

# **Beyond Kinship: A Study of the Eighteenth-century Irish Community at Saint Croix, Danish West Indies**

By Orla Power

## **Abstract**

*The Irish trading post, and its associated sugar plantations on the Danish island of Saint Croix during the eighteenth century, is fascinating in that it reflects a cultural liaison unusual in the study of the early modern Irish diaspora. Although the absence of a common religion, language or culture was indicative of the changing nature of Caribbean society, the lack of a substantial 'shared history' between Ireland and Denmark encourages us to look beyond conventional notions of the organisation of Irish-Caribbean trade. The traditional model of the socially exclusive Irish mercantile network, reaching from Ireland, England, France and Spain to the Caribbean colonies and back to the British metropole, although applicable, does not entirely explain the phenomenon at Saint Croix. Instead, the migration of individuals of mixed social backgrounds from the British Leeward Islands to Saint Croix reflects the changing nature of the kinship network in response to the diversification of the Caribbean marketplace.*

## **Introduction**

At the height of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) between the European colonial powers, the Irish community at Saint Croix in the Danish West Indies was responsible for some 30 per cent of official Danish sugar exports from the island [1]. The upheaval created by the inter-continental war created a myriad of opportunities within the ambit of inter-island and international trade. Skilled in the art of commerce and diplomacy and fortified by well-established familial connections overseas, the Irish group at Saint Croix were poised to take advantage of uncertain times. Originally from the British Leeward Islands, this group of Irish merchants and planters, while not overtly discriminated against, were nonetheless excluded from gubernatorial positions and held in mistrust by the British establishment. [2] Their strategy to partake in the sugar industry depended on developing kinship networks, which also served as a platform from which to establish other kinds of business and trade alliances in unfamiliar territories.

This article will show how the venture at Saint Croix reflected the changing nature of the kinship network, together with the increasing requirement to formulate alliances beyond the security of kinship itself. This phenomenon is illustrated by a brief synopsis of Irish inter-colonial and transatlantic trade as conducted at

Saint Croix. Finally, the concept of the 'metropole' is examined within the context of the sugar trade. The islanders did not always consider London, which acted as a focal point for Irish kinship networks, as the hub of their Atlantic world.



View overlooking Saltriver Bay, St. Croix.  
Henry Ryan, a planter from Montserrat and St. Croix,  
owned the land in the foreground c. 1760  
(Orla Power 2006)

## **The Irish Kinship Network**

Studies of Irish mercantile communities overseas during the early modern period are heavily influenced by the concept of the 'Kinship Network'. [3] In this way, the mercantile expertise of the many Irish families involved in international trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be appreciated by the extent to which they were

represented in the major ports of France, Spain, the West Indies, England and North America. Encompassing a geographically disparate group of individuals, such networks enabled Irish merchant families to engage in long-distance trade that was heavily reliant on complex credit arrangements. Reliance on trusted local contacts was essential in the functioning of the commission system and allowed the movement of commodities throughout the Atlantic world without the need for specie. During the eighteenth century, the Irish mercantile community was organised around London, the hub of the international sugar trade. [4] The ability to rely on kin to pursue communal family interests ensured stability and consistency within frequently volatile Atlantic markets.

### **An Irish Cosmopolitan Venture**

The Danish West Indian and Guinea Company purchased Saint Croix from France in 1733 with the expectation of competing in the global market for sugar. Denmark, slow to appreciate the economic significance of sweetness, made a belated attempt to engage in the trade and opened Saint Croix to all-comers. This proved to be an ineffective strategy. By 1747, the Company was in difficulty. As a result, negotiations were initiated to persuade the King of Denmark and Norway to purchase the island. Eventually, in 1754, the Crown took over Saint Croix, making it a free port and ensuring a favourable market in Denmark for the island's produce. Since Denmark remained a neutral country, the island prospered in trade and sugar throughout the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) (Westergaard 1917: 130).

