

The Irish in the Caribbean 1641-1837 An Overview

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Abstract

The arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean brought about irreversible demographic change. Decimated by defeat and disease, 'peaceful' Arawaks and 'warlike' Caribs alike ceased to exist as an identifiable ethnic group, their gene pool dissolving into that of the newcomers, where it died away or remained un-investigated. The replacement of native peoples by European settlers was desultory. After their arrival in 1492 the Spanish explored and settled the Caribbean islands with some enthusiasm. The extension of activities into Mexico and Peru, however, rich in precious metals and with a structured agricultural work force, swiftly eclipsed the islands as a destination for settlers. More northerly Europeans (French, English, Irish, and Dutch) arriving later, slipped into the more neglected Spanish possessions in the Leeward Islands (today's eastern Caribbean) or Surinam, on the periphery of Portuguese Brazil. These seventeenth-century colonists initiated the process which turned the Caribbean into the world's sugar bowl. To do so, they imported enslaved Africans who soon became the most numerous group on the islands. In the nineteenth century, as sugar receded in economic importance, so too did the remaining whites, and the Caribbean assumed its present Afro-Caribbean aspect. Changing the islands' flora, fauna and demography, the newcomers also imported their religious and political systems and 'great power' rivalries. Those who founded the colonies were eager for royal support and recognition, thinking very much in terms of subsequently returning home to enjoy wealth and importance. As their tropical possessions proved themselves valuable, kings and governments became more and more determined to retain and expand them. The sugar boom made the Caribbean a cockpit for warfare among the European powers. This presented difficulties and opportunities for the Irish. Divided at home into colonists and colonised, when seeking their fortunes in Europe's overseas empire, they had to choose which king to serve, which colony to plant.

Pioneer Settlers: The Case of Peter Sweetman

This situation in the Caribbean was first clearly articulated by Peter Sweetman in 1641. Sweetman had left Ireland with the intention of becoming a substantial planter. His chosen destination was Saint Christopher (Saint Kitts), the first island where Europeans made a serious attempt to develop tobacco plantations. Arriving simultaneously in the mid-1620s, the English and French, fearful both of native Caribs and Spanish claims to possession, partitioned the island amongst themselves. Sweetman, a subject of the British King Charles I and building upon connections with English traders and adventurers who used Cork and Kinsale as the last landfall on the Atlantic crossing, led his entourage (male and female, soldiers and servants) to the English sector of the island.

The outbreak of the 1641 rebellion by Catholics in Ireland against English rule caused Sweetman

to rethink his position. Tensions ran high between the English and Irish colonists and the governor sought to defuse the situation by deporting the Irish to the nearby island of Montserrat. Uneasy about this move, Sweetman wrote to King John of Portugal citing religious harassment and requesting to be allowed to lead four hundred Irish from Saint Christopher to an island site at the mouth of the Amazon. There, Sweetman hoped to establish a distinct Irish colony, promising King John that his group of soldiers and servants, which included fifty or sixty married men, would be a guarantee of security, stability and future development.

The idea of establishing an Irish tobacco colony along the Amazon under an Iberian monarch had been put before the King of Spain some years earlier. Church and King were well disposed to such a proposal having already welcomed the Irish as persecuted Catholics and useful soldiers. Hispanic colonists in the Americas reacted differently, seeing the Irish as

northern intruders, pointing out that not all of them were Catholics, complaining that wherever they came they brought the English with them. The Portuguese authorities now reflected a similar split. King John therefore designed a compromise solution. He refused Sweetman's request for a distinct Irish colony, based on the strategically placed island the Irishman had chosen. Instead King John offered a mainland site where Sweetman could establish a town. There he could be governor but the head magistrate would be Portuguese. The Irish must become naturalised Portuguese, admit other Portuguese subjects to settle among them and accept the Portuguese judicial system. They would also have to observe Portuguese trading rules, which meant that they had to rely on merchants in Lisbon (Lorimer 1989: 446-559).

Sweetman's hopes were dashed. He had hoped to set up a distinct Irish colony in an island location where he could maintain valuable trading connections with the English and the Dutch, currently the best suppliers of capital, cheap freight charges, manufactured goods, and African slaves. So Sweetman's attempt failed and the Irish were moved to Montserrat. By 1667 a visiting British governor described it as 'almost an Irish colony'.

A decade later a census of the island proved this description correct, showing some sixty-nine percent of the white male population and some seventy percent of the white females to be Irish. On Nevis and Antigua, the Irish totalled around a quarter of the white population; on Saint Christopher they hovered around ten percent.

