

Review of Nini Rodgers's *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery, 1612-1865*

By Gera Burton

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Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, European powers transported 11,000,000 enslaved Africans to the Americas. One of the largest and most elaborate maritime and commercial ventures in history, an undertaking of such magnitude, involving three continents, required significant planning and investment, generating vast profits. Given Ireland's geographic location, its domination by Britain, and the fact that in the eighteenth century slavery accounted for one-third of Europe's trade and half of Britain's trade, the existence of an Irish dimension is hardly surprising. Who benefited from slave-trade profits? What was Ireland's role? To what extent does Ireland's complicated history merit scrutiny related to the slave trade?

Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery, Nini Rodgers' well-researched and timely study tackles these perplexing questions. The author draws on first-hand accounts and archival resources to explore African slavery's Irish connections and offers two possible reasons for the neglect of this topic. One possibility is a reluctance on the part of researchers to confront this shameful history; the second arises from the supposed marginality of its importance. Focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the book provides a wealth of biographical information, tracing the activities of individual merchants, capitalists, and adventurers who profited from the slave trade and described themselves as 'Irish', although, as the author notes in the Introduction, they did not necessarily consider themselves exclusively or consistently so. Rodgers distinguishes shades of Irishmen, including Gaelic, Hiberno-Norman or Old English, New English, Anglo-Irish, and Ulster Presbyterians, arguing that each group produced merchants who benefited from the 'trade in stolen men'.

Divided into three parts, the book incorporates the author's original findings with data from a host of secondary sources. Part I: *Away* covers slavery from Saint Patrick in the fifth century to indentured servitude and slavery in the British West Indies, with details from the life of Olaudah Equiano and his master, Captain James Doran, on 'the Irish island' of Montserrat. Chapter 2 includes an examination of Irish participation in the over 4,000 slave revolts that occurred between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries on Montserrat, Domingue, Jamaica, and Demerara. Part II: *Home* traces the impact of Caribbean and North American plantations on eighteenth-century economic, social and political development in Ireland, then part of the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. A chapter on imaginative literature concludes with an analysis of Irish literary contributions to the promotion of anti-slavery attitudes. Irish emigrant and poet, Hugh Mulligan, author of *Poems Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression* (1788), emerges as an influential figure in the anti-slavery movement. There is a discussion of the works of Mary Leadbeater and Mary Birkett, followed by a more detailed analysis of the writings of Maria Edgeworth, who compared the lot of 'the lower Irish' with that of West Indian slaves. The reader might have expected to see Swift included here, especially for his mastery of the language of slavery with its 'rhetoric of calculation' (costs, yields, profits) so brilliantly exemplified in *A Modest Proposal*. Part III: *Emancipation* examines the links between Catholic and slave emancipation, including the analogous Irish/slave relationship. This section focuses on Frederick Douglass' visit to Ireland, followed by a lengthy discussion of the career of the pro-slavery Protestant Nationalist, John Mitchel.

For the Latin American reader, it might be illustrative to consider whether the complexity of the Irish colonial situation mirrored that of the *peninsulares* or Spanish colonists and first-generation *criollos* of Cuba, who either spearheaded or played key roles in the colonial project. Over time, the *criollos* began to distance themselves from the centre of power, a transformation that saw them no longer identifying themselves as 'Spanish', but rather as 'Cuban'. Much like their *criollo* counterparts, the Anglo-Irish developed a world view at odds with that of the majority population. Ireland's proximity to the colonial power was unique, as it continually nurtured the Anglo-Irish relationship, facilitating the maintenance of English households, providing an easily accessible English education for the next generation, and preserving an English identity. Underpinning that social framework were men imbued with ambition, foot soldiers in the project of empire building, a number of whom bore Irish surnames. In the vanguard came cash-strapped members of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry, vying for colonial governorships to pay off debts and support their lifestyles.

On the contentious matter of 'Irishness', some analysis would have been helpful to the reader, since it is hardly inconsequential that, for a portion of the population, 'Irish' was little more than a regional qualifier subordinate to the dominant 'British' signifier. Member of Parliament (MP) for County Down, Lord Castlereagh, exemplified this group. Had he been born in Kingston, would he have been considered 'Jamaican'? For the vast majority of the island's inhabitants, however, there was nothing protean about their Irish identity, with its connotations as fixed on their status as colonised subjects, marginalised in the land of their ancestors. Lacking agency, they had been systematically dispossessed of the right to participate as equal subjects under the British Crown.

