

# The role of Britain in Colombia's independence and social development

## Abstract

This article examines the role of Britain in Colombia's independence and subsequent social development. It situates the arrival of British support within the broader context of European and American revolutions of the early 19th century. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: the establishment of early diplomatic relations, the participation of the British Legion and individual actors in the independence battles, and the long-term influence of British presence on Colombian society. By drawing on primary and secondary sources, the study demonstrates how Britain's involvement extended beyond military contributions to lasting cultural, social, and institutional impacts. More than two centuries later, the legacy of these interactions remains visible in Colombia's development.

**Keywords:** colombian independence, colombia-united kingdom relations, british legion, social development, british influence, stellar history.

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## Introduction

This article is divided into three subtopics. The first addresses the beginning of diplomatic relations between Colombia and the United Kingdom, using the early 19th century as a starting point, when the world was experiencing revolutions and independence movements, including the liberation campaign of New Granada led by Simón Bolívar. During this time, hundreds of compatriots were recruited to fight in the army.<sup>1</sup> However, in April 1817, Mr. Luis López Méndez was sent as a patriotic agent to London to seek support for the liberation campaign. This event followed a request made by Francisco Miranda in 1812 when he sent a letter to a London journalist requesting the same support. Despite some challenges, approximately 7,000 men from England and Ireland embarked on expeditions to the New World.<sup>1</sup> They arrived with the initial promise of 50 pounds and the possibility of creating wealth and obtaining all the treasures that this new land could offer. However, their arrival in New Granada was not under ideal conditions, as many of them fell ill or, for various reasons, deserted the liberation project.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, their participation was crucial in achieving the long-desired independence.<sup>3</sup>

This study draws on the theoretical framework of \*Stellar History\* proposed by Robert M. Ojeda Pérez, which argues that the teaching (and, by extension, the analysis) of history must begin with a hermeneutical interpretation of social narratives, recognizing their political intention and their power to build participatory citizenship.<sup>4</sup> In the context of this article, this approach is applied to examine how historical narratives—including press accounts, diplomatic correspondence, and collective memories—not only report events but also configure 'institutional memories' and shape public perceptions of power structures, transparency, and governance. By adopting this perspective, the article highlights the broader cultural and social dimensions of Britain's role in New Granada's independence and the legacy of its influence on Colombian society.

As Ojeda Pérez explains, "This reciprocity is known as the hermeneutic circle; it implies a clear opposition to that notion of objectivity and non-involvement that is assumed to characterize the scientific explanation of things." This framework underscores that historical interpretation is not a detached activity but a dialogical process in which the historian moves continuously between parts and totalities. Within the context of Stellar History, this hermeneutic

operation becomes essential for understanding how narratives are constructed and re-constructed across time.

As noted by Ojeda Pérez,<sup>5</sup> "For this purpose, the shop of José González Llorente a Spanish merchant who supplied various products to the capital's society is taken as a point of reference," a perspective that helps illuminate the commercial tensions and supply networks that shaped Santa Fe in the years preceding the independence movement. These economic dynamics rooted in the interactions between criollo merchants, peninsular traders, and popular sectors created structural pressures within the colonial regime. Such pressures help contextualize why foreign actors, including the British, would later find fertile ground for engagement as political discontent deepened.

In this sense, as Ojeda Pérez<sup>4</sup> observes, "By understanding we mean a complex process that never produces unequivocal results. It is an endless activity, always diverse and mutable, through which we come to terms with reality." This conception challenges deterministic or linear readings of historical events. Applied to Stellar History, it reinforces the idea that interpreting the past requires an openness to multiplicity, ambiguity, and alternative temporal structures.

