

The Trouble with the Irish in the Cuban National Archives

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Abstract

There are few notable traces of an Irish presence in the fusion of cultural influences in Havana's cityscape but manuscript sources in the National Archives of Cuba provide accounts of Irish lives, lived amongst some of the wealthiest and more often the poorest of European immigrants in Cuban colonial society. This article describes the process of researching the history of a large workforce of Irish railroad workers who arrived in Havana in 1835 to build the first stretch of railroad in Latin America and the discovery of additional archival sources concerning different waves of Irish migration to the Hispanic Caribbean. It describes the riches and challenges of locating this cohort of immigrants in archival holdings in Havana and provides a reading of colonial reportage against a backdrop of the troubled context of Cuba, a global hub of the sugar trade and slavery, migration and culture.

For just as Havana's visible identity is one of fusion and confusion, so too can one trace a history based on the continuous fusion of cultural influences and manifestations, making a clear-cut identity as difficult to detect as the cityscape (Antoni Kapcia 2005: 5).

In November 1835 close to a thousand Irish labourers in New York were laid off for the winter season from their work labouring on the New York and Harlem railroad and on the Erie Canal. They were recruited as contract labourers for the Cuban Railroad Commission to build the first stretch of railroad in Latin America. Arriving in the teeming port of Havana, Irish migrants must have been awe-struck by "the city half-hidden behind a forest of masts and sails", a heavily militarised, Caribbean Spanish colony at the height of a sugar boom. As a key port in the global sugar market and the transatlantic slave trade, Alexander Von Humboldt described the city as presenting "diverse elements of a vast landscape" (Humboldt 2011: 27). Some of the architects of this landscape

included Irish merchants and sugar planters who during the eighteenth century were firmly established at the heart of the Spanish-Cuban aristocracy, such as the celebrated, O'Reilly, O'Farril, and O'Gaban. There were others who identified with the anti-colonial struggle including abolitionist Richard Robert Madden¹ and Irish Fenian, James J. O'Kelly, author of *Mambiland*.² The most significant numerically were the hundreds of settler families who participated in 'white colonisation' schemes to boost the numbers of white population in the 1820s followed by upwards of a thousand railroad workers in the 1830s. With no previous research on Irish migration to Cuba to draw on³, this article outlines a study of archival sources which formed the basis of doctoral research for my dissertation entitled 'Irish Migration to Cuba 1835-1845: Empire, Ethnicity, Slavery and 'Free' Labour'. In contextualising the railroad workers within a multi-layered history of Irish immigration to the colonial world of Cuba, it became apparent that there was a diversity of class and identity amongst the Irish who went to work and live in Spanish colonies. Because of the transcolonial and transnational history of the Caribbean region, research on Irish migration to Cuba involves a search of the archives in several different places. I have concentrated on the Cuban archives, with some research in the Spanish archives. The British archives proved to be a rich source of documentation for this group of migrant colonial subjects, whereas I found no records in the Irish archives. For the same reasons, to understand the context of the Caribbean it is necessary to consider a multiplicity of documents on Irish history and migration, the Irish in the United States, Irish migration to the Caribbean and Cuban labour and immigration history. Since Irish immigrants did not come to Cuba in any significant numbers after the mid-nineteenth century, any search for traces of immigrant lives in the mix of what has endured in this *entrepôt* of colonialism must engage with a palimpsest of diaspora, hybrid identities and "ethnic fade" where "ethnicity becomes un-cobbled from its

¹ For Madden's own account as a British colonial official in the position of Superintendent of Emancipated Slaves in Cuba see: Richard Madden *The Island of Cuba: Its Resources, Prospects and Progress Considered in Relation to the Influence of its Prosperity on the Interests of the British West India Colonies* (London: C. Gilpin, 1849).