By 1747, a group of Irish merchants and planters with family connections in Ireland, Montserrat and London, had begun to purchase land at Saint Croix. Astute property speculation, skilful plantation management and the shrewd use of international contacts sustained the Irish interest on the island. By the 1760s, this group had become a formidable presence both on Saint Croix and in Denmark. [5] Those involved were of varied social origins and included some members of Galway

merchant families, along with others who were of a more modest background.

Theobald Bourke, John Skerrett, Laurence Bodkin, all merchants of Galway families, were from Montserrat. Similarly, Henry Ryan, a skilled planter who was not a member of the Galway network, was also from Montserrat. Another associate, John Baker, a solicitor, was married to Henry Ryan's sister Mary. Accepted into the Irish community, he was also well respected within the British Leeward islands and served as Solicitor General from 1750 to 1752. Mathias Farrall, also from the British Leeward Islands but not originally associated with the Galway families, was a merchant and planter. Finally, Nicholas Tuite, the director of the operation, was a merchant whose origins lay in County Westmeath. Coming from a land-locked county, Tuite's family was not traditionally associated with international trade. However, by marrying Ann Skerrett, the daughter of a successful Galway family based on Antigua, he gained entry to the socially exclusive Irish mercantile oligarchy.

### **Operating within the Network**

Although Nicholas Tuite did not initially belong to this core network of Irish mercantile families, he clearly had something to offer the Skerrett family. Cullen has noted the difficulty experienced by those not associated with international trade in penetrating the mercantile network (Cullen 1984: 71). Originally involved in the inter-island sloop trade with his brother, Richard, Tuite appears to have amassed sufficient funds to marry the daughter of a well-connected individual. Such a match may reflect an increasing strain in the Irish network, and could point to the short supply of suitable spouses of the appropriate religion and social standing within West Indian society.

The importance of 'marrying well' is also reflected in the choice of partners for Tuite's own daughters. Tuite's eldest daughter Eleanor married the wealthy Thomas Selby of Middleton in Northumberland. His other daughter Anne married Thomas Stapleton, a member of the Irish merchant community in France, who was also well connected in the

British West Indies. Meanwhile, another daughter Winifred Tuite married Justin McCarthy of County Tipperary, who had made his reputation in French army service and was made Count in 1776.



The Danish fort at Christiansted, St. Croix  
(Orla Power 2006)

While describing several strategic marriage alliances outside the Irish circle in Bordeaux, Cullen points out that Irish-Catholic expatriates did not tend to marry outside their religion (Cullen 1980: 55). However, this was not entirely true in the West Indies where business and social interactions among Catholic and Protestant merchants were not uncommon. In fact, it appears that in the West Indies in general, where there was a limited pool of individuals of similar social standing, mixed-religion marriages occurred with remarkable frequency.

When John Baker, a Protestant, married Mary Ryan in 1746, she continued to attend Catholic service (Yorke 1931: 62). Their daughter Patty was also raised as a Catholic and attended a Catholic Girls' school at Lille, France. Difficulties seemed only to arise within the community when individuals actually converted to Protestantism. In 1751, Mary Ryan's niece Elizabeth chose to elope with a Protestant, Mr. William Coventry Manning. The disharmony that resulted when she conformed to the Church of England did not subside and her father John became stoutly 'resolved against a reconciliation'. [6]

Indeed, the desire to have one's daughters marry well was a determining factor in several of the wills relating to Irish families at Saint Croix. The preceding examples of mixed-religion marriages reflect the economic and

social necessity of forging alliances with 'the other', while simultaneously maintaining a clear sense of family heritage. The Galway families in Saint Croix reflect this in their wills.

In his 1777 will, Theobald Bourke's bequeathed a substantial amount of money to his heirs on the proviso that they marry with the consent of his executors or himself. Should they contravene this request, they were to be allocated a paltry maintenance for their lifetimes, and the remainder of their original inheritance was to be divided among those siblings who had not transgressed in such an impractical fashion (Will Bourke).