According to historian Matthew Brown, of the nearly 7,000 British soldiers who arrived, about 500 stayed on the continent after independence to establish lives.<sup>6</sup> From that point, the construction of the independent state began, influenced by the cultural diversity present in New Granada at the time. The first constitution, signed in Cúcuta in 1821, established specific regulations to allow foreigners to settle in the new country and thus enrich and invigorate commercial activities.<sup>7</sup> Recent research on the Irish/British Legion shows that recruitment and the voyage were marked by disease, desertion, and failures to fulfill promised payments, which explains why many volunteers did not settle permanently.<sup>8</sup>

Georeferencing studies of the Battle of Boyacá show how the social organization and spatial disposition of units including foreign battalions influenced tactical outcomes and the subsequent social integration of veterans into the territory.<sup>9,10</sup>

The second subtopic examines the role of various actors from the British Legion who stood out during that time. The contribution of the British Legion and other foreign soldiers who arrived and settled in Colombia during key periods of its history cannot be underestimated.

Their influence was profound and varied, extending beyond the military sphere to leave a lasting mark on the construction and evolution of Colombian society.

After establishing the historical context and the importance of foreign influence on Colombian society, it is essential to delve into journalistic and research articles that examine this specific topic. These articles can offer a more detailed and analytical perspective on how the presence of the British Legion and other foreign soldiers influenced various aspects of Colombian life, as well as the role of British women during and after the independence process. A particular case is that of Soledad Soublette, who played an important role as the wife of Daniel O'Leary and the sister of Carlos Soublette, a hero of Venezuela's independence.

The third subtopic focuses on the influence of British legionnaires on the construction of New Granada's society and how this influence has persisted to the present day.

As Ojeda Pérez and Zapata<sup>11</sup> note, "This article arises from a theoretical reflection on time and narrative in Paul Ricoeur, the works of Walter Benjamin, and the connections established by Stellar History as a theoretical model." These intellectual foundations give Stellar History its distinctive character: a way of reading historical time not as a single linear progression but as an interlacing of layered temporalities shaped by memory, narrative, and the plurality of human experience.

Furthermore, Ojeda Pérez and Zapata<sup>11</sup> emphasize that "This reflection is situated within a hermeneutic theoretical approach in order to create alternative ways of conceiving historical time, using an interdisciplinary, qualitative, and documentary perspective." Such an approach strengthens the methodological coherence of Stellar History by grounding it in interpretive, multi-layered readings of sources, connecting archival work with broader philosophical inquiries into temporality.

### Beginning of Colombian-British relations

At the beginning of the 19th century, with the recent French Revolution and the expansion of Napoleonic power, the world was in a state of uncertainty and constant change. In the Spanish colonies, there was a strong rejection of foreigners, especially the French, as there was fear of Napoleon's troops potentially arriving in American territories. In New Granada, specifically, there was a strong sense of loyalty that helped to solidify the negative image of foreigners in the territory, associating them with disrespect toward the Spanish crown. It was argued that, being subjects of another sovereign, these foreigners did not obey local laws, leading to a series of unfortunate events throughout the territory.<sup>12</sup>

In examining this early period, it is essential to recognize that the society in which these foreign actors arrived was already politically active from below. As Ojeda Pérez<sup>13</sup> notes, "This article seeks to show the different forms of participation exercised by the plebeian sectors of Santa Fe in response to the abuses of power committed by the colonial system," highlighting the agency of popular sectors in shaping political tensions. Their mobilization provides crucial context for understanding how British, French, and Irish individuals inserted themselves into a social environment undergoing profound internal transformation.

However, when King Ferdinand VII abdicated his throne under the pressure of Napoleon's invasion, the situation in the colonies changed dramatically. There were already independentist ideas gaining strength among the population, and with this news, the viceroyalty's

authorities declared that the king's abdication without the nation's consent forced them to reassume sovereignty. This was evident on June 27, 1811, when a provisional constitution for the Sovereign State of Antioquia was approved.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that some French residents of New Granada played significant roles in the independence process. According to Estrada<sup>12</sup>, the Frenchman Jean-Louis Girardot Bressant, who arrived in the New World in 1782 from Spain, where he had served in the royal Walloon Guards, became an important figure. He initially settled in Antioquia before moving to Honda in 1797 and participated in the independence proclamation on July 20, 1810, offering his services to the Government Junta and being appointed by Antonio Nariño as captain in the Patriotic Battalion of Defence.