² Ortiz wrote a lengthy forward to the 1934 Cuban edition of James J. O'Kelly *La Tierra del Mambí* (Ciudad de la Habana: Colección de Libros Cubanos, 1930). He cites a host of Irish connections with the Cuban aristocracy through the Catholic courts in Europe and the Irish brigades in the Spanish army. Such was Ortiz's praise for O'Kelly's contribution through his writings to *Cuba Libre* that he suggested erecting a statue or naming a street after him.

³ For an overview of Irish scholarship on Irish links with Latin America see Mary N. Harris, "Irish Historical Writing on Latin America and on Irish Links with Latin America." In *Europe and the World in European Historiography*, by Casaba Levai. Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006. Accessed 20 February 2008. <http://cliohres.net/books/6/Harris.pdf>.

artefacts”.⁴ The notion of ethnic fusion, or transculturation, as Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz termed it best frames the search for Irish cultural influences in the twenty-first century city.

Rafael Fernández-Moya, a local historian, from the *Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana*, has compiled the first account of traces of Irish heritage in Cuba.⁵ He presents a catalogue of the enduring marks on Cuban place names in memory of Irish immigrants who, over the centuries, made significant contributions to the economic, cultural and political evolution of the island (Fernández-Moya 2007: 193). A well known example is O’Reilly Street in Habana Vieja, named in honour of Dublin-born Alejandro O’Reilly, a general in the Spanish army, remembered for his crucial role in fortifying the imperial defences after the British occupation of Havana in 1762. Besides those traces “engraved in bricks and mortar” (Stoler 2009: 2), there are more oblique signs of an Irish presence in the fusion of cultural influences in Havana’s cityscape. The soundscape, that “distinctive fusion of noises” of the city, described by Kapcia as one of Havana’s “signatures” (Kapcia 2005: 1), also holds strains of an Irish cultural influence, albeit a more recent one. Hence the sight and sound of a lone Afro-Cuban piper sitting on the wall of the Malecón, playing an Irish tune on a set of Galician pipes in December 2007 would strike a note of hope and a certain chord of confusion in this researcher’s quest for records of Irish migrants.⁶ The transmission of Irish culture, through such an intriguing fusion of Irish music with Afro-Cuban roots resonated with my search in the dusty colonial documents of the *Archivo Nacional de Cuba* (ANC). My research questions became more compelling; what was the experience of Irish people in the company of other diasporas from the African continent, the Canary Islands and mainland Europe in this Caribbean Spanish colony in the early decades of the nineteenth century? What did they bring with them and what, if anything has survived of their ethnicity and culture? Two centuries later,

⁴ The concept of ‘ethnic fade’ is borrowed from a Plenary Lecture given by Professor Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin ‘Rhizomes, Hybrids and Prosthesis: Irish Diasporic Space and Music Memory in Québec’ at Ómos Áite International Conference, Center for Irish Studies, NUI, Galway, ‘*Lifeworlds, Space, Place and Irish Culture*’, NUI, Galway March 2014.

⁵For an account of a host of place names bearing the mark of an Irish presence in different parts of Cuba since the sixteen hundreds, see Rafael Fernandez Moya ‘The Irish Presence in the History and Place Names of Cuba’ in *Journal of Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 5 (2007), accessed 20 February 2012 <http://www.irlandeses.org/imsla0711.htm>.

⁶ The piper in question has since recorded an album entitled *Diaspora*, see <http://www.wilbercalver.com/>. There are strong Asturian and Galician piping traditions in Cuba, a legacy of Spanish immigration. The addition of Irish piping traditions is more recent and Cuban pipers or *gaiteros* are learning from visiting musicians through an Irish musical exchange programme with CeltfestCuba and Na Píobairí Uilleann.

Cuba does not boast an identifiable Irish diaspora, yet a quick search of the Havana phone directory throws up many names suggestive of an earlier Irish-Cuban diaspora – O’ Bourke Rodriguez, O’Halloran Gonzalez, O’Neal Sanchez and others such as Brown, O’Connor, Doyle, Dowling, Barrett, Murray and Morfi. These were not the names on the passenger lists of railroad workers – were there other waves of Irish migrants?

