

## **Irish Railroad Workers in Cuba: Towards a Research Agenda**

By Margaret Brehony

### **Abstract**

*The story of 300-plus Irish railroad workers, contracted in New York in 1835 to work in Havana, Cuba, raises many questions about their recruitment, experience and survival. Situating their migratory experience within a context of race and class politics, at a time of nationalist struggles on two colonial islands on either side of the Atlantic, the position of these migrants as colonised 'Other' within the Iberian Atlantic system of slavery and colonial labour is highlighted. The need to explore the relationship between an Irish identification with subalternity, on the one hand, and the significance of 'the wages of whiteness' to the Irish on the other, against the backdrop of the Hispano-Cuban colonisation policy to 'whiten' the island's majority black population is examined. In concluding that there was some opposition by the Irish to colonial rule and slavery in Cuba, the paper suggests that the question of Irish identification with a subaltern position merits closer investigation.*

### **Introduction**

Cuba is not usually associated with Irish immigrants, but in the decades before the 1840s potato famine successive waves of Irish people migrated to the Spanish slave colony. In the early 1800s, Cuba and Latin America in general were destinations for labourers who knew little about the climate, customs or language and had no personal networks to fall back on if things went wrong. The expectations and ambitions of English and Irish emigrants heading to Brazil in the 1860s were born of ignorance and desperation and based on idealised images of 'a land of mystery or lush paradise' (Marshall 2005: 7). Immigration schemes targeting labourers were more often than not exploitative; this was certainly the case with the importation of an immigrant workforce to build the Cuban railroad. Described as a bitter and shameful episode (Serrano 1973: 35), the fate of 300 Irish railroad workers contracted in New York in 1835 to work in Havana raises many questions about their recruitment, the conditions they experienced, their provenance and their survival; it also highlights their position as colonised 'Other' within the Iberian Atlantic system of slavery and colonial labour.

In this paper, I propose to situate this particular episode of Irish migration within the context of race and class politics at a time of nationalist struggles on the two colonial islands of the

Atlantic world. The perceived or real threat of a large population of oppressed "Others" in the case of Catholics in Ireland and of enslaved Africans in Cuba, especially their potential for inciting mass insurrection from below, weighed heavily on the cause for independence on both islands. Transformations in the world economy and the societal imperatives of colonial Ireland triggered a dynamic for the migration of labour. The railroad workers' position as colonial others and British subjects was also coloured by the Hispano-Cuban elite's colonisation project, a policy to 'whiten' the island's majority black population and assuage the fear of 'el peligro negro' (the black peril) amongst its white minority elite.

### **Irish Latin American Studies**

Within the broader context of Irish Latin American Diaspora studies, Irish migration and settlement in the Spanish Caribbean is one of the least researched areas to date. Mary Harris, in her survey of 'Irish Historical Writing on Latin America,' concludes that 'weighty Irish academic studies are very few indeed,' despite a growing interest and recognition of Irish communities in Latin America (Harris 2006). Citing Edmundo Murray's description of nineteenth-century Irish immigrants in Argentina 'as English colonisers in a remote location of the Anglosphere', she underlines the challenge to historians who wish to locate Ireland within the discourse of colonialism (Harris 2006: 258). Historically, the close ties

between Ireland and Spain have complicated the Irish attitude to Spanish colonisation, according to Harris, and she posits that 'Catholicism, rather than postcolonialism, proved the strong point of identification with Latin America'. In a short biography of James J. O'Kelly, the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz distinguishes between the conservative Irish who were supporters of the Spanish colonial system in Cuba, such as the celebrated Irish generals and/or merchants O'Reilly, O'Donnell, O'Farrill and O'Gaban, and those other sons of Ireland who identified with the anti-colonial struggle, including Richard Madden and O'Kelly. Regarding Irish involvement in liberation wars throughout South America, Ortiz concludes that for the latter Irish, England was their Spain (O'Kelly 1930: 41).