Neither the Spanish Habsburgs nor the British Stuarts were prepared to sanction an official Irish colony in the Caribbean. The Irish therefore were left in the position of trying to secure their advantage by playing off the rival powers against one another. As France replaced Spain as the leading Catholic power in Europe, Caribbean colonies moved from tobacco to more valuable and capital-intensive sugar cultivation. The division of Saint Christopher into French and British sectors thus became more politically volatile.

The Irish could prove politically influential. In 1666, when Britain and France declared war, it

was the Irish who ensured the triumph of the French on Saint Christopher and Montserrat. An English colonist commented that 'the Irish in the rear, always a bloody and perfidious people in the English Protestant interest, fired volleys into the front and killed more than the enemy of our own forces'. Montserrat, as well as the entirety of Saint Christopher, passed into French control, a situation reversed a year later. The English took over, demoting Montserrat's Irish Protestant governor for helping the French, and installing William Stapleton, an Irish Catholic, in his place, as he understood 'the better to govern his countrymen' (Akenson 1997:55-58).

It was the needy nobles of Portugal and Spain who established Europe's first overseas empires. Landless younger sons, *fidalgos* and *hidalgos*, bred to avoid manual labour and give orders to their social inferiors, took to soldiering, eager to conquer and discover new lands. In doing so they frequently encouraged the family's peasantry to leave the fields, take up arms and stagger on shipboard. Peter Sweetman, setting off for Saint Christopher with his armed retinue and bond servants, was an Irish version of this European phenomenon.

Tudor and Cromwellian conquest meant that Ireland was full of dispossessed or depleted Catholic gentry struggling somehow to preserve their social standing. The irony of the Irish as 'colonised and coloniser' is intellectually disturbing to readers in a later generation; it was not so to the actual participants. Needy Catholic gentry, landless swordsmen, particularly from the provinces of Connacht and Munster, might look west to recoup their losses. The earliest surviving Irish emigrant letter from the New World comes from the Blake brothers on Barbados and Montserrat, conventionally carrying messages home to Galway of the good living to be made in a new land. The details about the sugar plantation and the slave labour force which produced this satisfaction are surprising to the twenty-first century reader (Oliver 1909, I: 52-4).

Island Exploitation/Irish Servitude

While gentry and merchants (Catholic and Protestant) set out for the Caribbean to become

planters, the majority of Irish arriving there in the seventeenth century came as bonded labour. These servants, who continue to haunt Irish memory as 'white slaves' and 'political transportees', arrived in Barbados and Jamaica as well as in the Leewards. Barbados (rather than the more disturbed Leewards) emerged as the Stuarts' most valuable Caribbean colony, first producing tobacco, then in the 1640s switching to sugar.

In a headlong search for labour, the sugar planters bought up indentures (four to seven year contracts) for white servants and imported enslaved Africans. By the 1650s their preference for slaves, whom they would own for life, had clearly emerged. In their eagerness for profit the planters created a society which often frightened them, for both servants and slaves were numerous and discontented. In 1647 there was a servant revolt in Barbados, its ringleaders were hanged, but no particular part was imputed to the Irish.

The establishment of a protectorate in Ireland and the appointment of Daniel Searle, the first Cromwellian governor, aroused official fear of Irish servants as rebellious, and capable of making common cause with slaves. This accusation would be revived again at times of political uncertainty in 1685 (James II's accession) and 1692 (William III's establishment on the throne). On all three occasions, slaves were hanged and Irishmen acquitted (Beckles 1990:515-521). In 1660, Barbadian legal codes laid down a clear colour line. Africans and Native Americans were to serve for life, white men for the period of their indenture. Bonded servants were not slaves, but for those harassed by an uncaring master or overseer, subjected to unremunerated work under a hot sun and dying before their indenture was completed, the difference must have seemed academic.

How many white servants (bonded and free) reached Barbados in the seventeenth century and what proportion of these were Irish, it is impossible to say. Over fifty percent seems a distinct possibility. In 1667 Governor Willoughby was worried because he believed that more than half of the four-thousand-strong Barbadian militia was Irish (Ibid: 508-9). It

seems possible that there were more Irish servants on Barbados than on Montserrat.

So why have they made so little mark on an island described as 'as English as Cheltenham' and where the surviving records produce far fewer Irish names than the Leewards or Jamaica? One answer may be that intensive sugar cultivation, raising the price of land, drove out servants who had served their indentures. A Barbadian historian calculated that in the years immediately following 1660, ten thousand settlers, mostly servants, frustrated by their inability to gain access to land, left the island, half of them bound for Jamaica, the other half for mainland America, the Leewards, Windwards and Surinam (Chandler 1946:114).