Manuscript sources held in the ANC provide colonial accounts of Irish lives, lived amongst some of the wealthiest and more often the poorest of European immigrants in Cuba’s history. Searching the records for evidence of Irish railroad workers produced a surprisingly complex picture of a diverse Irish presence in Cuba since the early decades of the eighteenth century. In framing the experience of Irish labour migration in 1835, as the “outcome of colonial processes” of migration, labour and race, this study could not ignore the contribution of the earlier migration of Irish-Cuban planter families who were “integral to the continuing formation of such processes” (Axel 2002: 14). Irish merchants, planters and high-ranking military men were at the centre of colonial power and wealth in an escalating plantation economy dependent on forced African labour. However they were also enthusiastic supporters of free-market ideology and the formation of a separatist Creole identity. In pursuit of these ideals they promoted strategies to increase the white population with European, including Irish, settler families and the importation of ‘a colony’ of Irish catholic settler families as early as 1820. Archival sources for high-ranking military men and their families, who arrived to Cuba in the eighteenth century via Iberian-Irish connections, are described in great detail by Igor Perez-Tostado in this journal issue. Nineteenth-century Irish migration differed significantly not only in its mediation through the United States and the lower socio-economic status of this numerically much larger group, but also because of its trajectory within the emerging Atlantic networks of colonial labour.

Archivo Nacional de Cuba

The Cuban National Archive (ANC, *Archivo Nacional de Cuba*) located on Compostela Street at the corner of San Isidro in Old Havana⁷ contains extensive records for the colonial period going back to the seventeenth century, but for the nineteenth century they are described as voluminous (Perez 1984: 144). There is, according to Perez, a considerable overlap of subjects, so that a search for materials can take the researcher across a range of *fondos* (collections). A logical place to start might be the *Fondo*

⁷ For useful practical advice for foreign researchers accessing the ANC see the following blog written in 2007: <http://archivesmadeeasy.pbworks.com/w/page/24454205/Archivo%20Nacional%20de%20Cuba>

Ferrocarriles, the main source for the history of the railroad, but this does not cover the early period of construction carried out by the colonial authorities. This collection was more recently organised with an inventory by Oscar Garcia and Alejandro Zanetti before writing their major work on the history of the Cuban railroad, *Caminos Para el Azúcar* (1987) with a publication in English, *Sugar and Railroads: A Cuban History 1837-1959* (1987). Parts of this collection, unfortunately, have since been damaged by hurricane flooding. In general, as Zanetti and Garcia mention “the bibliography on Cuba’s railroads is lamentably scanty” (Zanetti and Garcia 1987: xxvi). Overall accounts by Cuban and Spanish historians make scant reference to Irish immigrants and only as part of the historiography of the railroad.⁸

For reasons to do with colonial processes of archiving the subjects of immigration, railroads and *irlandeses*, as the Irish railroad workers were referred to, the relevant records are found across a number of different *fondos* or collections. A ten-day wait for permission to access primary source documents presented an unanticipated opportunity to browse at my leisure the guides and catalogues in the archives. Not being a seasoned researcher of nineteenth-century Cuba at the time, the pace of working in a pre-digitised system, allowed useful time to discern the ‘structures of thinking’ of a colonial database.⁹ This involved a search of card catalogues held in wooden boxes, crisscrossing the four walls of the main reading room. The guides to each collection are organised chronologically or by name and sometimes cross-referenced by subject. There is a good mixture of index cards in manuscript and not always complete or legible with others more recently catalogued in typescript. With characteristic beginner’s optimism I started my search with the keyword *irlandeses*. Drawing a blank I then moved to *inmigración* which also led nowhere. Back to E for *extranjeros* (foreigners) and F for *ferrocarril* (railroad), both yielding sparse results, however they led to records of other relevant collections. *Reales Cédulas y Ordenes* is a collection containing royal decrees, circulars and

