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BILL ROLSTON

Bringing it all back home: Irish emigration and racism

Ireland has been an island since the end of the last Ice Age. This meant that it remained isolated from some major developments in European history and thought. For example, the Romans did not colonise the country and, as a result, native Brehon law remained intact at a time when Roman law was the basis of legal developments in places like feudal England. Another example is in the development of the early Irish Christian church. The ideals and ascetic practices of early monastic Christianity in Egypt and Syria were much more attractive to Irish Christians than the emerging centralism and bureaucracy of Rome.

But the emphasis on isolation should not be overstressed. Being on an island does not necessarily mean insularity, not least because people travel. Thus, from the earliest days of their written history, it is evident that the Irish met black slaves from North Africa, brought to Dublin by the Vikings, as well as Coptic monks, Phoenician traders and others. In addition, like many island peoples, the Irish have travelled throughout their history, whether as missionaries, soldiers, administrators or simply as people looking to make a living. In doing so, they have encountered other peoples, cultures and ideas, and these experiences have fed back into mainstream Irish culture on the island itself. One key instance of this is how, in two periods of mass emigration in the eighteenth and

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nineteenth centuries, Irish emigrants encountered African Americans and came to subscribe to a widespread global ideology: racism.

The Scots Irish

When the Elizabethans sought to subjugate Ireland, they found that the greatest obstacle was the power of the northern clans, the O'Neills and O'Donnells. But eventually the clans were militarily defeated and in 1607 their leaders fled to continental Europe. The event, known since as 'the Flight of the Earls', was a watershed in Irish history; it sounded the death knell of the old Gaelic order. It also ensured that the armies of many European countries had an influx of battle-proven Irish soldiers, known as 'the Wild Geese'. In 1635, there were seven Irish regiments in France, totalling around 10,000 soldiers, and, following the defeat in Limerick in 1691, a further 16,000 were shipped to France on British ships. There were over one hundred Irish field marshals, generals and admirals in the Hapsburg armed forces from 1612 on, and 6,000 Irish swordsmen serving the Swedish monarch at the same time.¹

The Flight of the Earls left the northern part of the country, Ulster, open to conquest and colonisation. Land was seized and distributed to militarists and adventurers. And plantations, which had been initiated earlier in the southern province of Ireland, were now established in Ulster. In the next thirty years or so, somewhere in the region of 100,000 settlers were planted in Ulster on land confiscated from the native Irish. About two-thirds of these settlers were English, and the rest – around 30,000 – were Scots. Ulster appeared particularly attractive to the Scots; impoverished as they were in their native country, Ireland seemed to hold out the possibility of a new world, a new life, perhaps even the chance of wealth. That they were determined, tough pioneers was beyond doubt. At the same time, as it turned out, Ulster was not the promised land it may have appeared from the short distance across the Irish Sea. The Irish were not happy to have been cheated out of their land and rebelled, most notably in 1641; newly established settlements were burned, settlers were slaughtered and, for a brief time, it looked as if the plantation project was about to disintegrate.

Moreover, as Presbyterians, the immigrants were second-class citizens in a situation where the English and Anglican upper class owned the land and monopolised political power. The rents were high and the ruling class showed no qualms about using 'the hard men of frontier society' for their own political ends.² In particular, they were more than content to have the poor Scots Presbyterians as a buffer between themselves and the discontented Irish. One English settler in County Armagh, a Mr Taylor, put it quite unapologetically

in his 'Proposition for Planting My Lord of Essex's Land' in 1622: 'The Scotch shall be as a wall betwixt them [the English] and the Irish through which quarter the Irish will not pass to carry any stealths.'³

It only took the arrival on the scene of another new world – which beckoned with apparently untold opportunities – for the Scots to leave Ulster in droves. An estimated 250,000 emigrated to North America between 1726 and 1776; a further 100,000 left in the next quarter-century.⁴ By the end of the eighteenth century, one in six of the European population in North America was Scots Irish by birth or descent.⁵