Furthermore, the interplay between these foreign visitors and the evolving local dynamics becomes clearer when considering that, as Ojeda Pérez<sup>13</sup> emphasizes, "It invites us to reflect on other actors who also drove the independence process, and who had been doing so for many years." This perspective shows that independence was not solely the result of elite-driven diplomatic and military decisions; it also emerged from long-term efforts by subaltern groups whose collective actions shaped the environment in which British actors later became involved.

In this context, it becomes clear that foreign influence was present from the very beginning of the independence process. These figures, motivated by personal aspirations, beliefs, or ambition, sought to be part of the process. However, considering the tension in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century the French invasion of Spain and England's vulnerability after losing its 13 colonies in North America it created a conducive environment for individual interests, strategies, and alliances that would allow the great empires of the time to gain the upper hand and take the greatest advantage possible.

### Britain and South America

At the beginning of the 19th century, Europe was undergoing a transitional period that directly affected the context of the American colonies. Representatives of these colonies travelled to the Old Continent seeking ideas, as well as economic and military support, to carry out the different independence processes that were being developed. However, it is important to first understand the preceding context.

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 caused widespread unrest across the continent. The governments of neighbouring countries feared that their own citizens might adopt these new revolutionary ideas and cause chaos in their territories. For this reason, in 1793, through the Treaty of Aranjuez, Spain and England created an anti-French coalition in which they essentially committed to providing mutual support in the event of an attack or invasion by the French and to ending commercial relations with this country. However, this pact did not last long. When French troops attacked Spanish territory, such as the cities of Bilbao and Vitoria, the situation changed radically. Spain entered a moment of crisis due to various factors, including battlefield losses, increased taxes, and economic weakness, and decided to end the conflict with France diplomatically by signing the Peace of Basel in 1795, which ended the conflict but marked a clear break with England, which at that time had been a declared enemy of Spain before their temporary alliance.

The diplomatic and military initiatives discussed in this section must also be understood within the broader material conditions of the colony. As Ojeda Pérez<sup>5</sup> explains, "This information was drawn

from several inventories, records of sales, and registers of goods being unloaded,” demonstrating that New Granada’s economy had long been embedded in global trade circuits. Even before direct relations with Britain intensified, these economic imbalances evident in scarcity, dependency, and shifting commercial networks encouraged certain actors to seek external alliances. This background helps explain why British officials and merchants viewed New Granada as a strategically promising region.

In 1807, Napoleonic troops entered the Iberian Peninsula, asking Spain for permission to cross its territory to reach Portugal and continue their invasion. However, Napoleon betrayed his ally and temporarily took control of the empire. The following year, King Ferdinand VII ascended to the throne only to be forced to cede his position to Joseph Bonaparte, who reigned until 1813.<sup>14</sup>

At this point, it is important to note that the stability of the Spanish empire was compromised. As mentioned earlier, some provinces in New Granada sought sovereignty, believing that without a strong king to follow, they had to find their own path. At the same time, the Kingdom of England was facing a bleak outlook, with the recent loss of one of its most important colonies leaving it with serious economic problems that required extreme caution and radical measures.<sup>15</sup>

While all this was happening in Europe, Spanish colonies in Latin America began to take their independence processes seriously and to seek possible alternatives or solutions to achieve their goal. Interestingly, many South American patriots sought support in Europe, specifically in England, and of course, the Viceroyalty of New Granada was no exception. The journey towards the moment when the first foreign troops arrived in 1818 began much earlier, thanks to Francisco de Miranda, a Caracas native who arrived in the Old Continent in 1776 and began making his way in the Spanish military sphere. In 1785, he began seeking support for New Granada’s independence cause from the British government, specifically from Prime Minister William Pitt, with whom he maintained dialogue for many years. Unfortunately, however, he never succeeded in fulfilling his purpose.<sup>16</sup>

This failure was due to the fact that the true intentions of the British government, represented, of course, by Prime Minister Pitt, were never to support the independence causes. In fact, the Kingdom of England officially declared itself neutral in the conflict.<sup>15</sup> What they really sought during all those years of supposed negotiations with Miranda was the information he could provide them thanks to his years of service in Spain.