Similarly, Laurence Bodkin's substantial estate was also shared out amongst his children. However, his female offspring Catherine and Ann were threatened with absolute economic isolation should they neglect their daughterly duties, and marry without consent (Will Bodkin). In the ambit of the Irish-Catholic West Indian experience, daughters were precious commodities and served to unite and reinforce partnerships and business ventures both within the community and beyond it.

One of the more traditional methods of maintaining Irish mercantile alliances was access to a Catholic education. Certainly, European education for boys was an essential rite of passage for many West Indian heirs. Given the restrictions on Catholic education in Ireland the boys, who were often as young as seven, were frequently sent to colleges in France and Belgium. Saint Omer's and Bruges were the favoured establishments for those who could afford them. What is particularly interesting, however, is the fact that sons of merchants based in the West Indies often studied accounting and business with their cousins, whose fathers were engaged in trade in London, Dublin, Nantes and Spain. This certainly had an impact on the strength and structure of the Irish business network at home and abroad, fostering what could be described as an 'Old Boys' Club' mentality and reinforcing its elite nature.

During the 1730s and 1740s, the school of choice was Saint Omer's, a Catholic academy in

Belgium. Thomas Skerrett of Ireland, Robert Tuite (Nicholas Tuite's son) and James Carroll of Carrollton, Maryland were all enrolled at the school in 1739. Michael Murphy and Charles Farrill, both of Montserrat, also attended Saint Omer's during this period. The second generation of Irish Caribbean scholars seemed, for the most part, to have attended the school at Bruges. During the 1760s and the early 1770s, the Bourkes, Ryans and Farrills, all of Saint Croix, were enrolled at the school. Their schoolmates included Edward and James Lynch, whose address is listed as the 'West Indies' and Francis Farril of Philadelphia. Michael and Robert McGrath of Ennis, County Clare were their contemporaries, as was Thomas Lynch, son of the infamous merchant and trader, Isidore Lynch of London. [7]

Once accepted into the Irish network, it was important to maintain the position. This can be appreciated in the manner with which the Cruzan plantocracy married and educated their children. However, in order to expand their ambit of trade, it was important to find alternate ways of forging alliances that were more suited to the unpredictable Caribbean environment.

### **Beyond the Network**

Nicholas Tuite's ability to gain access to the Irish mercantile network and to expand his business beyond its scope reflects his capacity to engender bilateral trust by alternate means. Possessed of a shrewd business intuition and an affable nature, Tuite chose prospective business ventures - and the personnel required to make them a success - very carefully. Renowned for assisting earnest individuals to purchase properties or invest in trade ventures, Tuite perceived such assistance as a 'leg up' rather than a 'hand out', stipulating that the loan be re-paid in full, usually on favourable terms (Will Tuite). 'Money,' as the saying goes, 'makes money', and by offering individuals the opportunity of sampling the sugar trade, Tuite forged lifetime friendships and enduring loyalties. John Baker, unable to afford land in the Leeward islands, was in 1751 offered a share in a plantation on 'very favourable terms'.

[8] As a result, Baker considered himself 'forever indebted' to Tuite. [9] Similarly, individuals such Francis Finn and William Dalton, both of Saint Croix, bequeathed money to Tuite for the purchase of a memorial ring. In Dalton's case it was to be worn 'as a remembrance that I was not insensible of the disinterested benefits he has [Tuite] been pleased to confer upon me' (Will Dalton).

Preserving a position within a familial network was essential in order to engage with and succeed in the world of Atlantic commerce. However, in order to secure business transactions above and beyond the security of the family bond, it was essential to have the skills with which to inspire trust and a sense of fraternity. Assisting individuals to make their fortunes was one way of ensuring lifetime devotion. It was also essential that an individual was both knowledgeable of the international market and approachable enough to act as an advisor. Such an individual ensured he remained informed and ready to take advantage of changing markets.