Several Cuban academics researching the links between Ireland and Cuba recognise that there are important Irish influences in the economic, political and cultural development of the island (see the article by Rafael Fernández Moya in this journal). Some of the first registered settlements of Irish communities in Cuba date back to 1817, though Irish individuals and families found their way, voluntarily or by force, to the West Indies much before that time.

### **Railroad workers**

During the months of November and December 1835, some 378 workers, most of them Irish, disembarked at the port of Havana. All had been contracted in New York to work for the Cuban Railway Commission. In a push to industrialise the sugar industry in Cuba on the eve of the abolition of the African slave trade, British investment paved the way for building the first stretch of railroad in Ibero-America between Havana and Güines. It was estimated that a workforce of 1,500 men would complete the excavations within a period of eight months. Benjamin H. Wright, the engineer in charge, looked outside Cuba to recruit cheap white wage labour of European descent. The Irish recruits are described as being semi-skilled with experience in explosives

and railroad construction. A copy of one ship's passenger rolls lists forty-six men and six women, and included artisans, labourers, mechanics, and overseers. Five women are listed as wives; one woman was apparently unattached to any of the men (Ballol 1987).

Accounts written by Cuban historians make brief reference to Irish migrant workers in the construction of the railroad; however, most fail to explore this migratory flow in any great detail. A more recent publication by the Spanish Railroad Foundation (Ballol 1987), commemorating 150 years of the Cuban railroad, contains the most extensive reference to Irish railroad workers and to the many records concerning them preserved in the National Archives in Havana and the Provincial Archives in Matanzas. In his study of the sugar mills in Cuba, *El Ingenio* (The Sugar Mill, 1964), the Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals provides a short account of the construction of the 'sugar railroad' and the immigrant work force (including Irish) that made it possible.

The Irish and other bonded labourers, particularly Canary Islanders, were forced into a brutal work regime under Spanish military rule, where any attempt to abscond was treated as desertion punishable by prison or execution. They drew monthly wages of 25 pesos, most of which was absorbed by the contractors as repayments for the maritime passage, passports, hiring fees, monthly medical bills, and debts incurred as penalties. Documents from the Cuban National Archives revealed a December 1835 report by the Royal Council for Development, which tallied the following figures for the labourers toiling on the railway project:

- Irish contingent, 282
- Military prisoners from the Iberian Peninsula, 140
- Freed slaves, 30
- Free blacks liberated from illegal slave ships, 24 (Ballol 1987: 82)

In the course of the construction of its short 17 miles, the 'sugar railroad' claimed many lives. The appalling work conditions of hunger and an exhausting sixteen-hour day, with workers

crammed into wooden huts at night, led to rebellion, protest and flight. Protestors ended up in prison, only to find themselves returned to the railroad work gang, this time as forced labourers. In fact some of the first strikes recorded on the island were led by Irish people and Canary Islanders (Mota, 2003). On termination of their contracts, the Irish were not entitled to repatriation. Their passports were returned and the workers unceremoniously let go. Serrano writes of workers plagued by diseases left to beg in the streets of Havana and in the countryside, an image of abject drunken misery, and of starvation (Serrano: 1991). Recalling their abuse in the British West Indies some two centuries earlier (see article by Rodgers in this journal) by planters who viewed them as 'insubordinate and riotous social misfits' (Beckles: 1990), the Royal Council in Havana likewise defended its refusal to repatriate the Irish by characterising them as 'worthless, lazy, disease-ridden, drunkards' who deceived their bosses by disguising their 'vile habits' at the time of their contracts (Serrano: 1991).