Despite Miranda’s evident failure, the plan to create a foreign legion for the liberation army did not end there. In 1816, advised by Colonel James Rooke, Simón Bolívar decided to send a couple of diplomatic delegates to England to again attempt to establish an alliance with the European country. These delegates were José María del Real, representing New Granada, and Luis López Méndez, representing Venezuela. Although the British government never officially declared itself in favour or against this cause, they did manage to recruit a total of 160 British men who would set off for the New World at the beginning of 1818. Méndez and Real achieved their purpose by using diplomatic and persuasive tools, promising financial rewards, supplementary military ranks, and fertile lands for those men who wanted to be part of this adventure.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1818 and 1819, a total of approximately 5,000 British soldiers arrived in the territory of New Granada. Many of them did not receive the promised rewards; others returned to Europe, and many others stayed to build new lives. Most importantly, many of

them were experienced soldiers who contributed new strategies that enabled the victory over the Spanish army.<sup>16</sup>

### British presence during and after the independence battles

The resounding call for help during the independence period prompted a notable migration of British citizens to Colombia at that time. This movement not only attracted fighters willing to join the cause but also drew individuals interested in investing in the South American nation. Colombia became a land not only of conflict but also of opportunity, where economic and personal growth flourished alongside the fight for freedom.

The British who arrived in Colombia saw beyond the struggle for independence; they envisioned a country with economic and social potential. They were not only driven by the defence of ideals but also by the desire to establish businesses and contribute to the nation’s development. This duality of purpose created a diverse and dynamic social fabric, where efforts towards freedom intertwined with economic progress.

The heroes who led the independence battles sacrificed more than their lives for the cause; they forged a rich and profound history in Colombian territory. Figures like James Rooke epitomise this dedication, leaving a legacy that transcended their individual acts. Their contribution not only shaped the battlefield but also laid the foundations for Colombia’s future, inspiring generations to fight for their ideals and seek a better future for all.

According to Martínez,<sup>17</sup> Colonel James Rooke of the British Legion took part in the Battle of Pantano de Vargas, where he was shot in the left arm, breaking the joint and exposing the bone. Father Gallo recounts that, while gathering the dead and wounded at night, they heard groans from the bushes and found an English officer, whom they carried to a house as best they could. The officer was Colonel James Rooke, who looked like a marble statue due to the blood loss he had suffered. The bullet had shattered his left arm from the elbow up, tearing arteries and veins. The amputation was carried out the next morning by the English surgeon Thomas Foley, after the battle of Pantano de Vargas.<sup>17</sup>

The amputation was performed the following morning at the Varguitas estate when the English surgeon Dr Foley arrived. Manuel Antonio López recalls, “He happily, with uncommon courage, offered his arm with serenity. The tourniquet was applied, the flesh was cut, the arteries tied off, and three seconds later, the surgeon had cut through the bone. When the lower part of the arm was detached, Colonel Rooke, with the greatest composure, took it by the wrist with his right hand, stood up before they cauterised the bone, and, lifting it above his head, exclaimed: Long live the Fatherland!” Due to the severity of Rooke’s condition, Bolívar ordered his transfer to the El Hato estate, belonging to the Augustinian convent of Belencito, located near the Pantano de Vargas.<sup>17</sup>

Vawell, a military man who was part of the British Legion, wrote in his memoirs that the badly wounded colonel “was left behind in a convent not far from Tunja, as it was deemed dangerous to take him on such poor roads in that condition. An English surgeon had skillfully amputated his arm and left detailed instructions with the monks. The monks, trusting more in their own healing procedures than in these instructions, removed the apparatus and replaced it with a mass of lint soaked in oil and wine. This treatment caused mortification and the death of our poor colonel.” It is estimated that he died three days after the battle. The National Museum preserves the wooden bench on



which Colonel Rooke was amputated by the English military surgeon Thomas Foley in July 1819, after the Battle of Pantano de Vargas.

On the other hand, Thomas Foley, an English citizen recognised for his skill as a surgeon and his ability as an administrator, was a prominent figure in the British Legion. He arrived in Venezuela in 1817 under the command of Colonel James T. English and served as a doctor and surgeon in the Legion. He was soon appointed Inspector General of Military Hospitals and joined the General Staff.