⁸ Other historical writings that mention Irish railroad workers include: Fernando Ortiz, ‘Las Perspectivas Económico-Sociales del Primer Ferrocarril de Cuba’ in *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, (1937), pp. 163-176; Duvon Corbitt, ‘El Primer Ferrocarril Construido en Cuba’ in *Revista Cubana*, Vol. XII, (April-June 1938), pp. 179-195; Manuel Moreno-Fraginals, *The Sugar Mill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba*. Translated by Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), pp. 131-142; Violeta Serrano, *Crónicas del Primer Ferrocarril de Cuba* (1973); Alfonso Ballol, *El Camino de Hierro de La Habana a Güines: Primer Ferrocarril de Iberoamerica* (Madrid 1987); Moyano-Bazzani, Eduardo, ‘Los Recursos Humanos en La Construcción del Primer Ferrocarril Cubano’ in *Arbor-Ciencia Pensamiento y Cultura* 136 (1990), pp. 189-202.

⁹ For an introduction to the collections in the National Archives of Cuba, see Louis A. Perez Jr., ‘Record Collections at the Cuban National Archives: A Descriptive Survey’ in *Latin American Research Review*, 19:1 (1984). Also see Louis Pérez Jr. and Rebecca J. Scott (eds), *The Cuban Archives/Archivos de Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones, 2003), also published in English by University of Pittsburgh Press in 2003.

documents relating to the *Junta de Población Blanca* and the establishment of new colonies of white foreigners. Starting a new search of *Población Blanca* proved to be more productive and threw up an array of manuscripts of government correspondence and official reports outlining strategies to promote white settlement, the rules and regulations of acquiring residency and permission from the authorities to conduct business in Cuba. It also contains documents with the lists of names of Irish settler families who came from New Orleans, Baltimore and Philadelphia to participate in white colonisation schemes in 1818-1820.

Gobierno Superior Civil, a ‘collection of miscellany’ dealing more with the institutional character of the colonial government and the administration of the Captain-General (Pérez 1984: 146), contained manuscripts dealing with royal decrees, stipulating the rules of entry and regulation of movement of foreigners, and surprisingly also dealt with the railroad; a search with the key-word *extranjeros* in the collection *Asuntos Políticos* threw up references to proclamations detailing strict rules regulating the circulation of foreigners dating back to 1750. In 1808 a royal decree ordered that “no consuls, agents or any class of representative of people from foreign nations would be admitted to the Spanish Indies”.¹⁰ Another reference to correspondence from the Captain-General to the Governor of Santiago de Cuba in 1811 demanded “the most scrupulous vigilance of foreign passengers” landing at any port.¹¹ The references alone in this particular collection which, dealing with “such diverse matters as banditry, *cimarrones* (fugitive slaves), piracy and the colonial militia” (Pérez 1984: 145), gives some indication as to the changing colonial sensibilities in relation to *extranjeros* over the course of a century. By 1846 references to *extranjeros* had changed from a matter of imperial defence to one of regulating and controlling contact with the Afro-Cuban population. In 1846 the Captain-General was concerned “about meetings of *mulatos* in Cuba and some suspicious *extranjeros*”.¹² Still looking for a lead to Irish immigrants and railroad workers, I browsed the index cards for the collection *Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento* (The Royal Development Board) under *ferrocarril* and the search became instantly more productive with several references to *los operarios* (unskilled labourers). This collection is described by Pérez as the “one of the most important sources for the economic history of Cuba between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (147). It is made up of official reports and government correspondence on subjects such as the slave trade, population statistics, the railroad, white colonisation and all aspects of economic development. The *Real Junta de Fomento* collection also held the records of

¹⁰ See ANC GSC, 10-25, July 1808.

¹¹ See ANC GSC, 213-165, 1811.

