europe, the symbolic heroism of the Alamo and the Texas Revolution, and the great wealth of individual cattle ranchers and oil magnates. These popular images incorporate a mix of diverse people and stirring events that played their part in the making of Texas.

Place-names on a modern map of Texas testify to the variety of peoples that contributed to the state's history. Tejas, Waco, and Wichita are names derived from Native American tribes in Texas. Gonzalez, Laredo, Seguin, and San Antonio represent just a few of the Spanish names for Texan cities, and forty-one counties owe their titles to Spanish origins. La Salle County honors a French explorer. Fredericksburg and New Braunfels owe their names to the arrival of German settlers in the 1840s. San Patricio County and McMullen County denote an Irish settlement established in 1829. The counties are named after Saint Patrick of Ireland and John McMullen, one of the two Irish empresarios who introduced Irish settlers to Texas. Austin and Houston are named after two of the most illustrious American founders of the Republic of Texas, Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston.

Despite the presence and contribution of so many peoples in Texas, its history has been written with little recognition accorded to cultural diversity. In recent years, historians have begun to branch out into new directions, and the Institute of Texan Cultures has, through its exhibitions and publications, celebrated the role of all its people. Yet Texas history has been for a long time interpreted and remains firmly rooted in the popular mind in terms of a dominant culture and written in a spirit of triumphalism and with a sense of Manifest Destiny.

No history is written in a cultural vacuum. Each written history represents a set of values and principles, and has, traditionally served the interests of powerful sections of society or of dominant cultural or ethnic groups. National histories have usually been driven by the need to pro-

claim the virtues, and gloss over the vices, of a country's past. Where matters of war and conquest are concerned, the history that endures is invariably written by the winners. Traditionally, this has been presented as the story of great men: statesmen and generals, men who, by their actions, changed the course of history by creating nations or winning decisive battles. Until quite recently, the lives of women, ethnic minorities, and the common people were rarely investigated or understood. The writing of history was the art of making heroes, and these served as our models to hand down to the next generation. Although people may be in need of heroes as much as they ever were, looking back on the world stage reveals as many figures to despise as to admire. And while "heroic" history has gone out of favor, the other groups, previously ignored, have sought to fill the vacuum with their own story. This carries with it the danger of replacing one narrow and selective view for another; each group competing for status accorded to victims within a model of "oppression" history or, alternatively and sometimes by extension, claiming exclusive honors in a form of "contribution" history, which becomes as self-serving as histories written to justify conquest.

The story of the Irish empresarios and the Irish colonies of San Patricio and Refugio in Texas has been told in the work of two leading authorities. Yet it is not well known outside the locality of Refugio in which they both lived and worked. Hobart Huson wrote *A Comprehensive History of Refugio County*, published in two volumes in 1953 and 1955. William H. Oberste covered the history of both colonies in his study *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies*, published in 1953. Both are now out of print and difficult to obtain, having become valuable collector's items. Everyone who follows in their wake owes them a considerable debt of gratitude for extensive research conducted over many years. John Brendan Flannery wrote a well-illustrated and broader study in *The Irish Texans*, published by the Institute of Texan Cultures in 1980, and this contains additional material on the Irish in other communities, such as Victoria, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi. The following year Rachel Bluntzer Hébert published an interesting but idiosyncratic book, which included some creative writing, entitled *The Forgotten Colony: San Patricio de Hibernia*, and Richard Roche published a slim booklet entitled *The Texas Connection: The Story of the Wexford Colony in Refugio* in 1989.

Although different in style and focus, they were all written as local histories, either of Refugio or San Patricio, or as an extension of Wexford history, in following the Irish who emigrated to Texas in 1834. More impor-

tant, they all presented the story of the Irish colonists in the romantic tradition of the struggle for national freedom, transplanted to Texas. The familiar plot depicts the Irish fleeing from poverty and oppression in Ireland, overcoming adversity in the form of cholera and shipwreck on the Texas coast, struggling to survive against hostile Indians in frontier conditions, and enduring property loss and death through the ravages of war in the Texas Revolution.

