

THE IRISH IN THE ANGLO-CARIBBEAN: servants or slaves?

WHY WE NEED TO CONFRONT THE 'IRISH SLAVE MYTH' AND HOW TERMINOLOGY IS NOT SIMPLY SEMANTICS

By Liam Hogan, Laura McAtackney and Matthew C. Reilly

When John Grenham asked the question 'Were there Irish slaves in Barbados?' in an *Irish Times* article on 7 September 2015 he answered in the affirmative. He claimed that there were 'Irish slaves' in Barbados in the mid-seventeenth

century and that 'refusing to call them slaves is quibbling'. Such statements are part of a larger and growing public sentiment that unequivocally declares the experiences of the Irish in Barbados to be those of slavery. In contrast, scholars of the period agree that those who

were forcibly deported from Britain and Ireland to the Caribbean in the mid-seventeenth century cannot be accurately described simply as 'slaves' but as indentured servants. Where does the truth lie and is this simply a question of semantics?

Semantics?

Rather than academic 'quibbling', as is often suggested by those who perpetuate the 'Irish were slaves too' meme, the differences and commonalities between these two forms of unfree labour are of fundamental importance to our understanding of the development of racialised perpetual chattel slavery in the British colonies. The term 'indentured servitude' is not a denial of their suffering or unfree situation but rather

Below: Black slaves cutting sugar cane on a plantation established by the Delaps of Donegal, from *Ten views of the island of Antigua* by William Clarke, 1823. (British Library)



an accurate term to describe their legal status, few rights and harsh reality. Colonial servitude in the Anglo-Caribbean was temporary and non-hereditary, with legal personhood, while chattel slavery was perpetual and hereditary with sub-human legal status. It is inevitable that if we refer to these two different statuses in the same historical context using the same term ('slave') these profound distinctions are erased. The refusal to differentiate often reveals a motivation to equate indentured servitude for Europeans with African chattel perpetual slavery to claim spuriously that slavery had nothing to do with race. Of course, the word 'slavery' can be applied to any situation involving coercion or a lack of freedom and it is frequently deployed as a metaphor or as rhetoric. 'Slavery' is thus a general term, so it is necessary to contextualise its meaning in the colonial Caribbean. Our argument will focus on the Anglo-Caribbean, specifically Barbados and Montserrat, but similar case-studies can also be undertaken in other colonial realms.

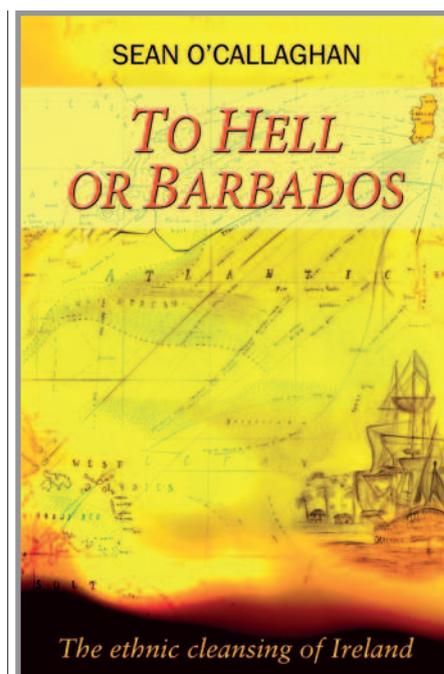
In the formative years of the English colonies in the Caribbean, legislators debated the terms, treatment and rights reserved for labourers. While the status of Amerindians was rather ambiguous, by the 1640s (shortly after the official settlement of Barbados in 1627) laws had been established that explicitly differentiated between servants (as reserved for Europeans) and the enslaved (as reserved for 'Negroes'). Bonded Europeans were classified as indentured servants under colonial law and were afforded particular rights not extended to the enslaved (how regularly they were able to take advantage of these rights is, of course, unclear). They were all temporarily (if they survived long enough) unfree, and those who were forced into servitude, just like those incarcerated today, can legitimately be described as being 'enslaved' in the broader sense. There are, and have been, many types of slavery. When the term is applied carelessly, however, it can be exploited to serve

a racist political agenda.