They arrived in the new world as impoverished as they had been when they reached Ulster; 'No group before the Scotch-Irish had arrived in such complete destitution', says Oakes.⁶ Although their first destination was New England, the area around Philadelphia and Delaware became the centre of Scots Irish settlement from 1720 on. Poor and marginalised as they were, they could not afford to settle in genteel Philadelphia. So they headed out to where the land was cheap or free, to the 'back country'. There, their experience was not unlike their previous one in Ulster, not least in terms of their confrontations with the natives. In 1763, for example, they were the first to face the attacks on settlers by a confederation of Indian nations led by Chief Pontiac of the Ottowas. Unlike in later wars, settlers and natives were fairly evenly matched in military terms; at the same time, even at this early stage, the settlers showed not only skill but also a potential for brutality which augured the later genocide of the native Americans, in which the Scots Irish were to play a key role. History repeated itself in one other sense too; a century earlier, as we have seen, Mr Taylor from County Armagh had proposed that the Scots be used as a buffer to protect the upper-class settlers from native attacks. In the Americas, some were quick to see the Scots Irish fulfilling the same function. Thus, James Logan, a Quaker who also hailed from County Armagh, and who became colonial secretary in Pennsylvania, stated: 'I thought it might be prudent to plant a Settlement of those who had so bravely defended Derry and Inniskillen as a frontier in case of any Disturbance.'⁷

At the same time, living as close as they did to native society, the Scots Irish quickly became the settlers who learned most and came to resemble the native population most closely. Like them, they dressed in buckskins, were highly skilled at hunting and tracking, and practised native skills of agriculture and herbal medicine. All in all, they were once again the hard men of the frontier, at the edges of settler society. As such, they were the first to push back that frontier. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, they poured through the Cumberland Gap, 300,000 of them between 1775 and 1800. They settled the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and the Carolinas. Some of the most famous, almost mythical frontier heroes were Scots Irish, men like Davy Crockett and Kit Carson. And their key contribution to the development of

American society continued, whether as hardened soldiers of Washington's Continental Army in the war with the British, Civil War generals – such as Ulysses S. Grant and Stonewall Jackson – and at least eleven US presidents, such as Andrew Jackson and James Buchanan.

Others, like Paul Getty and Thomas Mellon, went on to establish wealthy dynasties. Mellon was born in County Tyrone in 1813. Having emigrated to America, he later became a lawyer, a judge and a property speculator, and eventually patriarch of one of America's richest families. Unlike his fellow countrymen, the dirt-poor Scots Irish who had poured through the Cumberland Gap, Mellon was clearly someone who could easily be assimilated by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Philadelphia. His racist views and pronouncements undoubtedly articulated the deepest prejudices of the WASP establishment. On one occasion, he was approached as a judge by a lawyer seeking a charter to build a Jewish cemetery. Mellon replied, 'A place to bury Jews? – with pleasure, with pleasure'. His dismissal of Irish Catholics was equally definite; his proposal for a solution to Ireland's political problems was to disperse the Irish Catholic population as widely as possible throughout the world 'where they would disappear like a bad smell in the fresh air of other cultures'.⁸

The path to respectability was a much more difficult one for Mellon's poor fellow Scots Irish immigrants. However, one element that eventually allowed them to gain a level of assimilation was remarkably similar to a key aspect of Mellon's respectability; namely, racism. The ownership of slaves became, for many immigrants, not only the single most important symbol of their success in the new world, but also a key element in their upward mobility, however limited. There was no group of early immigrants more eager to acquire this symbol than the Scots Irish. As the inveterate nineteenth-century American traveller and commentator Frederick Law Olmsted noted, the Scots Irish, arriving in America practically destitute, 'are certain in a few years to acquire money enough to buy a negro, which they are said to be invariably ambitious to possess'.⁹ There is irony, and indeed sadness, in this situation. A people who had left Ireland to escape grinding poverty embraced a system wherein others could never own the profits of their own labour. They had escaped the disenfranchisement that had been their lot in Ireland only to enthusiastically disenfranchise and oppress others. And, although they had been among the first to join the Continental Army and to fight resolutely for independence and democracy, many of them would later fight for the Confederacy in order to withhold the benefits of that revolution from others.

That said, it should not be presumed that they were acting either irrationally or hypocritically. They shared one fundamental belief with the early architects of this new society, an intense faith in economic liberalism, and this ultimately would allow for their assimilation.