However, for a Caribbean island Barbados does possess an unusual number of poor whites, a distinctive group dubbed 'Red Legs' or 'Red Shanks' by nineteenth-century commentators. This group is said to be descended from Cromwell's transported Scots or perhaps English from Monmouth's rebellion. Recent research argues that the Red Shanks are the result of the large intake of servants in the seventeenth century. If they are carriers of Irish genes, perhaps they lack Irish surnames because female servants were more likely to remain on the island and marry there than their male counterparts (Sheppard 1977:25; Rodgers 2007: 338).

The question of how many Irish transportees reached the West Indies is just as difficult to compute. Most Irish soldiers leaving as a result of the wars in the 1640s and 1650s went or were deported to continental Europe. Possibly more Scots soldiers were deported to the New World than Irish. It seems probable that most transportation from Ireland took place after the establishment of the protectorate, when the Tudor law allowing the transportation of vagrants was applied to Ireland. In the 1650s the disturbed state of the country provided a rich source of vagrants, and of course it was easy for the authorities to designate anyone thought politically dangerous within this category. After the conquest of Jamaica in 1655, Henry Cromwell offered to help populate the island by sending off one thousand young women, a move for their own good 'although we must use

force in taking them up'. A similar number of boys aged from twelve to fourteen could also be provided. Whether or not this deportation took place remains uncertain. Its funding proved elusive (Thurloe 1742, 4: 23).

From Labour Oppression to Economic Opportunity

Recruits for the Jamaican campaign were raised in Barbados. Given the expedition's need for soldiers and the confused state of affairs on the island, it is possible that some transportees actually escaped into the Cromwellian army that conquered Jamaica. Push and pull factors of the various types mentioned so far led the Irish to Jamaica. In 1685 James II found Irish Catholic smallholders ready to cast their votes for colonial assemblymen who supported royal policy.

In 1731 Governor Robert Hunter declared that the 'servants and lower rank of people in Jamaica chiefly consisted of Irish Papists' who had been 'pouring in upon us in such sholes as they have done of late years' (Beckles 1990:520). This remark was made at the end of a decade in which 72,689 enslaved Africans had been ferried in, while the white population stood at just above 7000 (Richardson 1998, 2: 459). The same pattern existed in Montserrat. Between 1678 (the year of the first census) and 1775 the number of Irish on the island never reached more than 2,000.

In 1678 the majority of these Irish people may have been servants, bonded and free, but by 1729 they had disappeared either by dying, emigrating elsewhere or becoming smallholders. Some of these obviously lived not by farming but by renting out their slaves. Garret Fahy had sixteen slaves, four horses and one cultivated acre. Anthony Bodkin, described as a planter, had thirteen slaves and no land at all. John Conner, labourer, had two slaves, a man and a woman. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, Montserrat's slave population stood at 3,570: by 1729 it was up to 6,063, and as of 1775 had climbed to 9,834 (Sheridan 1974:182). The 'almost Irish colony' had thus achieved a Caribbean demographic norm.

The accession of William III produced colonial assemblies in the English islands which enacted versions of the penal laws so that Catholics now found it more difficult than before to hold public office. However, unlike in Ireland, no attempt was made to restrict their ability to buy or bequeath land. Britain's triumph in the War of the Spanish Succession (1713) removed the French from Saint Christopher, which the British, pleased with their exclusive ownership, now affectionately renamed Saint Kitts.

Greater political stability in the region made for economic development. In the course of the eighteenth century, the Creole Irish planter community on Montserrat achieved striking wealth. Leading families, Skerrets, Galways, Kirwins and Farrells, began to buy property in Saint Kitts. Fortunes were made by a combination of trading and sugar planting. Activating contacts in Bristol and Cork, they imported slaves and provisions, the two most desired commodities in the West Indies. Contacts with Guadeloupe and Martinique, the French islands, eager for barrelled and salted Irish beef to feed their slaves, and illegal imports of cheap British-imported slaves, provided an expanding market.

Also convenient for Montserratians, indeed visible from the cane fields of Saint Kitts, was Dutch Saint Eustatia, famed as 'the golden rock' for its smuggling activities. The most remarkable fortunes in inter-island trading were made by the Tuites and the Ryans sailing to the Virgins, where the Danes had recently acquired Saint Croix. On Montserrat at the start of his career, Nicholas Tuite had one hundred acres and forty-one slaves. On Saint Croix by 1760, he owned seven plantations and had an interest in fourteen others (Ibid.:444-5; Fenning 1962: 76). Orla Power's article in this journal provides an analysis of the activities of these Irish planters on Saint Croix.

