

**MATEO DE OVIEDO,
PERHAPS IRELAND'S GREATEST
SPANISH FRIEND OF ALL TIME¹**

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The second half of the XVIth century was about to start when the Good God decided to give a break to Henry VIII and asked him to his side. That same year, Mateo de Oviedo was born in Segovia (Spain), and although he was not such a well-known person as the English King, obviously, he has, in our humble opinion, gained a place in history.

Mateo de Oviedo was born in 1547, his parents having been Don Pedro de Oviedo and Doña Isabel de Carranza. We first hear of him when he is sent to the University of Salamanca to study law, probably with the good intention of making a lawyer out of him. That happened in 1562 when he was fifteen. Not long after, he would enter Salamanca, having taken the decision to join the Franciscan order. We must remember the ideals of that age when Counter-Reformation was the craze and obviously the Church was in the front line. Mateo, a son of his time, took the vows on June the 14th the following year. As a consequence of it, he gave up law and devoted all his energies to the study of Philosophy and Theology; subjects both of them, at which he became an expert, as we will have the opportunity to see.

¹ WALSH, Michaline, *The O'Neills in Spain*. The National University of Ireland, Dublin, 1957, p. 6.

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The period of instruction couldn't last for ever and so we see Mateo de Oviedo teaching Theology in the Franciscan convent of León in 1573.¹ That probably was his first job as a teacher. We find him years later doing the same activity but now in the convent of San Bernardino in Madrid. That was in 1579 and Mateo was already thirty two. We can consider that it was then when his, so called, 'political career' started.

He must have been very good in his job for the Papal "nuncio" in Spain chose him, in 1579, to go to Ireland, "in order to bring that isle back to Christ and at the same time see what could be done about England".² A delicate and difficult mission indeed. Pope Gregory XIII was determined to exterminate the Protestants wherever they were. In his opinion, Elizabeth I, the English Queen, was a "heretic" and "despotic" sovereign. That was why he sent a mission 'to reduce that island to the Catholic Faith'.³

The mission was secret and Mateo was asked to leave Spain immediately with the only company of some Franciscans, probably Irish, and a gentleman, Irish as well. They left Spain from El Ferrol in Galicia. Due to the secrecy of the mission Mateo couldn't tell his King, Philip II, about his journey but before leaving Spain he wrote two letters: one to the King and another one to the King's secretary Mateo Vazquez. We haven't found the letter to the King, yet, but we have found the letter he sent to his namesake Mateo Vazquez from El Ferrol, on May the 26th, 1579. In that letter, kept in The British Museum in London, Mateo shows his affection to the King and promises to have him informed of everything related to the good service of Spain.

Before going any further, however, we must remember what the situation in Europe was like in order to understand Mateo de Oviedo's activity.

Three European countries, England, Ireland and Spain formed the three angles of a turbulent relationship that had its apex in the first years of the XVIIth century when Spain sent a fleet with the intention of helping the

¹ RODRIGUEZ PAZOS, Manuel, *Provinciales Compostelanos*. Madrid.

² British Library, MS AD.28.360, fol. 83-84.

³ Ibidem.

Irish to get rid of the English. Our Mateo de Oviedo was there and had a word to say.

Since as early as 1520, Henry VIII had sought to hold a balance of power between the Habsburg Union of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire on one hand, and France on the other. This policy gave him the possibility of an attack on Ireland, but whenever he leaned towards one of the Continental giants, the other was naturally tempted to hit him in his Irish Lordship. Henry, therefore, sought to bring Ireland under a more firm control and subsequently he decided to make himself King of Ireland in 1541.¹ The relations between Ireland and England had always been complicated but they deteriorated much more after 1534 when the English Monarchy abjured of Papal supremacy.

The Irish Lords who looked for help in Europe based their appeals on religious grounds mainly, although there were obviously other advantages that we will analyze below. It was in France, not in Spain, where the Irish Lords looked for help in first place, in spite of the fact that Spain was considered the leading country in Europe after the peace of Cateau-Cambresis in 1559, and in spite as well of the supposed Spanish origin of the island supported by historians like Giraldus Cambrensis² or Edmund Campion,³ poets like Edmund Spenser,⁴ or militarymen like Captain Diego Ortiz de Urizar and Donill O'Suiban⁵ among others. I quote what Captain Diego Ortiz de Urizar said in a letter he sent to the emperor Charles V referring to the Spanish origin of Ireland:

¹ MAGNUSSON, Magnus. *landord or Tenant?* The Bodley Head, London, 1978, p. 13.