Unlike the rich Virginia tobacco barons, they would never own large plantations; they were unlikely to own more than one slave at a time and were consequently quite untypical slave owners. But the poor Scots Irish farmers in the back country believed that they had the same right to prosperity as the tobacco barons and indeed by the same means, the slave system; many of them later defended that right in the Civil War. They concluded that if the right to own slaves was essential to the prosperity of the barons, then it was a necessity for them also. That common support with the big slave owners for economic liberalism helped to ensure that eventually the Scots Irish, at least metaphorically, came in from the backwoods and became American.

The Catholic Irish

The path to respectability in America for Irish Catholics was an even more difficult one, given that they were 'doubly damned as foreign and papist'.¹⁰ Some of the earliest Irish Catholic migrants to the region arrived there entirely involuntarily, rounded up by Oliver Cromwell's son Henry, and sent as slaves to Barbados.¹¹ The situation facing those who arrived as servants, and therefore technically free, was often barely distinguishable from that of slaves. For example, a law enacted in Virginia in 1654 required Irish servants arriving without indentures to serve longer than similar English servants.¹² In South Carolina in 1698, ship's captains were paid a bounty for each non-Irish, white male servant they imported; they also had to certify 'that to the best of their knowledge none of the servants by them imported be either what is commonly called native Irish or persons of known scandalous characters or Roman Catholics'.¹³ The constant fear was that the Irish would prove to be as recalcitrant in the colonies as they had proven at home. That fear was not unfounded. In 1666, Irish servants and freemen on the island of St Kitts celebrated the announcement of war between England and France by evicting 800 English planters and taking control of the island. In 1689, the Irish of St Kitts and St Christopher revolted in opposition to King William's accession to the English throne.¹⁴ Worst of all from the colonial administration's point of view, there were a number of occasions when Irish servants joined forces with black slaves in rebellions, hence the existence of draconian laws against such solidarity. In South Carolina, for example, the law stated that a white servant who ran away with black slaves was declared a felon and was 'to suffer death without the benefit of clergy'.¹⁵

When the mass migrations of Irish Catholics to America occurred a century and a half later, much of this naked discrimination was no longer in effect. But there was no doubt that the Irish Catholics

were feared and despised for much the same reasons as before – their poverty, their tendency to political rebellion and, perhaps most importantly of all, their Catholicism. Forced out of Ireland by the devastating famine of the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish arrived in droves in a society where slavery was well established. They joined the slaves at the bottom of America's social class hierarchy. In fact, it is not to play down the horrors of slavery to suggest that, in some respects, their social situation was worse than that of the black slaves, particularly in the south. As far as planters were concerned, slaves entailed a financial investment, and there was sometimes good reason not to squander that investment. Irish workers, on the other hand, were free labourers, hired when required and fired when not needed. The planter need have no commitment, financial or otherwise, to the labourer. If a labourer was injured in the course of carrying out work, the employer had no responsibility, but a dead slave was a financial loss and an injured one a continuing financial burden to the master. True, adult slaves tended to live only an average of ten years after arriving from Africa, so there were clearly limits to the protection planters afforded their investment. At the same time, there were signs that they were willing to be cavalier as regards the health of their Irish labourers. Thus John Burnside, himself an Irish immigrant who became a major slave owner, protected the health of his slaves by employing Irish labourers for ditching and other severe work.¹⁶ M. W. Phillips, a contemporary traveller, summed up the logic involved: 'Planters must guard their slaves' health and life as among the most vital of their own interests; for while crops were merely income, slaves were capital.'¹⁷

Frederick Law Olmsted saw this differential between Irish and slave labour at first hand. When he observed a gang of Irish labourers digging ditches, he asked the overseer why he was not using slaves for the job. The overseer replied: 'It's dangerous work, and a negro's life is too valuable to be risked at it. If a negro dies, it's a considerable loss, you know.'¹⁸ On another occasion, Olmsted watched as black slaves and Irish immigrants loaded bales of cotton on to a ship. The slaves rolled the heavy cotton bales down a ramp, while the Irish stood at the bottom of the ramp to direct the moving bales into the hold. The bales frequently bounced out of control, breaking railings and injuring the workers at the bottom of the ramp. The ship's mate explained to Olmsted what was happening: 'The niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies are knocked overboard, or get their backs broke, nobody loses anything.'¹⁹

