

El Salvador: The Scottish people who emigrated to Latin America

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DO you have family connections in the USA and Canada? Have you been in North America and had someone tell you that they were part “Scotch”? For many of us in Scotland, we are aware of our connections in these two countries. But how about south of Trump’s wasteful wall with Mexico?

While Scottish settlers migrated to the USA and Canada in the 19th century, they were also settling the rest of the Americas from Tijuana to Ushuaia – from Mexico to Argentina. It is less likely that you will know Scottish ancestors and their descendants in these places as this landmass is extensive and the settlers became isolated from their - Scottish origins. But Scottish history flows through the veins of Latin America’s past. This article rekindles our Scottish connection to the Latin American region to enhance our nation’s global memory.



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In 2017, I was backpacking in Central America while I studied Spanish at a language school in Honduras. I arrived at a hostel in El Salvador's capital city, San Salvador, tired from my triple-transfer congested minibus voyage from Guatemala. When I checked in and gave my name and nationality to the receptionist, José, he responded in Spanish: "I am from Scotland as well." I switched to my Scots-English but he said he only spoke Castilian Spanish. I realised he meant that he had historic familial connections to Scotland; he was not a hippy hosteller on the Gringo Trail working for free accommodation. How did someone from Scotland end up in this Central American micro-state?

We conversed about our shared Scottish heritage and José explained to me that his grandfather came to Central America at the start of the 20th century to work on the construction of the Panama Canal. As a Scottish engineer, his grandfather joined an -

international workforce that laboured to crack open the waterway that split the Americas and facilitated new global maritime trade routes. After completing the task in 1914, José's grandfather decided to remain in the wonderful world of Latin America; he headed northwards to his next job opportunity in El Salvador.

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Thus, two generations later, José finds himself in an international hostel in the country with a clandestine connection to the Scottish nation.

As an aspiring historian, I thought to myself "surely there are more stories of people like José's family in Latin America?". As it turns out, there are lots.

Since the conquest and settlement of the American landmass, led originally by the Spanish, Scottish protagonists have played their part in Latin American history. Many of us have heard of the Spanish Conquistadores (the Spanish first arrivals who colonised the Americas) and their villainous acts of abuse and exploitation. Names such as Hernán - Cortés and Francisco Pizarro are synonymous with avaricious imperial plunder. But Scots also assisted in the Spanish conquest of the "New World".

In his research at St Andrews, Joseph Wagner has uncovered Scots' role in this conquest. He has discovered how Thomas Blake was one of the first people from the British Isles to settle in the Americas, arriving from Scotland in the early 16th century. During Blake's time in the Spanish colony, he assisted in the Spanish exploration of what is today part of the southern area of the United States (Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico).

After the conquest of the Americas, Scotland's role in Latin America did not terminate. - During the wars of personnel went to the Americas to support Latin American independence.

One of the most notable Scottish contributions in these wars was in Gran Colombia (modern-day Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador). Hundreds of Scottish volunteers travelled with the British Foreign Legion to the north of South America to fight against - Spanish loyalists, and help liberate the region from Spanish control. Some Scots decided that the allure of Latin America was too good to pass, and they decided to remain in the region after the wars.

INDEPENDENT from Spain, Latin America offered extensive trading and settler opportunities to non-Spaniards. Thus began the increased arrival of Scottish migrants and entrepreneurs. Scottish settlers came and went in Latin America as missionaries and traders.

Most significantly, after the Industrial Revolution in Britain (circa 1760-1840), itinerant Scots participated in the new ventures in Latin America. Scots worked on economic development projects led by British capitalists in countries such as Brazil and Colombia. As British firms constructed many of the railways across the continent, Scottish engineers travelled with these firms to apply their expertise to the railway projects.

Simultaneously, as goods from Scottish factories arrived into Latin America, Scottish traders also arrived into the marketplaces to sell these goods. Remarkably, in a 1924 parliamentary debate, a Welsh MP claimed that “there are more Scotsmen in Argentina than there are in Glasgow”.

He was referring to the large presence of Scottish traders in the country due to their importance for the British connection there.

Scots went to places such as Argentina to escape the factories of the Central Belt and to improve their own socio-economic status.

Reading this article in 2021, you might ask “why did Scots move to countries such as Mexico and Argentina instead of New York if they wanted to boost their socio-economic status?”.