² WALES, Gerald of. *The History and Topography of Ireland*. Penguin Classics, Reading, 1985, p. 97-98.

³ VOSSEN, Alphonsus Franciscus, *Two Bokes of the Histories of Ireland*. Volgoe de Couragie, Nijmegen, 1963. p. 32.

⁴ SPENSER, Edmund, *A View of the State of Ireland*. The society of Stationers, Dublin, 1633, p. 33.

⁵ Archivo General de Simancas, *Guerra Antigua* 587.

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“ ... Dizen los irlandeses que aquel rreyno toca a V magt porser su origen y antiguedad deespaña parte degalizia y parte de bizcaya, yo les dezia q bien entendido setenia enespaña ser ello asj.”¹

To the eyes of Rome, either France or Spain were equally acceptable as agents of the Roman Empire. That was probably why Shane O’Neill asked for help in France in 1566 and afterwards in Spain.

What was the reaction of England to this?

As the possibilities of an intervention of Spain in Ireland increased, England intensified her help to the “rebels” of the Low Countries to the point of threatening the whole existence of the Spanish Empire. As a counterpart, the Irish, and some Spaniards like Mateo de Oviedo, urged King Philip II to transform Ireland into the English Netherlands at a minimum cost.² Spain had already sent qualified people to get information of the real situation of Ireland just in case she decided to launch an attack in the English backyard. Among them, we find figures such as Gonzalo Fernandez, personal chaplain to the emperor Charles V, who is sent over to get all the information he can gather about the military strength of the Earls,³ or captain Diego Ortiz de Urizar who left us a detailed military description of the island and its people.⁴

For Spain the advantages of sending troops to “free” Ireland from the “heretics” were enormous. On one hand that would make the English spend money and people to keep an army in Ireland with the possible consequence of having to stop their help to the “rebels” in the Low Countries; on the other, the Spanish fleets coming from the New World would not have to face the constant attacks of English pirates and privateers. Mateo de Oviedo knew all these reasons and that’s probably why he decided to keep the King informed about his trip to Ireland.

To make matters worse, James Fitzmaurice, the Earl of Desmond’s cousin, had to leave Ireland hunted by the English. That was 1575.

¹ Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 828, fol. 106.

² Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 840.

³ B.L. Cotton MS Vespasian, London.

⁴ Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 828, fol. 106.

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Fitzmaurice flew to the continent where he tried to get some help to free Ireland from the protestants. It was not an easy task to convince Philip II to invest money on such an adventure and subsequently Fitzmaurice's progress was slow. He was still in Spain three years later when Elizabeth I sent Walshingham to negotiate with William of Orange, something Philip II took exception to and that forced him to let Fitzmaurice sail for Ireland. James Fitzmaurice landed in Dingle (Ireland) on July 18th, 1579, and Mateo de Oviedo took part in the expedition. Even though it was an enterprise financed by the Roman Catholic Church, Mateo de Oviedo felt he had to tell his king about his trip and so he did, as we have already mentioned.

James Fitzmaurice's invasion of Ireland took place in 1579. In itself it proved disappointing, for Fitzmaurice was killed in a skirmish, shortly after landing, while on his way to the monastery of the Holy Cross at Tipperary to fulfil a vow. However, the doubtful Desmond, dismissed by Sidney as harmless, put himself at the head of the rebellion. The Earl asked for help in Spain, as his cousin had done before, and Mateo de Oviedo is mentioned by Desmond as someone who knows the Irish situation so well that he is capable of explaining everything to the Spanish King. In other words, Mateo de Oviedo was one of Desmond's men in Madrid.¹

In spite of Mateo's efforts to convince the King to send some help to the Irish Earl, Desmond was defeated and eventually caught and decapitated by a disgruntled kerne called O'Moriarty.

The following years were of great importance in the clash between England and Spain. It was in 1580 when Spain incorporated Portugal to the Spanish Crown. Almost instantly the Portuguese pretenders to the throne fled to England helping to deteriorate an already deteriorated situation as a consequence of which the citizens of both countries, England and Spain, were the first to suffer the consequences. The number of seized ships soared and it was an adventure to trade with any country in the area.