Some ten percent of the property owners in Jamaica in 1670 were Irish. In 1685 when James II ascended the throne, he found the support of this group useful in promoting his policy of strengthening Catholicism and royal power by encouraging the exercise of freedom of religion within his dominions. The triumph of William III reversed this situation, but in 1729 some

twenty percent of the colonial assemblymen possessed Irish names.

In the early eighteenth century, families from Connacht and Munster, Archdeacons, Kellys, and Bourkes, established a tradition of Irishmen holding the Jamaica's highest legal offices. Coming from a Catholic background, to achieve these positions they had to conform to the established church, but Protestantism in the Caribbean was always less severely demanding than in the mainland colonies. Legal office opened the way to the easy acquisition of land for plantations so that all these families emerged as rich slave owners. In 1752 the heiress Elizabeth Kelly, daughter of Denis Kelly of Lisaduff, County Galway and Chief Justice of Jamaica, married into the Brownes of Westport, County Mayo, thus aiding their rise to Viscounts of Altamont and Earls of Sligo. Irish names on the island continued to mount among the substantial planter class, O'Hara, O'Conner, Talbot, Coulthurst, Herbert, Gregory, Martin, Madden, Forde, Richards, Dobbs, and de la Touche.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Ulster Presbyterians, famous for settling as Scots-Irish in Pennsylvania and the Appalachians, also appeared in the Caribbean. Some were wealthy merchants who invested in plantations, Delapps from Donegal and Dublin in Antigua and Jamaica and, from Belfast, Blacks in Grenada, and Gregs and Cunninghams on Dominica. Others worked as overseers or as commission agents, selling Irish linen and provisions, expanding into slaves, hoping that their fortunes would eventually rival those they had formerly served.

The most striking case here was that of the Blair brothers from Newry. In the late eighteenth century James and Lambert Blair left Newry to set up an agency on Saint Eustatia. Their 1790 accounts reveal that the largest items of purchase for their planter clients were slaves for a Mr. Stevenson (Blair 1793:24). By the turn of the century when the British took Demerara from the Dutch, the Blairs had amassed enough capital to invest in the rich, wet, black soiled lands of the new colony. After emancipation, when the government paid out £20 million in compensation to the plantation owners for the loss of their slaves, James Blair junior received

about £83,530 for his 1,598 slaves. As such, he received more money than any other slave holder in the British Empire (Higman 1967: 12). In the eastern Caribbean, Queely Shiell vindicated Montserrat's reputation as an Irish island by claiming for 920 slaves, a number far in excess of anything the island's largest planters in previous times (the seventeenth-century Dutch Waads and the eighteenth-century English Wykes) had ever amassed. Indeed this claim meant that tiny Montserrat produced the largest single compensation package in the Leewards (Sessional 1837/: Montserrat).

However, the majority of those claiming and collecting under this compensation scheme were small property owners possessing ten slaves or less. Defenders of slavery complained that its abolition would hit the most vulnerable hardest. Men, drawing up wills, preferred to bequeath land to their sons and moveable property (slaves) to female dependants. Thus, widows and spinsters were often left with few resources, save the ownership of slaves, who served them and could be rented out to bring in an income. Irish names supply evidence of this point. Examples from two parishes in Jamaica show Brigit Garvey received compensation for eight slaves; Elizabeth Anne Carroll seven; Jane Welch, Elizabeth Geoghegan, Anne O'Meally, and Eleanor Tierney six each; Elizabeth Anne Sherlocke, Elizabeth Slevin, and Mary O'Sullivan five; Rebecca Fergus, Elizabeth Burke, Cecelia Jane Murphy, Mary Anne Connolly four; Ann Rattigan three; Mary Anne B. Hennessey, two; Jane Boyle, Brigit Dillon, Mary Curtin one (Ibid: Jamaica). Again, the lists of names on Montserrat and Antigua reveal examples of a similar situation.

Throughout the British West Indies, records for the eighteen thirties attest to the tenacity of Hiberno-Caribbean connections. In 1833 the Earl of Sligo (direct descendant of Elizabeth Kelly and John Browne) claimed for 286 slaves and received about £5,526 in compensation. In 1834 he was appointed Governor of Jamaica with Dowell O'Reilly from County Louth serving as his Attorney General. O'Reilly's appointment reiterated the Irish legal presence on the island. Unlike his predecessors, the passing of Catholic emancipation in 1829 meant

that he could take up his judicial appointment as a Catholic.