Throughout the campaign, Foley accompanied the liberating forces, always marching in the rear. His most notable role was during the amputation of Colonel James Rooke's left arm, who had been wounded in combat. Besides his work as a surgeon, Foley established a close friendship with General Santander, whom he treated medically, providing relief for his liver colic until the end of his days.<sup>18</sup>

In the first volume of the collected writings of Daniel Florencio O'Leary, various communications between Simón Bolívar and several British colonels or commanders were discovered. These documents highlight the significant relationship between Bolívar and the British officers, showing a strategic and diplomatic collaboration between the two countries. This discovery allows us to understand that Simón Bolívar considered England to be a crucial ally in the fight for the independence of Latin America, seeing this relationship as a favourable starting point for his campaigns and liberating projects in the region.

A clear example of this dynamic can be found in the epistolary exchange between Simón Bolívar and Colonel G. Hippiusley. On one occasion, Colonel Hippiusley submitted his resignation, but Bolívar decided to revoke it and maintained this revocation for an extended period. Regarding the proposal you make to return to England, etc., I say you have permission to leave; but as the campaign will not be suspended as you think and since the government has no funds to pay for your trip to recruit and transport 350 men, I do not accept it, nor the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and tenth. I accept the seventh and ninth without restriction, and the eighth, in accordance with the fifth article of the claim.

May God keep you for many years.

## BOLÍVAR.

Subsequently, this situation was accepted, as evidenced in a letter dated 22 July 1818. In this correspondence, Bolívar<sup>19</sup> officially accepts the resignation of the colonel commander of the 1st Hussars of Venezuela. Bolívar also included the necessary passport for the colonel to return to England. This shows that not all foreign fighters who participated in the struggle for Latin American independence chose to settle permanently in Colombian territory. The reasons behind these decisions were varied and complex.

Additionally, Commander Simón Bolívar, in a letter to Commander Mui on 19 May 1815 in Kingston, reveals Bolívar's British vision. In his letter, Bolívar underlines the crucial economic and strategic importance of supporting South America's independence. Bolívar argued that British intervention, although modest in terms of resources (twenty or thirty thousand rifles, a million pounds sterling, and a few warships), could ensure vast economic benefits. These benefits included exploiting the region's rich mineral resources, especially in New Granada, whose mountains were full of gold and silver. This exploitation, carried out by a small number of British mineralogists, could even surpass the mines of Peru and New Spain, generating a constant flow of precious metals to England. Additionally, Bolívar

highlighted the opportunity to establish exclusive trade with South America, providing significant economic advantages for Great Britain.

From a geopolitical perspective, Bolívar pointed out that British support for South America's independence would be strategic in maintaining the global balance of power. By preventing the region from falling back under Spanish control, England could prevent its European rivals from benefiting from South America's resources and control. British intervention would ensure a commercial and military preponderance that would reinforce its global position. Bolívar also suggested that England could take charge of opening canals in the provinces of Panama and Nicaragua, turning these places into global commercial centres, economically benefiting England and allowing it to control vital trade routes.

Bolívar emphasised that many inhabitants of South America were already in favour of independence and that decisive British support could consolidate this trend and prevent the restoration of Spanish rule. This would not only benefit the South American countries but also align these nations with British interests, creating a long-term beneficial relationship. Essentially, Bolívar appealed to both the commercial and strategic interests of England, showing how its support for the South American independence cause could result in enormous mutual benefit. Bolívar's letter was a call to action, urging England to take advantage of the opportunity to support South America's independence, which would bring significant economic and strategic benefits to Great Britain.

In another letter sent on 28 September 1815 to the editor of "The Royal Gazette," Bolívar made some indirect references to British influence in the historical events that occurred in Latin America during the period of the independence wars. Bolívar mentioned how the British played a role in shaping military and political strategies, as well as in providing support to the independence movements. For example, Bolívar noted that during the fight for North American independence, the three most powerful European nations (likely referring to France, Spain, and the Netherlands) supported the United States in its struggle against Great Britain. Furthermore, he suggested that the art of war, unknown to the Spaniards, was learned from the British, presumably during the United States' War of Independence.