¹² See ANC GSC, 141-17.

the *Comision del Ferrocarril* (the Railway Commission). The Irish finally made their appearance, with no reference to *los irlandeses*, but in documents described in the card index as: “about the unskilled workers on the railroad”, “measures taken by the government to prevent desertions”, “contracts for the railroad” and “an enquiry into the unfortunate occurrences on the railroad and how order was reinstated”. This collection yielded the largest number of documents on the railroad workers in question with passenger lists, details of their contracts, reception and accommodation. The different reports therein by the engineers, the Railway Commission, newspaper reports, and correspondence between the *Junta de Fomento* and the Captain-General provide a rich source from which to document and analyse the harsh conditions and coercions at play, and the protests and strikes by the railroad workers. These manuscripts describing the response of the colonial authorities, the engineers and the military forces, provide an insight into the discursive strategies of the ruling elite and their contradictory ideas on property and ‘free’ labour. In the consternation over insubordinate Irish labourers, as reported in the colonial record and the perceived threat they posed to the social order, the discourse of ‘free’ labour and the earlier welcome increase to the white population quickly turned to a racialised discourse of a ‘degenerate’ class of white labourers with a ‘disinclination to work’.

The next collection I approached with a degree of trepidation, on discovering two shelves of thirty type-written ledgers of anywhere between 250 and 800 pages each were the guides to a miscellaneous collection known as the *Libros de Miscelánea* and *Miscelánea de Expedientes* dealing exclusively with the nineteenth century. This is a rich treasure trove of chaotically organised records relating to civil and criminal disputes, records of altercations in which people fall foul of the law, providing unexpected and tantalising details concerning the general population. It also contains information on the entry and departure of ships and lists of foreign residents. It is organised alphabetically, so starting with the first initial of names of foreign residents allows a small advantage. Conveniently with Irish names, a search starting with O or Mc presented an encouraging warm-up. While the collection was catalogued in 1922, the old binding and the deteriorated state of some of the volumes can make the search a very frustrating experience, rewarded every now and again by the appearance of Irish names. This led to records with lists of applications for residency by hundreds of Irish settler families and petitions to Ricardo O’Farrill of the *Junta de Población Blanca* for aid, when left destitute by prospective sponsors. When I returned to Ireland after my research trip I read the wise caution of more seasoned researchers than I, who recommend approaching this set of records with “time, patience and

mental stamina”.¹³ It is worth the effort because while the collection does not yield much about cutting edge technologies of the day, large public works or major social or political upheavals it is filled with what Stoler describes as “rich ethnographic moments stored in the non-eventful” (2009: 157).

In the collection *Donativos y Remisiones*, containing a wide array of donated materials to do with commerce, military leaders of the independence period, correspondence by political figures and intellectuals there are references to Irish names dating from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century. Within the same time period, *Instrucción Pública*, which deals with public education in the latter part of the colonial period, contains references to many Irish names, by now double-barrelled, applying for permission to receive and give instruction in subjects as varied as mechanics, languages, medicine and music. Time did not allow a fuller search of this collection but it would be a good place to work back from, linking the now fused Irish-Cuban names to earlier settlers.

The final collection I looked at was the records of the Military Commission, *La Comision Militar*, which deals with public order, crime, slave conspiracies and rebellions. This massive collection comprises “at least 165 *legajos*, or bundles of testimony for 1844” with verbatim transcripts of the military tribunals dealing with the *Escalera* conspiracy (Finch 2007: 15). I examined several large bundles containing the records about Irish and other foreigners accused of conspiring to revolt which, interestingly, also appears in the British and Spanish archives.¹⁴ At the National Archives in Kew Gardens, London, the Foreign Office collection held a surprising amount of detail in English on British subjects in Cuba, including Irish, contained in consular dispatches by British Officials petitioning on behalf of Her Majesty’s subjects who fell foul of the law or ended up in prison. My search of the *Archivo Histórico Nacional* in Madrid (AHN) and more recently the *Archivo General de Indias* (AGI) in Seville provided little new on the Irish railroad workers; however it was possible to re-read copies of documents of the *Junta de Fomento* and newspapers of the day in pristine