In spite of issues such as restrictions on land ownership, the prohibition on the right to bear arms, living within city walls, and holding memberships of city corporations, clearly some Catholics prospered with the patronage of

influential Protestants who could vouch for their loyalty to the Crown. Some opted to join the Established Anglican Church 'to become English men'. Thousands of 'the Irish nation' were voluntarily and involuntarily shipped to the Americas, either for petty offences or to escape oppressive conditions in Ireland. The book tends to gloss over the fact that Cromwell's deportations forced some members of 'the Irish nation' into indentured servitude in Barbados, where they became rebellious, unfree persons. Jamaica's Governor Robert Hunter banned 'native Irish Papists' from the larger island.

Rodgers' analysis of Ireland's connection with the slave trade highlights some undisputed facts. Since Britain governed Ireland on the garrison principal, treating the island as a colony in its imperial mercantile system, imposing taxes and exporting goods, such as butter and beef, to West Indian plantations, the island's economy languished under British control. Ireland's exclusion from membership of the slave-trading Royal Africa Company - whose initials, RAC, were branded into the chests of Africans - meant that the island was banned from participation in the infamous triangular trade for most of the eighteenth century. With Ireland's economy subservient to Britain's economy, it lacked the capacity to produce the wide range of manufactured goods demanded by the dehumanising commerce in people, including chains, cooking pots, cutlery, trading irons, and firearms, all produced in Britain. Maintaining a well-funded lobby at Westminster, planters of the sugar islands - 'the spoiled children of the empire' - were economically and intellectually tied to Britain. Rodgers argues that in 1784, plans to engage in the slave trade, hatched by merchants in Limerick and Belfast, did not come to fruition. The Dublin Chamber of Commerce proudly observed that Ireland was unsullied by the 'odious slave trade'. In 1788, the Chamber observed with satisfaction that 'the traffic in human species does not appear to have ever been carried on from this kingdom.'

The author's meticulous examination of surviving letter books and ships' logs for

surnames of ships' captains operating from the ports of Bristol and Liverpool reveals the presence of names of Irish origin. Since the port of Liverpool accounted for half of Britain's trade, and one-third of Europe's trade during the eighteenth century, and given that city's close ties to Ireland, it is surprising that few Irish merchants and captains appear to have been involved in the slave trade. Unfortunately, the book does not provide a percentage for that participation. However, Irish crews appear to have comprised more than 12%, the highest non-English group. While acknowledging that the use of surnames can be an inexact measurement, the author investigated the backgrounds of profiteers with Irish-sounding surnames—the permanent émigrés—to reveal their involvement in the slave trade. The book includes brief histories of slave ship owners with Irish roots, most notably the Irish-Frenchman and *armateur*, Antoine Walsh (1703–63) whose notorious slave-trading activities produced great wealth in St. Malo and Nantes. David Tuohy, an Irish Catholic emigrant, and resident of Liverpool, is identified as one who benefited from the traffic in human beings, and planter Samuel Martin, a native Antiguan with Ulster roots, is said to have undergone a 'shift in consciousness' after many years of involvement in the slave trade.

The book provides rich contextual background to illustrate the economic impact of sugar in the rise of the Catholic middle class, and the importance of provisioning the slave trade in the West Indies to the development of Cork in the eighteenth century. The principal players include Richard Hare, one of Cork's wealthiest merchants with ties to banking and the sugar network in London, whose descendent became Governor of the Gold Coast in 1957. There are the Roche and the Creagh families from Limerick, who held slaves in Barbados, and whose involvement 'stretched from Nantes, to Africa, the Leewards, Rhode Island and South Carolina', and the Latouche family who owned plantations in Jamaica. Favoured by Ireland's governing power in Dublin Castle, the Brownes of Westport, with seats in the British parliament (Lord Altamount) emerge as 'Ireland's premier slave-holding family'.

The author's scrutiny of newspapers published in Ireland revealed two instances of a slave advertised for sale, one in Cork (1762) and one in Dublin (1768). There is even 'an Irish-speaking negro' from South Carolina, Samuel Burke, who is identified as a resident of Cork. In the second half of the eighteenth century the number of 'sightings' of blacks in Ireland is given as 100, mostly those of servants visiting the island with their masters. An estimate of comparative figures for Britain or other European countries at that period would have been helpful.