However, Bolívar also pointed out that the British did not retaliate against Spain for supporting the United States during its War of Independence, implying a lack of direct British intervention in Latin America's independence struggles.

In another letter sent on 11 June 1818, Bolívar expressed regret over incidents involving British troops under Colonel Wilson's command in the city of San Fernando, as communicated in the recipient's letter dated 7 of the current month. Bolívar regretted not only the potential negative consequences for the Republic that could have resulted from the departure of the British troops and the breakdown of harmony between the recipient and Colonel Wilson but also the discomfort this had caused the recipient, who had generously joined the fight for the homeland's freedom. Bolívar lamented the incidents that affected relations between the British troops and Colonel Wilson, acknowledging the importance of maintaining cooperation and understanding for the Republic's good and expressing his commitment to addressing the matters raised in the recipient's letter.

Bolívar's correspondence with the British shows his great ability to understand global politics and explain how an alliance could benefit both sides. Bolívar did not only want South America's independence for idealistic reasons; he also saw how crucial foreign powers' support was to this process. By highlighting the shared strategic and

commercial interests, Bolívar pragmatically spoke to his potential allies, promoting international collaboration that promised great benefits for all. This strategy sought not only to secure immediate support but also to establish a new world order in which South America would be an independent and respected actor in the global community.

### British influence on Colombia

It can be said that “The adoption of new consumption patterns was not, however, accidental. The consumption of European goods was one of the key paths chosen by Bogotá's upper class to consolidate itself as a dominant class, capable not only of securing its social position but also of building a ‘modern’ nation in line with the models proposed by Europe”.<sup>20</sup>

As Malcolm Deas notes, after independence English merchants, miners, and investors arrived whose activities (textiles, mining, loans) affected consumption patterns and the economic structure of Colombia's elites.<sup>21</sup>

According to Rodríguez (S.f.),<sup>22</sup>

“From the moment the Spanish arrived in America, a rupture of thoughts occurred with the indigenous population as new habits, customs, and, above all, a set of religious ideas and a language were introduced, serving as a conduit to shape a different social order from the one previously managed by some indigenous communities.”

For this reason, it is important to consider that religions and cultures have changed from their roots, modifying America and its habits.

A very interesting fact is that “In the 1850s, the methods of making photographs on paper invented by the Englishman William Fox Talbot (1800-1877) were widely publicised. They were advertised in the *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada* as ‘drawings that he calls photogenic, or produced by light, made under all kinds of varied combinations’”.<sup>23</sup> This is an example of how the British introduced new ideas, forms, and things that were not used in Santafé de Bogotá.

### Conclusion

The beginning of relations between Colombia and England was full of obstacles due to the British Empire's lack of initial interest. However, thanks to the diplomats sent by Simón Bolívar, the British Legion was established. Although Britain officially remained neutral in the conflict, this event marked the beginning of a series of economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

We can affirm that British influence was profound in cultural, social, structural, and infrastructural terms, as well as in certain customs eradicated by them in America. A significant example is the construction or buildings in the northern part of Bogotá, with hierarchical connotations.

The migration of British citizens to Colombia during the independence period was not only driven by the call for help in the independence cause but also by the interest in investing and contributing to the country's development. This movement brought with it a diversity of purposes, including both the fight for freedom and the pursuit of economic and personal opportunities.

The British who arrived in Colombia not only participated in the independence battles but also played important roles in the nation's future construction. Figures like Colonel James Rooke demonstrated exemplary commitment and sacrifice, leaving a legacy that transcended their individual actions on the battlefield.

Additionally, the relationship between Simón Bolívar and the British officers reveals a strategic and diplomatic collaboration between the two countries. Bolívar recognised the importance of British assistance, both militarily and economically, and sought to take advantage of this relationship to ensure the success of the independence campaigns in Latin America.

However, there were also challenges in these relationships, as evidenced by the incidents between the British troops and Colonel Wilson. Bolívar lamented these conflicts and acknowledged the importance of maintaining cooperation for the Republic's good.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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