Entertainment, hospitality and friendship were a fundamental part of business networking in the West Indies. During Christmas 1751, Governor Heyligger and his wife from the Dutch island Saint Eustatius spent a fortnight at the Baker residence. [10] The following Spring, Baker visited Heyligger at his home on the Dutch island of Saint Martin. [11] Similarly, on a visit to Saint Croix, Baker dined at Mr. Tuite's residence with Judge Schuster and Judge Hazelberg (Yorke 1931: 52).

Accordingly, the important role of alcohol is clear in the large consignments of Madeira wine imported into Saint Croix for personal consumption. As the century wore on, the beverage became associated with increasing sophistication and 'good taste'. In 1752, Baker remarked to his brother that he would like the West Indies 'particularly the hospitality of the place: even the most greedy people...are not niggardly in that point or in their living'. [12] In this light it is not surprising that the hospitable Nicholas Tuite, master of the international business realm and the art of conversation, made a special provision to bequeath the

following to his wife: ‘...all my Wines Rum Brandy Beer Ale Cyder and all other spirituous Liquors together with the provisions and stores belonging or for the use of my said houses in England for her sole use and as her own property for ever...’ (Will Tuite).

### **Trans-national Trade at Saint Croix**

Although recognising the importance of hospitality and friendship in the building of trans-national alliances, the Irish group at Saint Croix were very much of their time, particularly in relation to slavery. In examining customs records relating to the period, it is clear that the Irish community considered their African labourers as commodities. The slaves’ introduction to society at Saint Croix is listed alongside consignments of routine items required for management of the plantations. Such stark inventories reflect the absence of any need to forge partnerships or build alliances with individuals considered as plantation ‘stock’.

During 1760, Laurence Bodkin imported a large number of Africans to Saint Croix from various locations. On the 3 June, a vessel skippered by Jacob Dischington imported a cargo of 22 male slaves, 36 females, 29 girls and 14 boys directly from the Guinea Coast for which he paid 318 rixdalers. [13] In July of that year, Henry Ryan imported 18 men, 13 women, 12 boys and 2 girls along with a quantity of cement from Montserrat. [14] Meanwhile, on 26 May Mathias Ferrald exported bread, rice, 1000 floor-tiles and 16 slaves to Puerto Rico. [15]

The settlers’ wills also reflect their attitude towards African slaves. Laurence Bodkin bequeathed the sum of 1,700 rixdalers to his nephew, either to be given him when he turned 18 or ‘to be laid out in Negroes for his use’. William Bourke, Bodkin’s godson, was to be given a smaller sum because he had already been given ‘...one Negro woman and one child...[the] Negro woman nam’d Bella is worth 500 rixdollars’ (Will Bodkin). It could be said that the highly competitive nature of the sugar trade underpinned the settlers’ reliance on chattel slaves. Writing in 1762, William

Dalton desired that ‘...immediately upon my demise I desire that my little Negroe boy Joseph have his freedom.’ Given that the will was not proved until 1779, it is certain that Dalton’s slave was no longer a ‘little Negroe boy’ (Will Dalton).



Ruins of an eighteenth century plantation house on the northern coast of St. Croix  
(Orla Power 2006)

Overall, it is clear that the Irish community was adept at maintaining familial alliances while liaising with Danish officials and merchants of various nationalities when required. Both Baker and Tuite spoke some Danish. However, where language barriers existed, solutions were readily found and adopted. Hardware goods imported for the sugar and rum producers ‘Bodkin, Skerrett and Ferral’ did not have corresponding Danish nomenclature. As such, in the official records, a degree of syncretic interaction is apparent. For instance, a technical apparatus relating to the distillation process, such as the *Swan Neck*, [16] was directly translated as a ‘Svan Halse’. Similarly, articles associated with the production of ‘Killdevil’ such as ‘Killdevil pans’ were prefixed, in Danish, by the phonetic ‘*Kieldhyvel*’. [17]



Sugarmill  
(Orla Power 2006)

Apart from involvement in the principal trade in sugar to the Danish metropole, Irish individuals at Saint Croix often used sugar and rum in transactions with traders from other islands. For instance, Theobald Bourke imported 28 fads of unrefined and 20 fads of refined sugar from French Granada in March 1760. [18] Similarly, Captain John Kennedy exported 18 fads of rum to the Dutch Saint Eustatius in May of that year. [19] Irish merchants trading to New York, Montreal and beyond matched such inter-island trade, and reveal the global reach of mercantile operations on the island.