We have found a beautiful testimony of what the situation was like in a letter found in the Archivo General de Simancas. We refer to a letter a couple of sailors from Betanzos in Galicia, Pero Gómez and Pero García,

¹ Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 833, fol. 65.

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sent to King Philip II. They asked for help since they had lost everything, their ship included.¹

While those things were happening, Mateo de Oviedo was in Ireland getting all the information available for his King. Once more he must have been very good at his job because on the 14th of October 1580, the Gaelic Earl of Desmond in a letter sent to the King of Spain, refers to Mateo de Oviedo as a person who knows the Irish situation very well as we have already mentioned.

By about the same time, his signature appears in a letter brought over from Ireland by Diego de Cuebas, a man from Santander.² The letter gives details of the Nobles who are against the English Queen and there is a list of the most urgent things the Irish need to fight the “heretics”.

Mateo’s first experience in Ireland lasted, most probably, between three and a half and four years since we find him in 1583 in Santiago de Compostela in charge of the convent of San Francisco. He remained there till 1588 as it is said in the ACTAS DE TOMAS DE HABITOS DE NOVICIOS.³

That notwithstanding, Mateo de Oviedo appears in another chronicle as being “Guardián” of the convent of Oviedo between 1583 and 1588.⁴ We think that unless both responsibilities were compatible, something we very much doubt, it is more likely that Mateo de Oviedo had spent those years in Santiago. We know that from 1585 he taught Theology at the University of Santiago making it compatible with his being in charge of the community. While at the University, there was an incident that may reveal the type of character he had. He had been in charge of teaching Theology while the lecturer Dr. Francisco Gómez was in Madrid negotiating certain matters concerning the relationships between the University and the Archbishopric, as Mateo wasn’t paid anything for that, he thought it was

¹ Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 833, fol. 50.

² Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 833, fol. 64.

³ *Asientos de novicios desde 1568*, Archivo de la Provincia de Santiago (convento de San Francisco de Santiago).

⁴ *Crónica de la provincia franciscana de Santiago*, 1214-1614, por un franciscano anónimo del siglo XVII. Archivo Iberoamericano, Madrid, 1971.

not a good idea to work for nothing and decided to resign. His lessons were so popular among the students that almost immediately the University begged him to continue with his lessons with the promise of paying him 120 ducats a year. Mateo accepted the new situation and went on teaching till he was sent to Madrid to help Dr. Francisco Gómez with the negotiations he was undertaking, in November 1586.

In 1587 Mateo de Oviedo was back in Santiago again and the following years he devoted most of his energies to the Order after having been elected “Definidor Provincial” a couple of times. (1588 and 1594). The beginning of 1598 finds him in Toro, (Zamora) as “Guardián” of the convent the Franciscan Order had in that town. It is during this period when his political activities in Ireland are more intense, especially in relation to Ireland and the Irish.

It is clear that the Irish hadn't forgotten Mateo's good services in Ireland because on the 17th of October, 1597, a group of Irish bishops proposed him as Archbishop of Dublin in a letter sent to the Spanish King. They say among other things that, ‘during Gregory XIII's life he had been sent three times to Ireland with great danger to his life, and that the degree of his zeal and goodwill to the Irish had been so high that all the Catholics of the country knowing of his great personality and wishing to have him with them for ever had named him Archbishop Cassiliense, which is one of the main churches in Ireland, as well as his “nuncio” and “Procurador General” in the Vatican and the Spanish Court’.¹ ‘He loved Ireland so much and had worked so hard for its spiritual health, that he had never stopped doing so in the last eighteen years’.² He had been the best Irish Agent in the Spanish Court since his first arrival in Ireland. There is little doubt that Mateo had tried very hard to convince the Spanish King to send an army to Ireland to free that Catholic country from the Protestants, to the point that Profesor Silke says that ‘in recognition of his usefulness O'Neill gained his appointment to the See of Dublin in May 1599’.³ It is not our intention to contradict Profesor Silke, but we think Mateo de Oviedo was not named Archbishop of Dublin before the last days of 1599, or even the

¹ Archivo General de Simancas, *Guerra Antigua* 3143.

² Archivo General de Simancas, *Guerra Antigua* 3143.

³ SILKE, John, *Kinsale, the Spanish Intervention in Ireland at the end of the Elizabethan Wars*. Liverpool University Press. Liverpool, 1970, p. 65.

