

An historic relationship

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JACQUES ARNOLD was Midland Bank's Deputy Representative in Brazil, establishing their Representative Office in São Paulo in 1976. He was later the Thomas Cook Regional Director for Latin America, establishing operations throughout the continent. He became MP for Gravesham in 1987, as well as Secretary of the British Latin American Parliamentary Group. He was an international parliamentary observer at the Chilean Constitutional Referendum in 1989, and led a British Parliamentary Delegation to Chile following the restoration of democracy. Since leaving parliament in 1997, he has been Advisor to a range of British companies in their Latin American activities.

Britain's Foreign Secretary at the time of Colombian Independence, George Canning

This historic first-ever State Visit to the United Kingdom by a President of the Republic of Colombia, carried out this week by President Juan Manuel Santos, is yet another milestone in the centuries-old relationship between our two countries. A resident of London for nine years from 1972, he was a representative for the National Confederation of Coffee Growers at the International Coffee Organisation, itself based in London, and previously he had studied for a Master's degree in Economics and Development at the London School of Economics. He has many personal friends in London.

The State Visit follows the successful visit to Colombia in 2014 by the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, during which they visited the



Centre for Peace, Memory and Reconciliation in Bogotá, accompanied by the President and his First Lady, when the Prince spoke to families of victims, of his own experiences during the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the "bewildering and soul-destroying anguish" he felt on learning of the death of his uncle Lord Mountbatten, who died in an IRA bomb attack. He continued, "It is an immense tragedy that violence has cast such a long shadow across the whole of this remarkable country for the past five decades. Many of you here today will have experienced unimaginable suffering, and our hearts go out to you as you struggle to come to terms with all that has happened to you and your loved ones." Following the successful conclusion of the Peace Accords, and a permanent ceasefire coming into effect, the poignancy of his words could not have been more relevant.

British-Colombian relations date from 1825, when Colombia's envoy, José Manuel Hurtado, was presented to King George IV, and thereby became the first Latin American envoy to be received by the King, and indeed by any European Court. This symbolised a major change in the international order, marking the transition of the former Spanish American colonies into independent nations in their own right. It was a consequence of Britain's despatching Consuls and Commissioners to Colombia in 1823, and the decision to negotiate a commercial treaty and recognise the newly independent country the following year. A year later, the Foreign Secretary made his famous speech in the House of Commons, "I called the New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old".

This formalised a relationship between the two countries which stretched back to many years before. Since the sixteenth century, Britain had developed colonies in North America and the Caribbean, the most prominent of which was Jamaica. It was from the latter that trade developed with Cartagena and other ports, despite Spanish prohibition. When the North American colonies rebelled, and Jamaica failed to join them, the importance of this trade grew. War with Spain, declared in 1796, only further encouraged Britain to provide assistance, which was exemplified by the resources made available to Francisco de Miranda in his struggles.

The Napoleonic Wars had their impact on these developments. In 1808, Napoleon deposed the

Spanish Bourbon Monarch, Ferdinand VII, and imprisoned him in France, placing his own brother, Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish Throne. Due to wartime pressures, this resulted in Britain upholding the claims of Ferdinand, and as his ally, reversing its previous policy towards Latin America. The Juntas all over Latin America mostly pledged their allegiance to Ferdinand, and rejected Napoleonic ambitions, but also the authority of the Bourbon regency. In the process they rejected the previous Cádiz Monopoly, and opened their ports to foreign trade, and British Colombian trade blossomed, largely through Jamaica.

Within a couple of years many of the Juntas declared their own independence, and sent their own representatives to England, Simón Bolívar being one, who with others campaigned for their cause in London. Their diplomatic ventures were unsuccessful as the British Foreign Secretary was concerned to avoid upsetting his Spanish allies. Despite neutrality, supplies reached the independence movement through Jamaica. Following the defeat of Napoleonic France, Ferdinand VII turned his attention to regaining his American Colonies, and despatched forces. A desperate Junta at Cartagena declared it was annexing itself to the British Empire, and called for its defence, a call which was rejected under the pressures of European realpolitik.

Nevertheless, Colombia's men in London did not give up – buying arms, and recruiting soldiers and sailors who had been demobilised from the victorious British forces after Waterloo. They also campaigned to build up support for their cause, which rapidly gained in strength. 7,000 recruits travelled to South America to fight for the cause. Colonel James Rooke, a Waterloo veteran, created a brigade under Bolívar, known as the Legión Británica, which fought at the Battle of Boyacá, a key battle in the wars of independence. Another, James Fraser, wrote a guide to military tactics in Spanish, and settled in the country, with his family contributing military men to Colombia for generations thereafter.

The steady success of the independence fighters tilted the balance of power, and the development of British trade created a rapidly growing interest, itself under pressure from rival French and US influence, the latter expressed by its Monroe doctrine, the former by its renewed alliance with Spain. George Canning, the new Foreign Secretary, himself a mercantilist and MP for Liverpool, finally acted with the formal recognition of 1824 – itself celebrated through the streets of Bogotá. This led to a new era of development aided by British trade and finance.

Simón Bolívar was an admirer of British politics, “Great Britain provides more than just military backing, commercial opportunities, and financial

support for Spanish American leaders; it also offered a powerful, practical, living model for the construction of their post-independent nationhood.” He embraced the model for combining political freedom and social improvement with respect for property and a robust legal system. However, its non-Federalist aspects led to the collapse of 1830, and the parting of the ways between Venezuela, Ecuador and what was then called New Granada – later to become the Republic of Colombia.

With the demise of Gran Colombia went the preponderance of British influence in the country, but countless Britons and Irishmen contributed to the economic and infrastructural development of the country, and Britain remained Colombia's greatest market until the first world war.

British investment nevertheless continued over the succeeding decades, culminating in BP's massive investment in the Colombian oilfields at Cusiana. The inauguration of this project in 1992 brought about the first ever bilateral visit to Latin America by a British Prime Minister, John Major, who has embraced Colombian-British relations with enthusiasm.

The cultural contacts between our two countries also date from the independence era, and these flourish today, with the high exchange of students referred to in other articles. Visitors to Bogotá will see examples of traditional British architecture. The British Council has operated in Colombia for 70 years, with English teaching, and a lively programme of arts and cultural events.

Over the last two years, British-Colombian trade has grown by over 30 per cent, in addition to rising British investment. The Presidential Visit this week will give additional impetus to this encouraging progress. ■

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Colonel James Rooke's Legión Británica played an important part in the Battle of Boyacá in Colombia's War of Independence