### **Twice Exploited: As Labourers and as White Buffers**

In the absence of any comparative studies of Cuba and Ireland as colonial sites, the broader question posed by Joe Cleary (Carroll 2003: 40) as to the extent of connections between Irish oppositional discourse and other non-European subaltern discourse is a very useful prism through which to examine this episode of the Irish experience in Cuba. References to Irish contract workers in Cuba in the early part of the nineteenth century reveal their exploitation as "racial pawns" in the Latin American power elite's struggles to contain black workers and slaves through racial privilege. During the nineteenth century, they sought to 'whiten' their populations and engender European mentalities and customs through immigration. Argentina is noted for its 'success' in effectively diluting and diminishing its Afro-Argentine and indigenous population by these means. Doctoral research carried out by Claire Healy describes the enthusiastic embracing of their own whiteness by the Irish

in Buenos Aires - albeit not with the extreme reactionary stance associated with North America's race/class wars. This eased the Irish-Argentines' way out of the subaltern position that they came from. They were easily classified 'as *ingleses* and therefore unequivocally white' (Healy 2005: 488), contributing to the structural process of inscribing white dominance. However, the Irish who came to Cuba to work on the railroad were known as *irlandeses* (not *ingleses*) and their incorporation into the world of privileged whiteness was not so clear cut.

The marked differences in the experiences of Irish immigrants in Argentina and Cuba must be found in the Hispano-Cuban colonisation policy to 'whiten' the island, to keep it from being overrun by a majority black population. Irish subalternity on the one hand, and attempts to tie the workers to 'the wages of whiteness' on the other, need to be explored against this backdrop. The British too imported Irish labour as a solution to tipping the balance in favour of whiteness in the planter-dominated economies of the Caribbean. While they may have been successful in terms of producing the 'right' numbers of whites, it must be remembered that the Irish servants were perceived and treated as 'black men in white skins' (Beckles, 1986). They were considered by their English masters as the 'internal enemy' and at different times were seen as a greater threat to peace than their African slaves. Suspicions of Irish participation in slave revolts ran deep.

The accusation of Irish identification with African slaves in Barbados was repeated again in Cuba more than a century later. Jonathan Curry-Machado studied the presence, identity, and influence of engineering migrants in Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century, including some Irish artisans working on the sugar plantations and railways. He contends that by their mere presence, foreign labourers and mechanics were seen as 'catalytic agents' in the social and political changes taking place at the time in Cuba (Curry-Machado 2003). Both Curry-Machado and historian Robert Paquette describe the imprisonment and torture of British subjects during the slave revolts which

took place on a number of sugar plantations in 1844. British Consular documents at the Public Records Office in Kew contain testimonies of Irish prisoners accused of being involved in a plot to overthrow slavery and the Spanish Crown.

Many foreigners were arrested and tortured during a crackdown by the Captain-General of the island, General Leopoldo O'Donnell, ironically a descendent of the O'Donnells of Donegal. His brutal repression of slaves during the revolts known as the Escalera Uprising is well known. There are lengthy petitions by the British Consul in Havana advocating for more humane treatment of the British subjects imprisoned in different parts of Cuba who were natives of Ireland. For example, Patrick O'Rourke was accused of helping to obtain ammunition to assist in the insurrection; [1] James Downing, a native of Waterford, was also charged with conspiring to overthrow the authority of the Spanish Crown in Cuba; [2] Patrick O'Doherty, of Donegal, a train driver on the Havana-Güines line, was thrown into prison for allegedly causing the train he was driving to crash into another [3].

### **Slavery vs. Wage Labour and Whiteness**

From the end of the eighteenth century, Bourbon-driven capitalist expansion in Cuba based on the production of sugar relied fundamentally on slave labour. After the Haitian Revolution of 1791 Cuba became the world's largest producer of sugar. The various Anglo-Spanish treaties to suppress the 'legal' African slave trade opened the way for another lucrative flow of captives via contraband that lasted throughout the last third of the nineteenth century. By 1846 it is estimated that 36 percent of the Cuban population were slaves, many of whom still spoke African languages and had little or no contact with the Creole or Cuban-born world outside the plantations. At this time Cuba had a very large slave population and a higher proportion of free blacks living in cities and practising trades than all the other so-called sugar-islands (Ferrer 1999). The Spanish Crown turned a blind eye to the thriving illegal slave trade to maintain a

plantation economy that yielded fat royal revenues. They also hoped that fear of the large African population would keep growing anti-colonial sentiments by Cuban separatists from materialising into a full-blown independence struggle.