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Spring of 1600. We base this thesis, first, in the letters we have come across in the Archivo General de Simancas where Mateo himself insists in the necessity of having a title of some consistency before embarquing to Ireland. In a letter he wrote in the last days of November 1599, he asks his majesty to send him to Ireland endowed with authority to handle such serious affairs which are no less than the preservation of the whole kingdom of Ireland. As Rome was slow, Mateo suggested that the King nominated him for a See in Spanish territory, either in Spain, Italy or the Indies.¹ In the second place we base our thesis in the fact that the writing before and after being named Archbishop is completely different. That change takes place not before the Spring of 1600 and we haven't found any letters dated before March 1600, where Mateo may have used the tittle of Archbishop of Dublin.

In any case the important question now is that Mateo was finally granted that title though as you probably know, he never set foot in Dublin and of course the Protestant authorities never recognized such a Popish title, though they knew of Mateo and his title and whenever they refer to him they say things like:

'The Spaniard who called himself Archbishop of Dublin'.²

'... a letter sent by a friar in Ulster, lately came out of Spain with the supposed Archbishop of Dublin',³ or 'that a Spanish bishop, who called himself by the title or name of the Bishop of Dublin.'⁴

Once Mateo was invested with that authority, he displayed all his ability to convince the Spanish authorities to send a substantial aid to Ireland. He probably was the Spaniard who best knew the Irish situation. We can say he was a personal friend of the Gaelic Earls, O'Neill and O'Donnell, the main opponents of the English in Ireland. His moral authority was so accepted among the Irish that, all the Irish ships that wanted to trade with Spanish ports, had to have a kind of passport with

¹ Archivo General de Simancas, *Guerra Antigua* 3143.

² *Calendar of State Papers*, Ireland. June 16th, 1600. "A letter from the Earl of Ormonde to the Queen Elizabeth I".

³ *Calendar of State Papers*, Ireland. July 13th, 1601. Cork. "A letter sent by Sir George Carew to Sir Robert Cecil".

⁴ Archivo General de Simancas, *Estado* 2511 & 961.

signature together with O'Neill's, in order to preserve the secrecy required in the preparation of the Armada:

“It is most suitable for the good service of His Majesty that not a single ship coming from those kingdoms be allowed in Spain unless they bring passports signed by O'Neill and the Archbishop of Dublin who is with the Earl”.¹

As a man of great activity and a strong character he got furious when the Spanish public officials were negligent in anything related to Ireland. We have found letters of complaint to the Ministry of State for War and Finances, Esteban de Ybarra, for that. He even got furious as Michaline Walsh says in her book *THE O'NEILLS IN SPAIN*, when Henry, O'Neill's son, wanted to become a Franciscan friar in Salamanca and Mateo was asked to solve the problem, because he considered that he had more important things to do.² However, it is during the attempt to free Ireland from the protestants where Mateo's character is best seen. As an expert on Irish matters and due to his special relations with the Irish Earls he gave his opinion about the place where the Armada should land. He said Kinsale was the place and it had to be Kinsale in spite of the opposition of the Chief Comander of the Spanish landing forces, Don Juan del Aguila. During the time the Spanish forces were there, he was in charge of the hospital, something that gave him a certain degree of authority, especially when the King himself had asked Don Juan del Aguila to take into account any suggestions made by Mateo de Oviedo; I can assure you, by the way, that, for Juan del Aguila's disgrace, he made quite a lot of them. When everything was over and the conquest of Ireland to the Catholic Faith was lost, Mateo de Oviedo, in the ulterior survey carried by the Spanish government, accused Don Juan del Aguila of not having been a competent commander and blamed him for having surrender to the English Viceroy, Lord Mountjoy. Nevertheless, the Spanish government cleared both of them of any responsibility and Mateo, old, tired and disappointed, retired to Valladolid where he died on the 10th of January, 1610 according to some³ and on the 2nd of May, 1611 according to others.⁴ He is the man who, in

¹ WALSH, Michaline, Op. Cit. p. 6.

² *El Eco Franciscano*, 1: Diciembre 1919, 556-58.

³ *El Eco Franciscano*, 1: Diciembre 1919, 556-58.

⁴ *Hierarchia Catholica* IV, 177.

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Michaline Walsh's words, 'is perhaps Ireland's greatest Spanish friend of all time'.¹

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¹ WALSH, Michaline, Op. Cit. p. 6.