



Marshall, Oliver. *English, Irish and Irish-American Letters in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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In spite of the pre-eminent role played by Great Britain in Brazilian political and economic affairs in the nineteenth-century, which has been the object of attention of many scholars, few are the studies which have examined in more detail aspects of the history of British communities in Brazil. Of course, one must not forget Gilberto Freyre's ground-breaking work on the British influence on Brazilian life, landscape and culture (1948); José Antonio Gonsalves de Mello's *Ingleses em Pernambuco* (1972); Francisco Riopardense de Macedo's *Ingleses no Rio Grande do Sul* (1975) or, more recently, Louise Guenther's study of a British merchant community in Bahia (2004), just to mention a few. Oliver Marshall's *English, Irish and Irish-American Settlers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* [Centre for Brazilian Studies, University of Oxford, 2005] comes, therefore, as a most welcome addition to this list, as one more step towards exploring new territories in the investigation of migration policies and of the British presence in nineteenth-century Brazil.

Relying on abundant documentation and a wealth of diverse sources and materials – reports, travel books, diaries, letters, petitions, depositions, newspapers and periodicals –, the book offers a very interesting view on the issue of immigration, discussing how promises of cheap land, job opportunities and the possibility of economic independence attracted hundreds of English and Irish immigrants to work on the agricultural settlement schemes set by the Brazilian government in the second half of the nineteenth century. A more general introduction focussing on the agricultural colonization in Brazil between 1808 and 1867 (Part II) is followed by specific chapters about the Irish and Irish-Americans and the English, recreating the circumstances which made these people decide to leave their homeland and try a new life abroad.

Part III deals specifically with the Irish Diaspora and how a “New Ireland” was formed in Brazil, with Irish workers being practically expelled from New York City or the English Midlands due to the appalling living and working conditions which they faced in these locations. As the outcasts of British capitalism and Victorian Britain, the Irish were a dispossessed, rejected and despised community and it is not surprising that they were an easy target for the Brazilian government's propaganda. Being a Catholic country, where the Irish immigrants would enjoy religious freedom, Brazil was constructed as a dream new homeland, where wages would be higher, land plentiful and life much cheaper.

The recruitment of English immigrants is examined in Part IV, preceded by an overall view of the situation of the agricultural labourers in mid-Victorian England, with their customary fare of low wages, want and poor living conditions. Understandably, “these white slaves of England”, as a contemporary defined them, were convinced to confront “the passage” not only by the descriptions of a beautiful, attractive and welcoming country but also by the favourable testimonials of friends and relatives who had already taken the plunge. The stark reality of the pioneering venture was, however, one of appalling conditions and personal suffering.

The image of Brazil as a heaven, where a life of happiness awaited those who had been courageous enough to cross the Atlantic, would prove to be far from true once these pioneer settlers reached their final destination, one of the state agricultural colonies in the south of the country [mainly Colônia Príncipe Dom Pedro, in Santa Catarina; Assunguy, in Paraná; and Cananéia, in São Paulo]. Maladministration, insufficient land or financial support, unsuitable settlements, and the “whims of nature” were some of the hardships they encountered in a country they knew very little and had fantasized a lot about.

In many instances, Marshall vividly reconstructs scenes which give the narrative a special touch and flavour, once the reader can almost visualise, for example, the immigrants’ departure from Wednesbury’s London and North Western Railway Station, the union meetings organised to present Brazil as a possible destination for the villagers of rural Warwickshire, or the reception the immigrants on board the steamer *Lusitania* got in Rio de Janeiro and their surprise at what they saw there. The controversies over emigrating to Brazil and the conflicting views of those involved in the venture – promoters and agents on one side and immigrants on the other – add to the overall picture and offer the reader an insight into the battle of arguments that waged at the time, depending on the role each individual played in the process.

The reasons and explanations for the almost complete failure of the southern state colonies in Brazil are explored in the conclusion (Part V), where the confrontation of different points of view held by different parties reveals how the unsuitability of the immigrants themselves for these land settlement schemes, greedy agents, inadequate planning, poor central and local government administration, and mounting debt all led to what many described as a disaster, with people dying or starving and being reduced to rags, having to be repatriated back to England.

Vestiges of the presence of those hundreds of English, Irish and Irish-American immigrants are hard to trace, since they have not left such clear and impressive imprints as the British expatriate communities of Rio de Janeiro or Bahia, whose power and influence can be measured through their participation in the world of Brazilian politics, trade and cultural life. Of the few *colonos* who remained in Brazil Marshall gives final notice, by telling us about their descendants, very few of whom have any knowledge of or show any interest in their origins.

The book closes with three appendices, of which the third is the most interesting, for it includes a “partial listing of British *colonos*”, with, among other pieces of

information, names, occupations, places of origin, colonies and last known destinations. Behind the anonymous term “immigrant”, with which they are normally referred to in histories, these are shown to be real people, whose dreams of a better life made them cross the Atlantic, face the unknown, and venture into a completely new world. For each of the names on the list, one can imagine hopes, expectations, a life of toil and lost illusions.

English, Irish and Irish-American Settlers in Nineteenth-Century Brazil shows the plight of those hundreds of people in their search for a new life, a destiny shared by immigrants of other nationalities who had also been enticed to come to the tropics, mostly landless, rural labourers driven away from their homeland by poverty, deprivation and very harsh working and living conditions. It also reveals how recruitment schemes and practices, promotional materials and false promises created a world of expectations that would eventually end in cultural shock and frustration. The land of opportunity very frequently proved to be an everyday struggle against the climate (heat, torrential rains), poor housing, strange customs, and an experience of strain and endurance. The image of the fine country where “anything will grow if you put it in the ground” [cf. letter quoted by OM] is shattered by the harsh reality of human failings, cultural difference and governmental incompetence.

Even if these groups were too busy trying to cope with all sorts of difficulties and had to dedicate too much of their time and effort to survive, one would have wished to read more about how these families organised their private lives or daily activities, if they had any social life, apart from work, any reading habits (those who were not illiterate)... This may be an unjust demand on such a rich book, and most probably one impossible to meet, in view of the documentation available, but by comparison to the information about the ways of living of the other British communities in Brazil, one can only wonder how these people’s everyday life was actually lived.

The striking differences, however, between the Rio and Bahia British communities examined by Freyre and Guenther respectively and those Marshall discusses in his work cannot escape the attentive reader. Incommensurably more powerful and influential than their fellow-citizens, the former had full access to the world of politics, commerce and culture and to the spheres where decisions were made, and it is only too obvious that their presence should be strongly felt in Brazilian social, political and cultural life. Not so with the poor, illiterate and helpless families and individuals who had few resources rather than their workforce. In spite of ethnic and cultural differences, which are always absolutely central and should never be left aside in our examination of these migratory processes, what one confirms here, by comparing the two experiences – of those who have and those who have not –, is that class issues still deserve serious consideration.