

Ireland and the Caribbean

By Jorge L. China
Guest Editor

The Caribbean was the first American region to come to the attention of sixteenth-century Europeans. It was here that they at first marvelled at the pristine beauty of the New World, were puzzled by the 'strange' Arawak and Carib natives, lorded it over the indigenous people and their countryside in the name of religion, civilisation, and mercantile expansion. They thereby set in motion the largest trans-oceanic migratory movement in the history of the world. The pursuit of riches and fame lured enterprising people from throughout the 'Old World,' fascinated by the unique languages, spiritual beliefs, and cultural artefacts of the people of the 'New World'. While it is tempting to describe this process using modern-day multicultural clichés like the 'melting pot' ideology of the United States or 'mestizaje' in Latin America, it must be remembered that intense friction accompanied the post-1492 re-settlement of the New World.

The newcomers brought with them their centuries-old quarrels, and these were played out in the Antillean archipelago in the shape of inter-imperial competition and warfare. These carry-overs from Old World politics, in turn, would influence the various ethnic, religious, and racial groups that came to be a part of the re-settlement of the Americas. The Caribbean and its surrounding littoral exemplify this legacy. Perennial clashes between Spain, France, England, Denmark and Holland, the five leading European countries whose subjects carved out colonies there, have characterised much the history of this region over the past five centuries. Even Sweden, which at one point occupied the tiny island of Saint Bartholomew, was involved in these economic and territorial battles.

Although the region-wide violence perpetrated by pirates, privateers and armed military expeditions, who raided, pillage and killed is now largely behind us, it has been replaced by another type of discord: the politics of

representation. The area's present-day historiography, particularly in relation to the colonial period, mostly focuses on the Spanish, French, British, Danish and Dutch settlers, and their various attempts to gain the upper hand. Colonists, fortune-hunters, adventurers, clerics, voyagers, coerced labourers, prisoners, religious dissidents and mercenaries from other parts of Europe who also had a role in the demographic, economic and political evolution of the Antillean archipelago, are generally marginalised or silenced.



Christmas Carnival in Montserrat
(Jonathan Skimmer, 2000)

The Irishmen and women whose varied experiences are featured in this special edition of *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* are certainly some of them. With the possible exception of the Irish association with the eastern Caribbean island of Montserrat, they are not in the mainstream of academic and popular discussions of Caribbean Studies. It is hoped that the essays that follow will shed some light

on their voluntary or compulsory arrival, successes and failures, misfortunes and strokes of luck, virtues and shortcomings, contributions and blunders, in short on their 'lived' experiences.

Perhaps one of the most revealing findings in this collection is the fact that the Irish diaspora in the Caribbean was not limited to any one historical period, group of individuals, or geographical area. Their presence in the region stretched across time, from the indentured servants in the 1650s to mercenaries and freedom fighters in the early nineteenth-century Spanish American wars of independence. Unlike many other European colonists, who generally came as single men, one finds both Irish men and women among the pioneers. Some, like Byrne's John Hooke, arrived voluntarily; others crossed the Atlantic under duress, like the transported and forced labourers studied by Rodgers.

Most European settlers on the islands confined themselves to one or another island or group of islands, hence the modern-day expressions Hispanic Caribbean, French Caribbean, British Caribbean, and so on. The Irish, on the other hand, looked for and found new homes wherever opportunities or other circumstances took them. They resided on practically all of the islands of the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean zone, as demonstrated in the papers by Rodgers, Anderson, Power and Chinaea, among others. Some of them were undoubtedly trans-colonial, multilingual, and highly adaptable to changing environments.

The Irish also helped to shape the demographic, social, economic and political evolution of the areas under study. Early on, Irish servants and religious dissidents comprised the bulk of the white population of the British Caribbean. When the islands made the transition to sugar cultivation, and Africanisation set in, this numerical advantage faded away. Since the presence of whites now became a matter of public safety, some of the Irish exploited this shift to their advantage whenever possible, by seeking or demanding access to the more prestigious positions of master artisans, overseers and planters.

In some cases, as shown by Power, Irish people took leading mercantile positions in the expanding world of transatlantic trade. Others escaped from servitude or defected to England's Catholic rivals, especially France and Spain. In Cuba, Irish railroad workers became part of the plantocracy's unsuccessful 'whitening' scheme, as described in Brehony's article. Politically, the vital roles played by the O'Reilly-O'Daly team in revamping defences in the Puerto Rican capital of San Juan, as examined in Chinaea's article, or John 'Dinamita' O'Brien during the Cuban insurrection of the 1890s, analysed in Quintana's article, are also acknowledged in this volume. They are but a few examples of a long tradition of Irish military presence in Spain and its American colonies.

Finally, the Irish impact in the region went beyond their physical activities as servants, planters, merchants and soldiers. Attempts to draw comparisons between the colonial experiences of Ireland and the Caribbean have also sparked the creative energies and imagination of writers. Two examples in this volume are Tewfik's insightful deconstruction of Lorna Goodison's poem, 'Country Sligoville', and Novillo Corvalán's original search for a literary kinship in the works of Derek Walcott and James Joyce. Their work shows the enduring cultural, linguistic and political cross-pollination resulting from the Irish presence in the Caribbean, one that challenges the notion of discreet colonies or nations evolving in relative isolation. Instead, the authors show how writers in both the Caribbean and Ireland see or have come to grips with their common experiences with servitude, oppression and forms of colonialism.

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