Island-Hopping in the Caribbean

The Irish had nonetheless never limited their Caribbean destinations to British colonies. In the early 1670s a visitor came upon a settlement of one to two hundred Irish on Guadeloupe living 'much as they do at home in little huts, planting potatoes and tobacco, and as much indigo as will buy them canvas and brandy and never advance so far as sugar planting'(Cullen 1994:127). This group may not have made such social progress but certainly next-door on Martinique there were families who had done so. Kirwans, Roches, Lynchs and Skerrets sought ennoblement from the French Crown in the eighteenth century, claiming to have left Ireland for the colony in the seventeenth century. Social absorption for Irish Catholics in French and Spanish colonies was relatively easy. In the late seventeenth century, John Stapleton and his wife Helen Skerret left Ireland for the newest and largest French colony, Saint Domingue, where their success as planters enabled them to move to France, buying a property in Nantes (Holohan 1989: 29).

To make this journey in reverse became more common as the Irish merchant community on the Atlantic coast found itself at the centre of France's slave trade and sugar imports. In the second generation, Galway Butlers, now in La Rochelle, sent two sons to Saint Domingue where they established extensive plantations (Ibid.: 97-100).

The most famous Irish merchant family to use wealth gained in France to establish plantations in Saint Domingue were the Walshes. Antoine Walsh worked as a slave trader from 1730 to 1753, during which period his ships carried some 12,000 slaves across the Atlantic. In 1753 he retired from that trade and left to settle on the family plantations on Saint Domingue, where died in 1763 (Rodgers 2007: 106-112). His immediate heirs remained in the southern province of that colony, among other *grand blancs*, successful Hiberno-French planters, Sheil, O'Gorman, Rourke, Macnamara and Plunket (Van Brock 1977, 13:89-104).

Back in France, money from the slave trade and plantations helped to fund the Irish college in Nantes and Walsh's regiment in the Irish brigade, which received its name from Antoine's nephew, coming from a new generation determined to put trade behind them. Despite enormous losses in both areas during the upheavals of the Revolution, these families survive today in France as titled and *chateaux*-owning.

In eighteenth-century Saint Domingue, Stapletons, Butlers and Walshes were *grand blancs*. Yet Saint Domingue's swiftly expanding plantation economy, which made France the greatest sugar producer in the Caribbean, offered opportunities to men of modest means as well as to wealthier investors, thus creating a class of *petit blancs* engaged in small holding, overseeing, trade and artisan activities, and all employing slave labour. Given the existence of a substantial Irish presence in the Atlantic ports (at once long established but also continuing to receive young, impecunious arrivals from home) the development of a group of Irish *petit blancs* is a likely but as yet an un-researched topic in Irish-Caribbean studies.

Irish Mariners in the Antillean Sea

Irish sailors constitute another historically neglected group with significant Caribbean ties. We know that in the closing years of the eighteenth century some twelve percent of the crew on Liverpool slave ships were Irish (Behrendt 2005). Sailors making the direct voyage from home to the Caribbean must also have been numerous. From the seventeenth century onwards, the Munster ports achieved international importance as the final point for taking on water and victuals before the Atlantic crossing. Since the West Indian islands furnished little in the way of material for naval repairs, eighteenth-century Cork was organised to produce sailcloth and rigging as well as provision for British, French, Dutch, Danes and Bremeners setting out on the Atlantic crossing.

Captains, unexpectedly short on crew, must also have used Munster as a point of last resort. Scattered evidence of Irish people sailing the Caribbean suggests a wide social spectrum. The County Kerry poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin

(1748-1784) wrote his only work in English in Port Royal, Jamaica. His encomiastic poem to Admiral Rodney was perhaps embarked upon in the hopes of gaining his discharge from the British naval vessel on which he was a rating. Of the pirate fraternity, Anne Bonny from Cork was sentenced to death in 1720. Disguised in male clothing, according to Daniel Defoe, she was 'as forward and courageous' as any of her calling. Unlike her male colleagues, she was reprieved from hanging on the grounds of her pregnancy (Applby 1991: 64).

Irish Inter-Racial Marriages and Affairs

In 1775, nineteen-year-old Charles Fitzgerald, naval officer, brother to Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and third son of Emily, Duchess of Leinster, wrote to his mother with literary panache that 'the jet black ladies of Africa's burning sands have made me forget the unripened beauties of the north'. A few months later he followed this up with the news that she could look forward to 'a copper coloured grandchild' (Tillyard 1995:331).