The distinction between voluntary and involuntary indentured servitude is also an important one. It is true that some Europeans, particularly prisoners of war or political prisoners, were sent to places like the Caribbean against their will and without a predetermined period of servitude. Upon arrival, however, those without contracts were, by law, required to serve the master who purchased their labour for a limited number of years, depending on their age. It is also true that many servants did not live to see the end of their period of servitude owing to brutal treatment, climatic conditions and their harsh work regimens, but while under the conditions of servitude they were subject to the same laws that governed European servants, not 'Negroes'. The oft-quoted popular 'history', Seán O'Callaghan's *To Hell or Barbados*, may be to blame for the conflation of all forms of servitude with chattel slavery, but these distinctions demand careful attention.

Not simply a case of comparing temporary 'slavery' and perpetual slavery

There are few accounts that describe the experiences of indentured servants in the mid-seventeenth-century Caribbean. In short, servants often worked alongside enslaved Africans, were punished by their masters for transgressions and had a meagre diet. Many grew discontented with their conditions, and Richard Ligon, who was in Barbados from 1647 to 1650, notes that planters took precautions to incorporate defensive features into their homes 'in case of uproar ... either by Christian servants or negro slaves'. French priest Father Antoine Biet visited Barbados in 1654 and lamented how poorly the servants were treated. He commented that some of the families who were forcibly deported to the colony were split up and purposely sold to different planters as part of their punishment. If servants left the plantation without permission from their master, this unaccounted-for time



was added to their term of indenture. Enslaved Africans, who were owned for life, were beaten for similar infractions. If indentured servants assaulted another servant or a slave it was treated as a misdemeanour and they were fined. If they assaulted their master, they were whipped. Their indenture was legal property, and therefore a servant's remaining time could be left in wills, traded for commodities and sold. Since one's labour is inseparable from one's person, indentured servants in Barbados were temporarily treated as a sort of commodity.

Ligon is often sourced to help gird the argument that indentured servants were treated 'worse' than slaves before 1661, but his view was ideological rather than historically consistent. His own notes undermine this argument, including his description of how the conditions for servants had improved markedly during his time on the island. For

Above: The oft-quoted popular 'history', Seán O'Callaghan's *To Hell or Barbados*, may be to blame for the conflation of all forms of servitude with chattel slavery, but these distinctions demand careful attention. (O'Brien Press)



Ligon, as well as other seventeenth-century English observers, it was likely the shock of seeing Europeans in such conditions that drew their attention and the analogy to slavery.

While planters in Barbados were paranoid about the Irish under their watch, by 1667 nearly 2,000 Irishmen were members of the colony's militia. Enslaved Africans were also permitted to be in the militia, but only in cases of emergency and they were never permitted to wield firearms. The 1661 slave code ordered overseers to search 'negro houses' for 'clubs, wooden swords' so that they could be confiscated and burnt. Furthermore, if an Irish servant encountered an African slave in the act of stealing, he could kill the slave and the homicide law would not apply. The killer would be rewarded with a large amount of sugar and the owner of the slave would then be compensated for his loss out of the public purse. Enslaved Africans who assaulted any 'Christian', regardless of the white person's status, were severely punished under assorted methods of torture. Biet notes that he 'saw a poor negro woman perhaps forty

years old, whose body was full of scars which she claimed had been caused by her master's [applying] the fire-brand to her'. Such mutilations of slaves were permitted. It was lawful for conspiratorial slaves to be burned alive, beheaded, gibbeted and castrated.

One of the worst recorded incidents of servant abuse in Barbados appeared before a court in 1640. John Thomas, likely an Englishman, had been suspended from his wrists by his masters and burning matches had been placed between his fingers. He had 'lost the use of several joints'. In a rare case of a servant successfully suing for redress, the court freed Thomas from his indenture and ordered his former masters to remain in prison and to pay for his medical treatment, plus compensation amounting to 5,000 pounds of cotton. This case demonstrates that servants had legal redress and that the sufferings of servants were not limited to the Irish; English, Scottish, Welsh, German and French servants also experienced hardship in Barbados.