### The Metropole

McCusker describes a complicated financial exchange zone which existed between Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Hamburg. For example, a London merchant who wished to purchase a bill on Copenhagen would have had to negotiate through Hamburg or Amsterdam, as there were few or no bills for sale on Copenhagen (McCusker 1978: 81). This shows the extent to which Copenhagen was dependent on other European capitals in the ambit of international trade. It is probable that this was a factor that influenced the prevalence of non-Danish nationals in positions of influence in Copenhagen. Danish reliance on European finance ensured opportunities for well-connected individuals within the Atlantic World who were willing to engage with unfamiliar territory.

Overall, without London, the Irish Atlantic mercantile world would have floundered

(Truxes 2006). Contacts frequently tied to a merchant's familial network furnished financial services to clients in far-flung regions. Individuals such as Isidore Lynch and John Kirwan, both of Galway families, managed bills of exchange and sourced venture capital as required. Given that London was one of the most important markets within the international sugar industry, allegiances with influential brokers involved in the trade were an essential aspect of maintaining and appreciating one's wealth and affluence. It was common for planters who had 'over-wintered' in the Caribbean to return to the metropole for a few months in the spring. [20] This was regarded as a time to socialise, reinforce business arrangements and to enjoy the trappings of success. Soon after her return to London in July 1757, Mary Ryan and her sister bought assorted silks at Mr Palmer's on Ludgate Hill (Yorke 1931: 98) and her husband, John Baker, met Nicholas Tuite at Lloyd's coffee house and later dined at Mr Kirwan's (Yorke 1931: 105).

However, as the Irish presence at Saint Croix gained in significance, Copenhagen came to join London as another metropole on the Irish-Caribbean horizon. Trips to London also became opportunities to meet Danish representatives of the King. [21] In 1760, John Baker and Nicholas Tuite both travelled to Copenhagen where Tuite 'drank chocolate with the Imperial Minister' (Yorke 1931: 142). Theobald Bourke, who composed his will in Copenhagen in 1770, was granted a 'Facultas Istandi' by King Christian VII at his Royal Palace at Christianborg (Will Bourke). Similarly, the will of Laurence Bodkin and his wife Jane was recorded in Danish and registered in the Chancery Rolls at Copenhagen in 1763 (Will Bodkin). Meanwhile, Nicholas Tuite was accorded a special honour by the Crown and his son, Robert was granted the status of Chamberlain to the King of Denmark (Yorke 1931: 62). The Irish presence at Copenhagen can also be appreciated in the fact that the sugar refinery of 'Selby and Company', belonging to Nicholas Tuite's grandson Charles Selby, was one of the top five producers in

Copenhagen at the end of the eighteenth century (Sviestrup 1945: 88).

In examining the role played by Irish individuals in the rapidly expanding and changing Caribbean marketplace of the eighteenth century, it is necessary to focus on the commercial relationships based on kinship, together with those which lay beyond traditional familial ties. Overall, the methods and motivations that engaged and built alliances with 'the other' are essential in our understanding of the region during this time. In concentrating on the kinship network alone, it would appear that all roads led to London. However, by searching for alternate spheres of

influence and the ways in which the network adapted to suit the rigours of the Caribbean market, it is possible to chart the Irish journey on the fringes of the familiar. Such an approach may further elucidate the duality of commercial liaisons displayed by Irish settlers at Saint Croix. Similarly, in using this approach, it is hoped to shed light on the settlers' own sense of identity, perceptions of 'otherness' and notions of 'Irishness'.