Until recently, historians have tended to ignore the convergence of the struggle for Catholic emancipation - promised as a quid pro quo for the passing of the Act of Union in 1800 - and the abolition of slavery, achieved after protracted efforts by Wilberforce et al. in 1833. Rodgers highlights the significant, but often overlooked, outcome: in 1829, Catholic Emancipation split the Tory vote, which in turn cleared the way for the abolition of slavery. As early as the 1760s, the Quakers had been in the forefront of anti-slavery agitation, and the author's inclusion of the work of the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society (HASS) is a most welcome contribution. That membership included Richard D. Webb and Richard Allen, both Quakers, and Unitarian James Haughton who in June 1840, along with Edward Baldwin, attended the World's First Anti-Slavery Conference in London.

It is important to note, however, that the activities of Daniel O'Connell and Richard Robert Madden overshadowed those of the HASS. With a higher international profile in the anti-slavery movement, and informed by his eye-witness accounts of slavery in Jamaica and Cuba, Madden addressed the Conference along with Daniel O'Connell, although the book does not make that distinction. Neither Madden's role in the *Amistad* affair, nor his role in the abolition of the apprenticeship system two years early, receives attention.

In his seminal work on the slave trade, Hugh Thomas noted that slavers in Catholic countries ignored successive papal condemnations of slavery and the slave trade by Popes Urban

VIII (1639), Clement XI, who instructed his nuncios in Madrid and Lisbon to act so as 'to bring about an end to slavery,' and Benedict XIV (1741). As Rodgers observes, Madden's appeal to the Catholic Bishops of Ireland to 'deal a heavy blow...to slavery in all its forms', appears to have fallen on deaf ears. Pope Gregory XVI's papal encyclical of 3 December 1839, strictly forbidding 'any Ecclesiastic or lay person from presuming to defend as permissible this traffic in Blacks no matter what pretext of excuse...' should not have required Episcopal clarification.

Madden's documentation of papal condemnation of slavery might also have merited discussion. Regarding nationalist anti-slavery agitation, two points are worth noting: first, the protracted campaigns for Catholic Emancipation, Repeal, and agrarian reform proved to be exhaustive struggles detrimental to O'Connell's health, precipitating his imprisonment, followed by his demise in the famine year of 'black 47'; second, Catholic/nationalist preoccupation with survival of the 'Irish nation' at home drained energy and resources from all but immediate considerations. Madden would have agreed with Frederick Douglass' commentary on the hypocrisy of the Whigs and their followers who tended to engage in a type of 'telescopic philanthropy' by supporting distant causes at the expense of pressing humanitarian concerns close to home (i.e., the plight of Ireland's starving millions).

Ever since Eric Williams' observation that Liverpool's slave traders financed the industrial revolution in England, new light has been shed on the slave trade's economic impact. If the

slave trade made England rich, how much of that wealth found its way to Ireland? Throughout the Irish Diaspora, there is a level of unease with the disjunctures between a perceived Irish affinity with oppressed peoples and the recorded activities of numerous individuals - often with tenuous Irish connections - who profited from the slave trade.

Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery analyses the Irish experience of 'enslavement' in light of the experience of enslaved Africans, always at pains to distinguish between the two. Rodgers manages to draw together the various strands linking Ireland with slavery to present the most comprehensive volume available on the subject. Her research reveals that, although Irishmen of all backgrounds had connections with slavery, very little of the slave trade profits actually wound up in Ireland. Evidently, the bulk of the profits went to consolidate the wealth of colonial powers.

This reviewer noted a few shortcomings: It was the abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton - not Charles - who took over the mantle from Thomas Clarkson. As noted, the roles of Ireland's anti-slavery activists could have been further developed. Nevertheless, a study of this scope could only have been completed by a committed scholar working over an extended period. This book will be valuable to researchers and scholars alike, making a significant contribution to Ireland's historiography. It should stimulate further research.