It is, however, a selective history, driven by a wish to celebrate the durable qualities of the Irish and to communicate to others the valuable contribution the Irish pioneers made in the creation of the Republic of Texas. It combines both oppression history and contribution history. The history presented in this book attempts to overcome these traps. The story of the Irish pioneer settlers in Texas is dramatic as a narrative. It has no need of added color or partisan storytelling. The approach adopted may be described as “inclusive” history, incorporating the lived experience of men, women, and children, irrespective of race, color, or creed. Although the focus is on the Irish settlers, their outlook was clearly shaped by the legacy of the American Revolution in 1776, and some had spent time in the United States before moving to Texas. All of them became colonists alongside a mixed group of Mexicans, Americans, and other Europeans, and after Texas Independence in 1836, the Irish inherited a Hispanic ranching tradition. The argument employed points to a greater acceptance of the polyglot cultures that shaped the formation of Texas, and a crucial blending of cultures that sustained the development of a ranching system in the Coastal Bend.

Primarily, it is a Texas story, but to understand it fully requires a recognition of a wider world. As a frontier province of Mexico, Texas posed problems of population and settlement in the face of American expansionism. Chapter 1 shows how American and European travelers came to explore the wild frontier and described it as a paradise, a garden of Eden, nature unspoilt and untamed. This was how it was sold to would-be migrants in the high-flown language of the day. On a more practical level, the Mexican government offered immensely generous land grants under the empresario system in the 1820s and early 1830s. The chance to acquire land sparked “Texas fever,” which attracted men of broken fortune, malefactors, and land speculators from the American South and Europeans who dreamt of a better life in the New World. The dilemma facing the Mexican government was that to populate the province of Texas required accepting American immigrants, many of whom had no land titles,

but American settlers could not be relied on to be loyal Mexican citizens. So an attempt was made to attract European migrants, chief among them Irish Catholics, to act as a buffer against the potential aggression of the United States. In the event, Mexico's colonization policy floundered on a lack of manpower, insufficient financial resources, and the political factions in Mexico City that neglected its northern province.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of some of the issues currently being debated in Irish migration studies and focuses on the context of Irish emigration in the pre-famine period, 1815 to 1845. This includes a discussion of the previous histories of the Irish in Texas, firmly set in the tradition of oppression and contribution history, and questions the perceived wisdom about why the Irish left Ireland to settle in Texas in 1834. Far from being poor victims among a starving people, the would-be colonists appear to have made rational choices about the risks and prospects involved in choosing a pioneer life in Texas. They had to have the means to pay for the trip plus a year's provisions, and they came from one of the most affluent areas of Ireland.

Further reassessment is made in chapter 3, which offers a fresh interpretation of the role of the four Irish empresarios, John McMullen, James McGloin, James Power, and James Hewetson, who between them in the period 1829 to 1834 settled the two Irish colonies of San Patricio and Refugio in south Texas. They are presented as merchants and entrepreneurs who saw in the development of Texas the opportunity to capitalize on their Mexican contacts and experience through land speculation. In many respects, they were men of vision who had become largely Mexicanized through marriage, commercial contacts, and as Spanish speakers. They were the only Europeans who had any success as empresarios; nevertheless it was a highly risky venture, and as the story relates, they faced innumerable obstacles to achieving successful recruitment and settlement of the two colonies. Surviving letters of the Irish colonists point to the ill feeling back in Ireland over the deaths of so many en route to Texas and of the ill feeling between some of the colonists and the empresarios both in San Patricio and in Refugio.