Sugar planters shaped colonial labour relations and technological developments, both of which leaned heavily on foreign capital. As the abolition of slavery neared, their calculations regarding the pros and cons of bonded versus wage labour also had to factor in concerns about industrialisation and the racial anxieties of the time. The importation of thousands of contracted Chinese labourers to work in the sugar mills only intensified their racial fears. The Hispano-Cuban 'colonisation' project calling for the importation of cheap white European labour that had started towards the end of the eighteenth century now acquired some urgency. Apart from addressing a chronic scarcity of manpower to fuel the voracious expansion of the sugar industry, the business of importing wage labour was part of a policy to 'whiten' the island and assuage the fear of '*el peligro negro*'.

The white ruling population clung to their Iberian superiors for fear of a slave rebellion such as happened in Haiti. Cuban colonial society in the early part of the nineteenth century, with its white minority elite and black majority subjects, was moving from a discourse of planter/slave to one reflecting a conflict of race (Benitez-Rojo 1992: 122). Those prepared to consider independence from Spain expressed their desire for a Cuban nation 'formed by the white race' (Ferrer 1999). While the discourse of Cuban nationalism centred on race and nationality, the merchant class envisioned a vast labour market of dispossessed workers both native and imported, who would also tip the balance in favour of whiteness.

In describing *los irlandeses*, Moreno Friginals draws on Engels' descriptions of the Irish in Britain as 'white slaves'. He also makes reference to Carlyle's descriptions of the Irish sleeping with their pigs, psychologically dependent on drink, etc., and lowering even further 'the minimal human needs' for factory

workers in England. He goes on to state: 'As the cheapest workers available in Europe who knew enough to lay rails, they were brought to Cuba by the railroad contractors to be submitted to a form of slavery similar to the Negro's' (Moreno Friginals 1978: 135). According to Ballol (1987), the documentation of the era depicted them in a negative light.

The Railway Commission ultimately divested itself of the Irish. Ballol quotes an article written in the *Diario de La Habana* dated 4 June 1836 that suggests an economic motive for the rejection of Irish workers in favour of a new wave of immigrants from the Canary Islands: 'Henceforth they [Canary islanders] could prove to be the most economic of workers, now that the company has liberated itself from the high daily wage paid to the Irish...' (Ballol 1987: 82). In a parting shot, the Royal Council in Havana stated that the 'worthless, lazy, disease-ridden, drunkards ... should have been thrown out much earlier' (Serrano 1991: 38).

Despite the 'moral' critique of the Irish, their whiteness was never called into question. This contrasts with the reputed racialisation of the Irish in North America in the early part of the

nineteenth century. The Irish had not yet embraced their position as white in the racial pecking order of the United States, where pitting race against class worked to disrupt potential alliances between Black, Chinese, and Irish immigrants (Roediger 1991). From the sources consulted, it appears that there was opposition on the part of some of the Irish to colonial rule and slavery in Cuba. Little else is known of those who survived the brutal conditions in Cuba either by returning to New York or staying on the island. Many questions remain unanswered: given the prevailing racial climate, why did they come to Cuba in the first place? How many departed or stayed, and what happened to each of them? What drove some of them to conspire to overthrow slavery and the colonial social order? It is hoped that a thorough investigation based on primary sources in Cuba or Spain may shed light on the experiences of this small group of people from Ireland who were exploited as peons in two very different colonial systems.

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### Notes

- [1] Letters from British Consul in Havana, Crawford, to Lord Aberdeen, 3 May 1844, PRO, FO 72/664, no. 142; 250.
- [2] Testimony by Daniel Downing to Crawford July 1844, PRO, FO/664, no. 161.
- [3] Letter from British Consul Turnbull to Lord Aberdeen 1841, PRO, FO 72/585 no. 56.

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