In short, the full text of laws passed in 1661 carefully spelled out the legal distinctions between slavery (as reserved for 'Negroes') and servitude (as reserved for Europeans). Earlier laws from the 1640s, which we know only by name, similarly make clear that certain rules and rights applied to

'servants' while others were explicitly for 'Negroes'.

Wider role of the Irish in the Caribbean

The majority of the Irish who arrived on Caribbean shores served as labourers and suffered hardships at the hands of overseers. Some suffered particularly cruel treatment owing to colonial antagonisms that existed between the Irish and the English. What underlines the historiographical vandalism of the 'Irish slaves' narrative is that some of those who tortured slaves and were cruel to servants were Irish. As Biet made his way across the island, he was befriended by an Irishman on a sugar plantation:

'One day I went to visit my Irishman. He had in irons one of these poor Negroes who had stolen a pig. Every day, his hands in irons, the overseer had him whipped by the other Negroes until he was all covered with blood. The overseer, after having had him treated thus for seven or eight days, cut off one of his ears, had it roasted, and forced him to eat it.'

This anecdote reveals that the Irish were also involved in the inhumane treatment of enslaved Africans in the Anglo-Caribbean.

While Barbados had very few Irish planters, the island of Montserrat is an important place to include in our discussions. Montserrat illuminates not only the 'Irish slave' experience but also the role of the Irish in the transatlantic slave trade. Montserrat was arguably the only truly 'Irish' island in the colonial Caribbean. Irishmen first arrived after being expelled by the British from St Kitts in the 1630s and they remained the major white population until at least the late eighteenth century. Irish people filled every level of social strata and religious persuasion on Montserrat, from indentured servant up to governor, revealing that they were not a heterogeneous group: they represented both the colonised and the colonisers. Evidence from govern-

Above: St Patrick's Day in Montserrat, 2013—from the seventeenth century the Irish filled every level of social strata and religious persuasion on Montserrat, from indentured servant up to governor: they represented both the colonised and the colonisers. (www.gov.ms)

ment records, court ledgers and private papers of the planter class highlight that the Irish larger landowners were often enthusiastic exploiters of the African slave trade, and their laws and court records in particular reveal stark distinctions between the status and treatment of indentured servants (also usually Irish) and chattel slaves.

To give some examples, there are details of laws enacted in 1683 restraining ‘unchristian-like association of white people w’th Negroes’, whose very existence reveals a distinction being placed between European indentured servants and African chattel slaves. Likewise, the King’s Bench and common pleas (a form of lower court concerned with property and the recovery of debts) from 1752–4 reveal a significant number of cases of plaintiffs suing for the return of African chattel slaves who had been ‘stolen’ by other landowners, often in an opportunistic way in the immediate aftermath of the death of their owner. The African slaves are always referenced in terms of their monetary value and are often unnamed: in legal terms they are treated as live-stock. There is no comparative example for white indentured servants. An extreme example can be found in the same ledger, where two landowners of Irish descent (Sweeny v. Lynch) saw Andrew Lynch sued for ‘trespass ... [to] beat, wound, ill treat a negro man slave named Sampson the property of the said Edmund Sweeny so that thereof the said slave died’. The case was held in a lower court because the murder of an African slave was considered a crime of property and it was not considered of interest to a higher court. As with many of these cases, it was later dropped without any sanction of the defendant.

Not worth arguing about?

Despite its political and social effects, it has been suggested by some that the ‘white slavery’ narrative is not worth disputing. We argue otherwise. The abuse of history has a spectrum of potential repercussions—from perpetrating

CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

The reluctance to differentiate between indentured servitude and perpetual chattel slavery in these contexts gives succour to ahistorical types, such as neo-Nazis, 9/11 Truthers and White Nationalists.