In chapter 4 the role of the Irish in the Texas Revolution of 1835–36 is discussed. It features not only the heroic struggles and sufferings associated with bloody battles and massacres, and the defiant declarations of independence and resistance against the Mexican "invasion" that have been much trumpeted in previous histories but also an explanation of the loyalty of some of the Irish colonists to the Mexican government to whom

in law they owed allegiance as Mexican citizens and to whom they were obligated for the land grants bestowed upon them. Two contrasting wars are examined: a war of political rhetoric by the politicians at odds with each other and a war that was far from a foregone conclusion as it saw-sawed from one side to the other. Great heroism was displayed and ultimate glory achieved for the Texan cause, but throughout it was mostly a chaotic and uncertain conflict. The Irish colonies suffered disproportionately in being located in the heart of the war zone. Irishmen played their part not only in the military engagements but also in providing the military with intelligence and supplies, and they were in the vanguard of the movement for Texan independence.

Chapter 5 offers a picture of the pioneer life experienced by the colonists who had survived cholera, shipwreck, and death in trying to reach Texas. Drawing on the wealth of contemporary accounts, I reconstruct the early struggles of the colonists; the building of primitive huts from poles and palmetto grass; encounters with Indians who could prove to be friendly or hostile; the ever-present threat of sickness and disease; and the attempts to build communities, churches, and schools. The chapter begins and ends with an assessment of the influence of the frontier on the Irish colonists. Did the harsh environment of a wilderness destroy the cultural baggage they brought with them from Europe, or did they retain certain features of it and maintain their own sense of identity? What contribution did the early settlers make to their communities and to the growth of towns like Victoria, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi?

Chapter 6 concludes the story of the Irish pioneers in Texas. After all the trials and tribulations the colonists suffered over a twenty-year period into the 1850s—when the Indians were finally cleared out of Texas and the border of the Rio Grande was established at the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo—a triumph over adversity took place that was of major importance to the development of Texas. The Irish colonists who had settled alongside Mexican neighbors acquired the skills and know-how of cattle ranching in a semitropical climate. These had been developed by the Spanish since the early eighteenth century in Texas and were continued by their Mexican successors. A cultural transfer took place among coreligionists that enabled Irish ranchers to thrive on the opportunities thrown up by the market conditions that followed the annexation of Texas to the United States. New Orleans and later Chicago were to become important markets for Texas beef, first by ship, then on the long cattle drives, and finally by rail to the stockyards.

Throughout the general discussion of the cultural inputs into cattle ranching by Texan, Anglo, or Hispanic is the fascinating story of Thomas O'Connor and the making of a great ranching empire. It is a story published for the first time. And it was made possible only by unrestricted access to the O'Connor family papers, previously closed to public scrutiny, and the freedom to interpret the evidence without restraint. The story begins with a seventeen-year-old boy, a nephew of the empresario James Power, who arrived in Texas in 1834, acquired a land grant of 4,428 acres, and assiduously built a mighty estate of 500,000 acres and 100,000 head of cattle by the time of his death in 1887. His life is pieced together from letters, deeds, folk memory, and even grocery lists. (Orthographical inconsistencies are, of course, prevalent in such sources. Unless the usage seems open to misinterpretation, I have reproduced the original spelling without comment.) The story tells not only how a ranching empire was built but also why Thomas O'Connor relentlessly pursued a policy of land accumulation all his life. Being deprived of the family farm in Ireland, the need to build a security for his family against the many uncertainties of frontier life, and the personal and tragic relationship with his eldest son, Dennis, all contributed to his determination to keep on acquiring land. Through surviving letters, we can also reconstruct the cultural legacy brought from Ireland and passed on to the next generation, and the identification that came from fighting for Texas and from the restored American Union after the Civil War.

Essentially, the whole story of the Irish pioneers in Texas is a story about land: not only the land hunger that prompted the colonists to leave Ireland in search of the prospect of owning vast tracts of land in Texas, a journey of 5,000 miles, but also the imaginative leap that allowed them to go from renting 50 acres to owning 4,000 acres. They were caught up in "Texas fever" as land grants became available to Americans, Mexicans, Europeans, and Irish under the empresario system. The war of the Texas Revolution was fought over the untapped potential territory of the province of Texas. Although many lost out to the depredations of the war, they returned to reclaim their land some years later and had to struggle to keep it. Out of this devastation emerged the figure of Thomas O'Connor and the building of a great, ranching estate on a scale that must have been unimaginable to the original colonists.