¹³ For a rich description and excellent guide to the intricacies of this collection, see Jorge L. Giovanetti and Camilla Cowling, ‘Hard Work with the Mare Magnum of the Past: Nineteenth-Century Cuban History and the *Miscelánea de Expedientes* Collection’ in *Cuban Studies* 39 (January: 2008), pp. 60-84. Giovanetti and Cowling draw attention to the deteriorating condition of this collection which is a problem across many of the collections I consulted. The concern and commitment by the staff at the archives to protect and conserve the documents is impressive, but the challenges are enormous, given the sheer volume of the collections and the scarce resources available to carry out the necessary work of conservation.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of these documents and Irish involvement in the *Escalera* Conspiracy see Margaret Brehony, ‘Irish Free Labor and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba’, 1835-1844’, *Éire-Ireland*, Volume 47, Issue 1&2 Spring/Summer 2012, pp. 70-93.

condition compared to the more deteriorated state of some of the records in Havana. The contrast between resources, research facilities, and conservation of documents in archives in the metropolis and archives in the periphery is stark testament to ‘uneven development’ in archival preservation into the twenty-first century.

This research was carried out over two three-month visits to Havana in 2008 and 2009. Because of the time-consuming nature of searching primary sources, there was less time to spend on secondary literature and accounts by Cuban historians of the period which could only be consulted in Cuba. Inter-library loan is not possible and much of the historical research carried out in the last fifty years in Cuba is relatively difficult to obtain from outside Cuba. A survey of historical literature and newspaper reports at the *Biblioteca Nacional ‘Jose Marti’* (National Library); *Instituto de Historia*; *Museo de la Ciudad, La Habana* (City Museum); and Havana University Library, *fondos raros y valiosos* (Rare Books Collection), all provided secondary material such as nineteenth-century travel narratives, contemporary Cuban and Spanish accounts adding texture and context to the history of colonial administration, the railroad, the slave trade, and abolition.¹⁵ The records of the *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País*, known as *Las Memorias de la Sociedad Económica* are held at the *Instituto de Lingüística y Literatura*.¹⁶ This colonial institution was set up in 1791 by twenty-seven Havana planters to inform the work of the *Junta de Fomento* by promoting agriculture, trade, literature, education and science. The planters used it mainly as a forum to promote schemes to advance the efficiency, technology and prosperity of the sugar industry. The many volumes of the *Memorias* provide rich historical documentation on a wide variety of subjects to do with sugar production, population trends, white colonisation, immigrants and railroads, but they also throw light on the mindset of the planter class on all aspects of the colony and particularly on the subject of ownership of labour, slavery, and abolition.

It goes without saying that immigrant mobile labour is a difficult cohort to research because they were poor, transient and often illiterate, therefore leaving few records of their own experiences. They appear obliquely and infrequently in the records and more likely when they fall foul of the authorities, but they become more centrally located as in the case of the railroad workers in question, when they erupt in protest challenging the colonial order. The Irish railroad workers occupied more space in the archive than they might otherwise have had they not contested the coercions and intimidations of their contracts. After the highs and lows of

¹⁵ *Biblioteca Nacional ‘Jose Marti’* can be accessed at <http://www.bnjm.cu/>, the *Instituto de Historia* can be accessed at <http://www.ihc.cu/>, and Havana University Library at <http://www.uh.cu/Biblioteca-Central>.