Relations between Irish men and African women were as much a staple of the Caribbean experience as malaria, yellow fever, hurricanes, rum drinking and turtle soup, but it is an area of life which rarely appears on the written record. The earliest emigrant letters hint at this scheme of things. In 1675 John Blake, a merchant settler from Galway admitted to the veracity of his brother Henry's accusation that he had brought a 'whore' from Ireland to Barbados along with his wife, but excused himself on the grounds of domestic necessity; his wife's 'weak constitution' meant that she could not manage everything herself 'for washing, starching, making of drink and keeping the house in good order is no small task to undergo here'. He could not dispense with the services of the prostitute until the African girl he had bought was properly trained in household matters (Oliver 1909-19, II: 55).

Wills and investigations instituted over disputed inheritance would sometimes reveal lifelong secrets concealed from the family back home. Thus in 1834 R. R. Madden (anti-slavery activist and future historian of the United Irishmen — see Burton's article in this journal) penetrated into the mountains of Jamaica in order to view a

deceased relative's plantation, long the subject of a chancery suit. There he was startled to find several mixed-race cousins and their elderly mother, his uncle Garret's mulatto concubine (Madden 1835, I: 171).

Irishmen in Antillean Inter-imperial Wars

Though Afro-Irish sexual relations and Irish sailors in the Caribbean have so far been neglected by historians, the impact of Irish soldiers in the region has received some attention. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the Irish were involved in countless colonial wars in the West Indies. In 1667 their settlers rushed to arms to help the French take over the whole of divided Saint Christopher. This triumph was short-lived. Yet the varied nature of their loyalties meant that one of the most successful Irish soldiers in the Caribbean, William Stapleton, made his career and fortune by reversing this situation. This landless swordsman from Tipperary, serving the British King Charles II in the West Indies, helped re-conquer Montserrat and became governor, first of that island and then of all the English Leewards. On Montserrat he supplied family and friends with lands and official appointments while confirming his planter wealth by marrying an heiress on Nevis.

William Stapleton's achievement conformed to a pattern which all soldiers longed for, the successful campaign which fed military reputation, career and fortunes. As the eighteenth century duel between Britain and France intensified, such opportunities blossomed. The Caribbean was a particularly enticing area for the expeditionary force, as plantation colonies invaded by military and naval forces offered extensive booty. Sugar planters, regardless of national affiliation, favoured preserving their lives and assets to fighting the enemy. They tended to flee, or cooperate with the invader.

During the Seven Years War, the British taking of Havana, the heavily fortified Cuban guardian of the Spanish fleet, furnished just such opportunities to Irish officers working for the rival sides, and illustrates both the advantages and dangers of military campaigning in the Caribbean. Five hundred and sixty of the British

forces were killed (most of them in the siege of Morro Castle, the huge fortification guarding the port), while about 4,700 died of fever or dysentery. The total prize money amounted to £750,000, distributed according to naval and military rank, ensuring that officers took the lion's share.

The taking of Havana was celebrated in Ireland as a victory for the Protestant cause. Bonfires were lit in Cork and Sir Boyle Roche (1736-1807) a Munster man, who distinguished himself at the assault on Morro, was hailed as a local hero. On leaving the army he entered the Irish parliament as member for Tralee town, County Kerry. He became famous for his 'fineering brogue' and bungling interjections. The 'Irish bulls' charged forth - 'I smell a rat - I see it floating in the air before me and hear it brewing a storm - but I'll nip it in the bud'. On such occasions his military reputation as a hero of Havana combined hilarity with respect. Useful to government as he offered loyal support and defused tempers with buffoonery, he became a successful collector of places and pensions for himself and his wife (Johnston-Lik 2002, 6: 171).

The British onslaught on Havana was even more important in furthering the career and reputation of an Irish soldier in the employ of Spain. Born in Baltrasna, County Westmeath, Alexander O'Reilly joined the Spanish army as a cadet at the age of eleven. He was a brigadier in the Hibernian regiment when in 1763 he became part of a force sent to Cuba to reorganise the colony after Britain's incursion. When the new governor died, O'Reilly took command of the island's administration and emerged with a reputation as a keen military strategist, who had re-established the viability of the colony. On his return to Spain he became a lieutenant general. Now regarded as a trouble shooter in the New World, both figuratively and literally, he led an expedition to establish Spain's power in New Orleans and Louisiana. In these areas he was able to promote the fortunes of three other Irish officers - Charles Howard, Arthur O'Neil and Maurice O'Conner (Fannin 2000: 26-28).

