

Disputed Territories

On Irish radio, a few weeks ago, the commentator made a brave endeavour to explain the reasons for the current tensions between Spain and the United Kingdom with regard to the sovereignty of Gibraltar. He dealt at length with the problem (as he saw it) before wandering into the historical “minefield” of the Falklands - and the Argentinean viewpoint. It was all good stuff - but such was my confusion that I felt compelled to undertake some modest “research”, little of which clarified the ownership of the territories.

Currently, The Falkland Islands (or The Malvinas as the young man kept saying) are a British Overseas Territory with internal self-governance and the United Kingdom government is responsible for; inter alia, the defence of the territory’s 3000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are of Scottish descent.

There is a belief that the 4,700 square mile archipelago was first discovered by Amerigo Vespucci but historians have long disputed this and most attribute their discovery to the early English Arctic explorer John Davis. In any event after their discovery “very little happened” and it took almost a century before a Royal Naval vessel, under the command of a Captain Strong, sailed between the East and West islands and christened the intervening waters “Falkland Sound” after the (then) Treasurer to the Navy. However, some history books attribute their “discovery” to a Captain John Byron, Royal Navy (see below) About the same time (1764), a French explorer named Louis-Antoine de Bouganville came across the uninhabited islands and put a landing party ashore on East Falkland, established Port Bouis as a settlement, claimed the territory for France and christened the island(s) Iles Malouines in tribute to his home port of St.Malo.

Now, for some unknown reason, Spain showed an interest in these far flung islands and France -also for some unknown reason - agreed to cede them to Spain but this was a time when British interest in the area was being reinvigorated and the aforementioned (now) Commodore Byron (known to his men as “Foul-weather Jack”) seized the Islands yet again for King George the Third and established a colony called Port Egmont on a small island adjoining West Falkland. Where the settlers came from is not revealed but they were probably military personnel.

Almost immediately, a Spanish naval squadron arrived and established a military base on another island and for some years both powers lived in almost total ignorance of the presence of the other. About 1774 they became aware of each other and just as war seemed inevitable Spain backed down and agreed that Britain had found them first.

About 1820 the young Argentine Republic established a settlement on another island but after some six years they ceded it to a Frenchman, Louis Vernet, who was a stockbreeder. He claimed ownership of the entire area but when he tried to tax a group of North American whalers who used the islands as a whaling station the US Navy intervened and destroyed his settlement.

Thereafter, the Argentine reasserted its right to the territory and, almost immediately, the British decided that they HAD to find out WHAT was going on. About 1832, HMS Clio, under the command of Captain Onslow, was dispatched to find out who was living where throughout the two major islands. They soon discovered an Argentine settlement on East Falklands (Port Soledad) comprising some 25 soldiers and an armed schooner but after some diplomatic discussion the Argentineans agreed to leave and the Falkland Islands once again fell under British control and settlers - mostly from Scotland - moved in.

Soon a whaling station was established and it was, for a short while, a convict station before a “government” was established and the area settled into an uneasy relationship with its nearest neighbour - one which persists to the present day.

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I think I should now ask Captain Kelso to explain and sum up the Northern Ireland situation, and then perhaps the Middle East. Now THAT would fill up quite a few pages! Ed.