¹⁶ <http://www.ill.cu/>

six months spent navigating a bewildering labyrinth of colonial archives I was beginning to get a sense of the “processes of archiving” and “how colonial sense and reason conjoined social kinds with the political order of colonial things” and even then how “that ‘common sense’ was subject to revision and actively changed” (Stoler 2009: 9). In the subject index of ‘colonial things’ in the archive in Havana, certain subjects mattered more for reasons of ‘colonial sense’, and the appearance, absence or location of subject matter followed a similar archival rationale. The fact that records of Irish immigration in the 1820s are filed under a subject index for ‘white population’ provides rich historical context. While looking for manuscript records of the railroad workers I encountered a huge irony in the colonial memory of place and ‘bricks and mortar’, on discovering that the National Cuban Archive building on the corner of Compostela and San Isidro, only a few blocks from the main Garcini railway station, was built on the ground where Ricardo O’Farrill first housed his slave depot, conveniently near the port and the slave market (Fernández Moya 2007: 190).

Discourse and the Colonial Archive

The archive in this study of Irish migration to Cuba is treated not so much as a “repository of the facts” but as “complexly constituted instances of discourse that produce their objects as *real*, that is, as existing prior to and outside of discourse” (Axel 2002: 14). In applying postcolonial theory to the historiography of the Irish railroad workers and taking a new direction to Ignatiev’s line of inquiry in *How the Irish Became White* (1995) in the United States, it is possible to examine the discourse and strategies of the Cuban ruling elite in which the Irish were variously construed as Catholic ‘whitening’ agents, free labourers, and ‘troublesome’ in the formation of a subaltern Cuban identity. By examining the archive against the social, political and economic backdrop of a ‘troubled colonial context’ the Irish experience as settlers and labourers in the context of the transition from slavery and free labour comes into sharper view. The importation of cheap white European labour in the 1830s, driven by an acute shortage of labour supply and a fear of ‘africanisation’, provides a window into the way in which processes of labour, class and race formation were adapted to changing economic and political climate.¹⁷ The developing discourse in the the colonial records of a transition to ‘free’ labour reveals a great deal about the mindset of the slave-holding class in controlling racial hierarchies and labour. By 1835, as the pressure to abolish slavery increased, debates on slavery became more heated, slave revolts were more common than at

¹⁷ The idea of *africanización* (africanisation) of Cuban society drew on a racialised colonial discourse used to distinguish between a white Cuban nation of Spanish heritage desired by colonial elites and a nation of mixed African and European cultural heritage. The term was employed to invoke fear amongst planter elites of Cuba becoming a black republic, like Haiti.

any other time and colonial comparisons with the first, black independent republic in neighbouring Haiti added renewed force to the planters' fears. Elaborate schemes for white colonisation and new sources of labour were devised in a contested and contradictory discourse which reads more as a "blueprint of distress" (Stoler 2002: 157). Ideologies of racial and ethnic hierarchies and systems of colonial labour were debated in the context of perpetual fears of slave revolts and insubordinate 'wage' workers threatening the colonial order. The case of Irish railroad workers affords an interesting examination of the reformulation of labour in the discursive strategies of the planter elite while the contradictions inherent in their rationale for importing cheap white labour as a likely substitute for slavery are laid bare by the coercions they exercised over 'free' labour.¹⁸

There is no clear-cut Irish identity detectable in the fusion that is twenty-first century Cuban culture and there is no one Irish experience in the historical records which remain from the colonial era. Irish experience can only be fully understood through analysis within the broader historical and social context of transnational and trans-colonial migration from Ireland, as part of a small flow of European migrant labour in the nineteenth-century Spanish Caribbean within larger migratory flows of forced African labour, contract labour from the Canary Islands and later Chinese indentured labour. Irish labour was introduced as a test of 'free' labour that would bolster the white population at a time when the pressure to abolish slavery was growing and played a part in the continual processes of class and race formation in the multi-ethnic and trans-cultural environment of Cuba.

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¹⁸ For an analysis of the railroad worker debacle, see Margaret Brehony, 'Free Labour and Whitening the Nation: Irish Migrants in Colonial Cuba', *Saothar* 38, *Journal of the Irish Labour History Society* 2013.

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