The world at the beginning of the 19th century did not see the USA as the expected future global power. After independence, Mexico was poised to be one of the leading global powers owing to its resource-rich landmass that extended from northern California and through Central America, and also incorporated the Philippines and its trade with Internal conflict stifled this potential, but as the Mexican government expanded its railway networks and increased its trading connections with Europe, Scots arrived with British enterprises to support Mexico’s economic expansion.

Innovative and industrious Scots likely participated in the economic development because of what they saw as a potential global trading power.

Argentina was a similar budding economic power at the start of the 20th century. In 1913, the Argentine republic’s GDP was the sixth largest in the world, and it expected to prosper in the 20th century the same way that the USA had in the 19th. Since the late 19th century, the Argentine economy accelerated and offered appealing prospects to Scottish traders and settlers. Hoping to benefit from Argentina’s modern growth, Scots boarded ships to South America instead of the North.

In New York you could be greeted by a large labour pool of European settlers living in slums and working the docks for precarious wages. But in Latin America, you could be greeted with multiple opportunities and the support of the British embassy and a community of Scottish settlers. Also, as people at that time expected countries such as Mexico and Argentina to boom, it is not perplexing to consider why Scots opted for the fresh air of Buenos Aires instead of the stench of dockyards in Boston.

But why were Scots leaving their homeland in the first place? Following the Industrial Revolution in Britain, Scots experienced the hardships of industrial society of rapid urbanisation and factory work. For some Scots in the rural areas of the nation, moving to the city was a dreary and claustrophobic prospect. Taking their expertise to work in Latin American rural areas enticed them more than the move to Glasgow’s dockyards.

Equally, for the Scottish urbanite, migrating to Latin America to take advantage of the economic opportunities there appealed more than remaining on the factory-line. Moreover, Britain’s industrial growth from the 19th century onwards served the British elite’s economic interests and the development centred on London capitalists’ desired outcome.

Ordinary Scottish people remained on the periphery of this economic development as the elite groups exploited Scottish labour to satiate their rapacious financial thirst. As a result,

the Scottish diaspora intensified, and Latin America was among the many regions in which the nation's people settled.

UNDERSTANDING this historic role and experience of Scottish people in Latin America has become increasingly popular in academia, and many scholars are currently exposing this history. Nicolás Gómez Baeza, a Chilean doctoral candidate at the University of Warwick, is creating original insight into the experiences of Scottish farmers in Patagonia, recently receiving a research grant from the Scottish Historical Review Trust.

His research emphasises how Scottish expertise in sheep farming supported agricultural development in Southern Chile and Argentina. Clare Arnold of North Western University in Chicago is another international doctoral researcher fascinated with the Scottish-Latin - American connection. Like Gómez Baeza, Arnold has written for the Scottish Centre for Global History's online research blog about Scottish settlers in Argentina.

Arnold and Gómez Baeza represent this growing body of scholars, in Britain and abroad, who are uncovering this Scottish connection to Chile and Argentina's past. However, other histories of the Latin American region intersected with global Scotland. To understand this history, we need to encourage and support more historians to investigate our nation's Latin American network.

The Scottish-Latin American connection is an important part of our national heritage and its global links. Too often, writers and politicians overemphasise the Scottish migrants in European-settler colonies such as Australia and Canada. When discussing Scotland's global connections, they focus on Europe and the European-settler colonies. This practice neglects the intricacies of the Scottish nation in the rest of the world by isolating its role in these European and pseudo-European countries.

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In Latin America, Scottishness has contributed to its geography of cultural diversity, which equally has influenced Scottishness as well. Scots moving around the region, remaining there or coming home shaped the Scottish nation through the interactions and - experiences that they shared with people in their homeland. To fully comprehend how Latin America influenced itinerant Scots and consequently Scotland's culture and identity, we need to explore this history and recognise this overlooked region's connection to Scotland.

Next time you look at the globe in your home office, spin to the Americas. But this time, look south of the anglosphere and gaze at the expansive and diverse ecological territories of Latin America. A world that is often forgotten shares more connection to our Scottish nation and our history than you might have thought. Along the precipitous summits of the Andean mountains, in the farmlands that cultivate the piquant tastes of Guatemalan coffee grounds, and throughout the foliage of the Amazon Rainforest, Scottish people - participated in the modern history of this convivial region.

You might have lost contact with your distant relatives and familial connections in places such as Panama, but acknowledging and remembering the Scottish nation's activity there supports our link with these Scottish protagonists and Latin America. Gaze at your globe, trace the boundaries of Bolivia, and imagine the mesmerising history of this region and its Scottish connection.