By the time O'Reilly arrived in Havana, Irish soldiers abroad were more likely to be found in the service of France. The Irish Brigade was headed by officers born in France's Irish

community or fresh from home in search of career opportunities denied them there as Catholics. In 1778 France and Britain went to war again and the Irish brigade served outside Europe for the first time. Suitably, Walsh's regiment was despatched to guard Senegal in West Africa, France's largest slave-trading establishment. However, the regiment was soon transferred to the Caribbean and played a vital role in the American Revolutionary War. King George III of Britain at one point declared that he would rather risk an invasion of Britain itself than lose the sugar islands, for without them he would not have the money to carry on hostilities.

The presence of armies and navies raised the price of supplies in the region to unprecedented heights. Irish merchants (Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter) seized on wartime conditions to make fortunes using that conveniently placed smugglers' rock of Saint Eustatia. In 1779 the British turned upon the Dutch colony. Admirals Rodney and Hood, landing the Thirty-Fifth Regiment of foot (a unit first formed back in Belfast at the beginning of the century by Sir Arthur Chichester) occupied the island. In London's parliament and press, this action would elicit criticism, suggesting that Eustatia was chosen as a target because of its easy riches, rather than strategic relevance. A cartoon of the time shows Rodney waving his sword and calling out 'French fleet be damned, Hood! Grab the loot'. On officially declaring war on Britain in 1778, rather than simply observing their neutrality with a pro-American bias, the French were eager to take the war to the sugar islands. In 1781 they launched a triumphant expedition from Martinique to Saint Eustatia spearheaded by the Irish Brigade.

When the French commander sailed back to Martinique, a Munster man, Colonel Thomas Fitzmaurice (b. Kerry 1725) was appointed Governor of Saint Eustatia. As the war ended, he used personal contacts with Lord Shelburne (the British prime minister with estates in Kerry) to prevent any embarrassing disclosures and persecutions of wartime smugglers (Ibid.: 226). Thomas Fitzmaurice himself would go on to hold important appointments in the long-established French colonies of Cayenne and

Guadeloupe, other footholds from which to secure Irish careers within the Caribbean (Hayes 1949: 96).

Saint Eustatia had provided conventional campaigns for both sides, death by disease rather than physical conflict for many, with rich pickings for the survivors. But the American Revolutionary War highlighted problems which would complicate the French-Revolutionary War in the Caribbean. Both conflicts raised the issue of whether or not enslaved Africans should be deployed as soldiers. In many societies throughout history enslaved people have been sent to the battlefield, but Caribbean slavery, the product of commercial capitalism, did not favour such a solution. Africans were to labour on the plantations while Europeans held the firepower, the ultimate weapon of control in societies where they were very much the demographic minority. Yet in military crises the temptation to use any able-bodied group of men naturally existed.

Faced with the prospect of defeat by the American colonists, the British began to enlist African Americans. Among them was a Samuel Burke, born in South Carolina around 1755, reared in Cork, returning across the Atlantic with his master for the Revolutionary War. In New York Samuel used his fluency in the Irish language to recruit dock workers to a Loyalist regiment, which he himself joined (Miller 2000:148).

Imperial frontiers also provided areas where the colour line might waver. Edward Marcus Despard, from a military family in Queen's County (present-day County Laois), spent the greater part of his professional career in Jamaica. After the American Revolutionary War, he fought in Honduras, where he led forces that comprised Native Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Appointed Superintendent on the Muskito Coast (later British Honduras) in 1787, he fell foul of the 'Bay men' who protested to Westminster that he treated 'the meanest mulatto and free Negro' as though he was a white man (Burns 1965: 541).

Recalled to London, Despard failed to get another official appointment and ended up in the debtors' prison, where he read Tom Paine

and took to radical politics. He joined the United Irishmen and attempted to recruit United Britons and so co-ordinate a republican risings in both countries. In 1797 suspicion of his activities resulted in his arrest and internment. In 1803 (the year of Robert Emmet's rebellion in Ireland), he was hanged for organising a plot to assassinate King George III (O. DNB 2004, 15: 906). Despard's story, individual and dramatic, reflects the tensions created by this revolutionary period. In the 1790s, the French colony of Saint Domingue was to see these factors played out at their most extensive and explosive.

The outbreak of revolution had caused quarrelling among the propertied groups in the colony - *grand blancs*, *petit blancs* and property-owning mulattoes. The desire of these groups to follow their own interests in order to dominate the wealthy colony had given the slaves the chance to rebel. In this situation, Victor Martin O'Gorman (born County Clare, 1746) emerged as a leading figure. Starting his career in the Irish Brigade, he had become aide-de-camp to Count d'Argout, governor general to the French colonies in America, a position which enabled him to acquire a substantial plantation in Saint Domingue's southern province. In 1790 he was elected as one of the colonial representatives despatched to Paris to serve in the National Assembly.