Gera C. Burton

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Author's Reply

Reviewing this book (332 pages of text), Gera C. Burton has written at length, summarizing its structure and content while adding further factual material and personal commentary. At certain points she would have liked more figures; one hundred and sixty seven sightings of Africans were recorded in eighteenth century Ireland (p.127). The reviewer felt that a comparative figure for Britain and other European countries would have been informative. Such figures could have been furnished, revealing the Irish number as tiny when measured against the contested figures for England - from three thousand to thirty thousand, with the latest estimate suggesting five thousand upwards (Myers, 1996: 31). In France, with a population more than twice that of England and Wales, four to five thousand has recently been posited (Peabody 1996:4). The fact that Ireland did not possess slave trading ports and was not an imperial metropole reduces the cogency of the comparison. Even more elusive is any exact quantitative assessment of the Irish merchants and captains involved in the Liverpool slave trade. The relevant material appears to be very sparse but further extended research could well reveal new sources. The same is true of Bristol and London, the latter port busy with slave ships and Irishmen in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century and as yet so far uninvestigated. (There is certainly at least a PhD thesis in all this.)

Burton is also concerned that this book glosses over Cromwellian deportations to Barbados. The author however feels that she struggled hard with the problem of bond servitude and transportation to the West Indies in the seventeenth century doing what she could with the current printed evidence. As far as she could ascertain no Irish historian since Aubrey Gwynn in the nineteen thirties has directly confronted the issue of Cromwellian transportation (Gwynn, 1931) Over the last decades Kerby Miller *et al* have brought about a revolution in historical knowledge of Irish emigration to North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even more recently

Mary Ann Lyons and Thomas O'Connor's conferences and publications on the Irish abroad have produced similar understanding for continental Europe over an even longer time span. (Attending one such lively and informative conference, this writer was asked by a post doctoral scholar where her particular interests lay. When she replied 'The Irish in the Caribbean' he laughed and said, 'You are on your own.')

A new study of Irish migration across the Atlantic in the seventeenth century, the era in which Caribbean destinations were at their most important, would be very challenging, the evidence scattered and diverse, yet this is an important project worthy of thought and investigation. Where thousands are carried away in ships there is usually some trace left in shipping or financial records - the early years of the slave trade, recounted by Hugh Thomas, make this clear.

When commencing research on *Ireland, slavery and anti-slavery*, the author began by writing Part 2, At Home, intending to produce a short work on the eighteenth century showing how Ireland was part of the 'Black Atlantic', its economy, society and politics affected by the export of provisions to the Caribbean and the import of slave grown produce, sugar and tobacco. It is still the case that the chapters focused on the eighteenth century contain more in-depth research than the others. However the lack of published material on Ireland's involvement with slavery and anti-slavery suggested that a work extending into earlier and later times could at least provide a useful overview for interested scholars.

Producing a survey of two and a half centuries entails a high degree of selection, always a difficult process. It seemed apposite to avoid writing at length on any prominent figure who left Ireland in youth and made his name in England. This entailed the rejection Hans Sloane and Edmund Burke, the former often seen as the father of the British Museum, the latter as the philosopher of British Toryism. In the case of Burke, mounting interest by historians in the influence of his Irish background on his thought and career, caused the author to lift the ban. In Sloane's case it

remained. Born in County Down in 1660 he left Ireland to study medicine and produced the first natural history of Jamaica in which he commented on slavery as well as flora and fauna. The author now feels that a concise and compact survey of the Irish in Jamaica from 1655 to 1838 would have been a useful contribution to historical knowledge and could have made some use of Sloane's writings. However, as the structure of the text had evolved, she could see no easy way of including such an account. Time of course was also a factor. Dublin contains Jamaican plantation records belonging to the O'Haras of Sligo and the de la Touche's of Dublin which the author never managed to consult. Jamaica remains a rich and promising field for future researchers.

Commenting upon Part 3 'Emancipation,' Burton is disappointed that more attention should not have been paid to the abolitionist R.R. Madden. Looking back the author agrees that she could have used the rich material which Madden provides more extensively. There were two reasons why she decided not to deal with his career at length. First she had already published an essay on this subject and did not want to repeat herself. (Rodgers, 2003:119-131). But again consideration about the structure of the book influenced the decision. Madden's anti-slavery career was carried out within a British context and at this point in time (the late 1830s and early 40s) the author was eager to move on to the U.S.A, where the main struggle between slavery and anti-slavery was now taking place.