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### Notes

[1] The term 'Irish' refers to individuals bearing last names associated with Ireland. Figure compiled using the Christiansted Weighbook for the month of June 1761, 1762 and 1763. Irish exporters were responsible for some 1.7 million rd (Reichsthalers/Rixdalers) of a total of 5.8 million rd of sugar exports from Christiansted during this period. Record Group 55. Saint Croix, Various Departments. Weighbooks, 1748-1778 Vol. 11,12 and 13. Entry No. 465. NARA, College Park, MD.

[2] Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations ... preserved in the Public Record Office. London: H.M.S.O., 1920-1938 (1749-50 Jan.-1753 De - 1932). 3 December 1751

[3] For example: Cullen, L. M. 'The Irish Merchant Communities of Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Cognac in the Eighteenth Century' in *Negoce et industrie en France et en Irlande aux XVIIIe et XIXe siecles : actes du Colloque franco-irlandais d'histoire*, Bordeaux, May 1978 / sous la direction de L.M. Cullen et P. Butel. (Paris 1980) and Cullen, L. M. 'Galway merchants in the outside world, 1650-1800' in: *Galway: Town and Gown 1484-1984*, ed. Ó Cearbhaill, D. (Dublin, 1984), 63-89).

[4] Truxes, Thomas, M. 'London's Irish Merchant community and North Atlantic Commerce in the Mid-Eighteenth Century' in *Irish and Scottish Mercantile Networks in Europe and Overseas in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, David Dickson, Jan Parmentier and Jane Ohlmeyer (eds.), Gent, Academia Press, 2006.

[5] For a more comprehensive background to the early Irish settlement at Saint Croix, see: Power, Orla 'The 'Quadripartite Concern' of St. Croix, 1751-1757. An Irish Catholic Plantation in the Danish West Indies' in *Proceedings of the Irish in the Atlantic World Conference, Charleston S. C. March 2007*, forthcoming.

[6] Letterbook of John Baker. Letters to Mr. Tuite. 27 January 1752 and 30 July 1752. See also: Yorke, Philip C. *Diary of John Baker*, London 1931. p16.

[7] See Holt, G. *St. Omers and Bruges Colleges. 1593-1773. A Biographical Dictionary*. Catholic Record Society, Vol. 69 (London, 1979).

[8] Letterbook of John Baker. 22 June 1752.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Letterbook of John Baker. Letter to Mr. Tuite, 27 January 1752.

[11] Yorke, Philip, C. *The Diary of John Baker*. London 1931. p92.

[12] Letterbook of John Baker, Letter to brother Thomas, 4 March 1752.

[13] Danish unit of Currency. In 1760, one rixdaler was equivalent to one shilling sterling (see Yorke 1931: 140).

[14] NARA, Washington D.C. Record Group 55. Saint Croix Customs Department, Christiansted. Customs Journal, 1749-1799. Box 877D, Entry No. 460. 1760. Ff246 [no date].

[15] *Ibid.*, ff220.

- [16] Component of the distillation still. Lewis, William, *The Edinburgh new dispensatory: containing I. The elements of pharmaceutical chemistry. ... III. The pharmaceutical preparations and medicinal ... The second edition; with many alterations, corrections, and additions.* Edinburgh, 1789. p352.
- [17] Record Group 55. Saint Croix Customs Department, Christiansted. Customs Journal, 1749-1799. Box 877D, Entry No. 460. ff176.
- [18] *Ibid.*, ff136.
- [19] *Ibid.*, ff203.
- [20] See for example the return of Nicholas Tuite and Theobald Bourke from England in June 1755. Yorke, Philip C. *Diary of John Baker.* London 1931. p82
- [21] Tuite and Baker met Baron Bothmar on two occasions, 30 October 1758 and 18 June 1760. pp118 & 136.

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