As planter, assembly man and soldier, he helped to organise the Irish brigade (now officially known under the new constitution as Eighty-Seventh, Eighty-Eighth and Ninety-Second regiments of infantry) to form part of the expeditionary force to put down civil war in Saint Domingue. In 1792 Dillon and Walsh's regiment fought and lost an engagement against a rebel army (largely of African origin) in the southern province at Les Plantons. During this engagement, O'Gorman armed and led a group of his own slaves as did his planter neighbour, the resident 'milord' Walsh, who was caught, tortured and beheaded by the rebels.

When news of this defeat was received by the colonial assembly, they declared it 'the finishing stroke to the whole colony'. Captain Oliver Harty of the Berwick regiment was then appointed acting commander of the southern

province and organised a campaign to avenge the loss at Les Plantons. For this deed, he was lauded by the southern provincial assembly as 'a good and brave patriot' and denounced by his critics for conducting a massacre of old men, women and children. A new governor, Sonthonax arrived from France and assessing the situation in the colony came to the conclusion that the rebel slaves would in fact make the best republicans. He thus removed Harty from his command, declared slavery illegal, and appointed Toussaint L'Overture, an African Creole general and former slave from a Butler plantation, as commander and chief.

Back in Europe, the Irish Brigade persuaded the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger to support the Bourbons by fighting with the French. Their offer was accepted. The leaders of the brigade had hoped to fight in Europe but instead became part of the British invasion of Saint Domingue. Victor Martin O'Gorman fought with General Maitland against the French colonial government which had emancipated the colony's slaves, leading a unit known as O'Gorman's Chasseurs Noirs (black hunters) dedicated to restoring slavery and monarchical rule in Saint Domingue (Hayes 1949: 232). This campaign, stretching from 1794 to 1798, ended in the defeat and withdrawal of the British, by which time savage fighting and rampant disease had annihilated the Irish brigade.

The horrors of Saint Domingue had driven Britain to employ people of African origin as combatants. The exigencies of war now required that this policy be extended as French activity in the Leewards and Windwards led to the development of an eastern Caribbean front. In 1795, to the unease of the British planters, eight West India regiments, drawing on Afro-Caribbean recruits, were established. All commissioned officers, who of course had to pay for their appointments, were white, and half of these were Irish or Scots (Lieutenant-Colonel John Skerret was the commander of the Eighth Regiment). While the rank and file were in the main black or mulatto, each regiment was constructed around a nucleus of European corporals, sergeants and drummers.

Incomplete copies of enlistment books which survive suggest a heavily Irish presence. The

first fifty-two names and backgrounds of those enlisted in the Fourth West India Regiment show fifty-one whites, the majority of them coming from Cork, Dublin, Tipperary, Galway and Waterford. Some of the older sergeants had from eighteen to twenty-nine years experience under the belts (Buckley 1979: 31). So in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, we see a common pattern of Irish being used as white buffers. As bonded servants, the Irish worked close to, but in distinct groups from, Africans. Personal contact might result in friendship and good feelings, but on the whole the Irish held and benefited from the existence of the colour line.

Conclusions

The Caribbean never achieved iconic status as a destination for Irish emigrants.

For Catholics who stayed put service with the kings of continental Europe was common. The West Indies, when remembered at all, struck a sinister note as a place of sentence for the transported. Yet for some, it had become home and for others a springboard for migration to mainland America. For Ulster Presbyterians, for example, North America became the Land of Canaan. The Antilles was often a place of opportunity; through Caribbean activities, Antoine Walsh and Nicholas Tuite became the friends of kings. Sugar and slaves shaped urban development in the expanding ports of Cork, Limerick, and Belfast and in Dublin their existence impacted on Ireland's parliamentary politics (Rodgers 2007:119-196).

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century the Irish could be found at every level of white society in the Caribbean, one that by the twentieth century was ebbing away. In the case of the other Europeans (Spanish, French, British, Danish and Dutch) remnants of their presence remained among the islands, recorded sometimes in a reduced but lingering governmental presence, more obviously in architecture and language. However, the Irish, working through the empires of others, have left no such visible marks. Their one memorial is the names they planted – only possible to discover in Cuba, Trinidad, Saint Domingue, and most noticeable in the Leewards and

Jamaica. These surnames are now sometimes borne by descendants of Africans, occasionally carrying a genetic imprint from the original owners from generations past.

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