

The 'Light Infantry of Capital': The Migration of Miners from South West Britain to Latin America in the Early Nineteenth Century and the Rise of the Modern Global Mining Economy

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Before the Boer War, one in every four white mineworkers on the Rand were Cornish; most of the mines there were captained by Cornishmen. In Michigan's copper mines it was noted that the Cornish had sewn up the mining labour market to such an extent that it was often hard for mineworkers of other nationalities to obtain a job. This pattern was repeated in many other mining areas around the globe where the Cornish were considered to be the world's finest hard rock miners. For a small region like Cornwall, the population of which never exceeded 375,000 in the 1900s, this was an incredible achievement. Yet how had Cornish miners worked their way into this seemingly unassailable position by the late nineteenth century?

This paper claims that this was by no means a foregone conclusion. It demonstrates that this resulted due to the British capitalisation of the Latin American mining industry following the independence movements of the 1820s. Cornwall was then at the vanguard of mining and steam engine technology and British capitalists looked to this region to provide their skilled labour needs. In Latin America, the Cornish acquired new skills in metalliferous mining that they exported to developing mining fields worldwide, along with their vaulted reputation, much of it on the back of British capital.

The decline of British capital investment and the parallel decline in cutting edge mining technology is depicted in changing labour recruitment patterns across Latin America in the early twentieth century. Moreover, this echoed a global process as American capitalists displaced the British and the Cornish slowly began to lose their international reputation as hard rock miners par excellence. The movement of Cornish miners, the 'light infantry of British capital', provide an excellent case study of changing capital investment patterns in the modern global mining economy.