Throughout the work the author has attempted to use biographical material in order to convey important historical developments in an interesting manner. Perhaps this does not work as well as she had hoped, for Burton has reservations about the device and in John Mitchel's case finds the material decidedly lengthy. In chapter 13 'Famine and War' the book deals with a place and time so important to the Irish that historians of migration and military historians have produced extensive research and publication. Discovering that many people in Ireland knew John Mitchel supported slavery with no idea why, and in

search of a strategy which would allow her to survey work done by others while adding some degree of original research, the author decided to showcase the Mitchel family as Irish emigrants entering, and contributing to, the maelstrom of the slavery and anti-slavery conflict. The close of this chapter returns to Ireland to concentrate on the impact of the Galway professor, John Eliot Cairnes' influential *Slave Power, its Character, Career and Probable Designs* (1863) followed by a description of the stimulus which the cotton famine gave to Irish linen. Considering that chapters 11 and 12 already provided an account of the work of the HASS (Hibernian Anti-slavery Society) assessing its contribution to the international anti-slavery movement and its impact on Irish society, the author does not provide a detailed history of its downs and ups 1850-1865. Anyone interested in this topic should start their researches by reading D.C. Riach's, pioneering PhD. thesis 'Ireland and the campaign against American slavery, 1830-1860' to which *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-slavery 1612-1865* owes many debts.

In her review Burton takes a stimulating line in suggesting analogies between the position of the Anglo Irish and the *crillos* of Cuba. This of course could be extended to mainland Latin America where the existence of indigenous, dispossessed peoples would offer an even closer comparison with the Irish situation. On the Caribbean islands Arawaks and Caribbs had been eliminated. African slaves, like the Europeans who imported them, were newcomers not natives. Pursuing her comparison Burton asks if Lord Castlereagh had been born in Kingston would he have been considered Jamaican? The answer is 'yes'. Any son born to a long established planter family resident in the colony, when he went to school or university or visited England, would have been hailed as a Jamaican or West Indian and would have viewed himself as such. The equation of Jamaicans with blackness is a post emancipation development. In the eighteenth century slaves were in a demographic majority on the island but many of them had been born in Africa. Even after 1807 the number of these was substantial. The small group of elderly

African intellectuals, slaves and ex-slaves, with whom R.R.Madden became friendly, prided themselves on being Muslim and Mandingo (Madden 1835: i 99-101, ii 183-189.) To return from the Caribbean to the Irish situation, Castlereagh's Presbyterian forbearers had arrived in Donegal in 1629 and a century passed before they began their move into an Anglo-Irish, Anglican ethos. Born in 1769, for most of his life he thought of himself as Irish and was regarded as such. Only after he had eliminated the Irish parliament and achieved cabinet status at Westminster did he decide that he was beginning to feel English.

Ireland, Slavery and Anti-slavery depicts identity as a social construct, often multi-layered and hybridised, shifting with time and place. The book uses as a base line the contemporary eighteenth century view of Ireland's population as consisting of 'Protestants (members of the Church of Ireland), Catholics and Dissenters (Presbyterians) and the study seeks to delineate their religio/ethnic backgrounds and their privileged or underprivileged status. It attempts to show how black slavery impacted on everyone from the rich and powerful to the poor and oppressed.

Burton quotes Rodgers' definition of those considered suitable for inclusion in the study but is uneasy about the choice and would have liked a deeper analysis of 'the contentious

matter of "Irishness".' For the last forty years Irish historian (historians writing about Ireland?) have been working to amend the view of 'the true Irish' as a monolithic group 'lacking agency' which Burton puts forward, drawing upon post-colonial theory. Rodgers discusses post colonialism with regard to anti-slavery literature and here finds it an unhelpful mode of analysis (pp.254-255). Within the review she feels that at times it leads to confusion. At one point Burton notes the importance of urban growth in eighteenth-century Ireland, at another she states firmly that the island's economy was 'languishing in British control'. The text stresses that even without admission to the slave trade, within the imperial regulations laid down by Westminster, Ireland benefited from mercantile contacts with the slave plantation complex. The argument that Ireland was part of the 'Black Atlantic' is the thesis upon which this book is based.

Given the different approaches of reviewer and reviewed some degree of disagreement is inevitable and could prove fruitful. In the hope that *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-slavery* will stimulate further research, they are in complete agreement.

Nini Rodgers

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