Their propaganda includes a conspiracy theory claiming that historians avoid calling indentured servants ‘slaves’ for political reasons. They protest that historians are not to be trusted and that one should avoid reading ‘biased history books’ about slavery, as they have covered up the ‘truth’. Those inculcated have been persuaded to ignore contextualised history. In an op-ed piece for

the Dublin-based *thejournal.ie*, the three authors of this article were attacked with comments claiming that our ‘white guilt’ was compelling our research agenda. Other accusations of ‘denial’ are intended to have a chilling effect on this debate by co-opting the loaded language usually reserved for Holocaust denial. It is pertinent to point out that Michael Hoffman II (a Holocaust-denier) and the *Barnes Review* (a Holocaust-denial journal) endorse the ‘Irish slaves’ meme, which does not differentiate between indentured servitude and perpetual chattel slavery.

Below: An example of a website claiming that historians avoid calling indentured servants ‘slaves’ for political reasons and are consumed by ‘white guilt’.

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Irish Slaves – What The History Books Will Never Tell You

Posted on June 19, 2015 by Royce Christyn in Sci/Environment // 122 Comments

Did you know that more Irish slaves were sold in the 17th century than black slaves? With a death rate of between 37% to 50%, this is the story the history books don't tell you about.

general misunderstandings to facilitating a racist agenda—and demands a response. Historical research does not take place in a political or social vacuum and it is incumbent upon researchers to use their privilege with responsibility. As the movement for reparations continues to

attract national attention in the United States and the Caribbean, those who proclaim the history of ‘white slavery’ claim a shared heritage of victimisation. By sharing ahistorical ‘white slaves’ memes they aim to vindicate themselves and their ancestors from any

THE 'REDLEGS' OF BARBADOS

Aside from serving white supremacist agendas, the 'white slave' narrative has been equally problematic in its exploitation of the 'Redlegs' of Barbados. The 'poor whites' that currently reside along the east coast of Barbados have been presented as a living fossil of the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland. Television documentaries, works of fiction and non-fiction, radio programmes, magazine articles, photography exhibitions and on-line publications all highlight the impoverishment of the contemporary Barbadian 'Redlegs', as they are pejoratively called, and identify them as the descendants of the forgotten Irish or Scottish 'slaves'. The discriminatory and damning descriptions of the 'Redlegs' are used to demonstrate the brutality experienced by the 'white slaves', whose descendants are portrayed as still suffering. Seán O'Callaghan's *To Hell or Barbados* is particularly derisive in its exploitative treatment of these people, claiming that 'today, Red Legs are of a sallow complexion and subject to many diseases like epilepsy, hookworm and anemia. They look down on the blacks and have never intermarried with them, and because of over 300 years of inbreeding many are mentally retarded with a low literacy rate'. Such unethical treatments of the 'Redlegs' are seldom concerned with



the attitudes, centuries-long history and daily lives of these very people. Simply used as victims of a history of 'white slavery', these Barbadians are stripped of their humanity and defined by erroneous notions of laziness, destitution, inbreeding, alcoholism and mental retardation. Additionally, their strong ties to Afro-

Barbadians through centuries of intermixing and daily social interactions are denied.

Above: The village of Church View in the parish of St John along the east coast of Barbados—one of the few communities with a significant 'Redleg' population, a racially diverse community claiming European and African ancestry.

involvement in the processes of racial inequality or oppression in the past and in the present.

The experiences of Irish indentured servants before, during and after the Cromwellian era represent a traumatic and haunting period in Irish history. Those who suffered and died as a result of their treatment should be remembered. Nevertheless, their experiences should not be treated as an opportunity for a 'race to the bottom' of the 'most oppressed'. Instead, we need to accept that, as badly as they were treated in the colonial Caribbean, Irish indentured servants were not

categorised in the same way as African chattel slaves: they were afforded rights and their period of indenture was not perpetual or hereditary. Accepting this distinction does not make their suffering any less, but it does ensure that the historical record is presented accurately and is not distorted for unsavoury contemporary purposes.

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FURTHER READING

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