Of course, there were limits to the abuse of Irish workers. As free labourers they could strike for better conditions or pay, and often did. And they could vote with their feet and head for work in the north. One contemporary English traveller in the south noted this phenomenon:

Swedes, Germans and Irishmen had been imported; but the Swedes refused to eat cornbread, the Germans sloped away north-westward, in the hope of obtaining homesteads, and the Irishmen preferred a city career. It seems that the south will have need of Sambo yet awhile.²⁰

Despite the potential for mutual antagonism between black slaves and Irish labourers, the hostility seems to have been less than might have been expected. True, anti-Irish jokes became common among American blacks, with collections being gathered as early as 1870. These jokes, usually told in a mock Irish accent, often depicted the Irish as lazy and incompetent. The jokes were an important means of 'laughing at the man' – that is, not just a comment on the Irish, but also a means of getting back at whites in general. 'The Irish characters of black jokelore became surrogates for all the other whites against whom it could be dangerous to speak openly.'²¹ Given their low social status, the Irish were the least likely to have the power to object to such ridicule. Moreover, there is also evidence of mutual aid between Irish and African Americans. For example, it is well known that black slaves who escaped to the north were helped by fellow blacks such as Sojourner Truth and her 'underground railway'. What is less well known is that 'some whites, among whom the Irish are most often mentioned, helped fugitives in their flight by forging passes for slaves'.²² But that solidarity was soon to break down and, when hostility between black and white did erupt, it resulted from the Irish setting out on the road to upward mobility.

Emancipation and Irish America

With Emancipation, freed blacks flocked north in huge numbers, where they encountered large numbers of newly arrived Irish immigrants escaping the Great Famine of the late 1840s and early 1850s. In 1836, 443 Irish immigrants entered the city of Boston; a decade later, the annual intake for that one city was 65,556. As they crowded into the cities of the east coast and mid-west, black labourers came face to face with the Irish, who immediately saw them as competitors for their low status jobs. 'Economically more secure than the Irish, other immigrant groups had little fear of Negro competition and generally adopted a more tolerant racial outlook.'²³ But the Irish were only beginning their own long trek from the margins to economic and social respectability. So, even though the number of black migrants to the cities initially represented little real economic threat, the Irish quickly turned on them. As early as 1850, the New York *Tribune* remarked that it was strange that the Irish, who had only recently

escaped from bondage themselves, were at the forefront of opposition to rights for black people.²⁴

The emerging racism of the poor Catholic Irish was given support by the attitudes of other more respectable Irish Americans. For example, John Mitchel, an Irish Protestant and a leading activist in the revolutionary Young Ireland movement, was transported to Tasmania for his part in an armed insurrection in Ireland in 1848. He was rescued by fellow Irish republicans, who sailed from New Bedford on the *Catalpa*, and eventually settled in Tennessee. In the newspaper that he founded there, the *Southern Citizen*, Mitchel wrote:

I consider Negro slavery here the best state of existence for the Negro and the best for his master; and I consider that taking Negroes out of their brutal slavery in Africa and promoting them to a human and reasonable slavery here is good.²⁵

Mitchel was eventually jailed for taking the side of the Confederacy in the Civil War. Other Irish revolutionary exiles, such as Joseph Brenan and Thomas Meagher, expressed similar views. And the American Catholic church, officially neutral on the issue, was in fact opposed to the emancipation of slaves. Tyrone-born Bishop John Hughes of New York showed the extent of his prejudice when he wrote that an abolitionist was also ‘an anti-hanging man, women’s rights man, an infidel frequently, bigoted Protestant always, a socialist, a red republican, a fanatical teetotaller . . .’²⁶ Such sentiments from trusted leaders can only have encouraged the poor Irish in their emerging racism.

Not surprisingly, Irish immigrants were not at the forefront of abolitionism in America; like Bishop Hughes, they saw it as the product of rabid evangelical Protestantism. And there were different methods of displaying the same current of underlying racism. For example, within six months of Emancipation, thirty all-black regiments were formed during the inexorable build-up to the Civil War. Some of the Irish in America objected that arming former slaves was as good as encouraging ‘slave rebellions’. But others concluded that it was better that black soldiers march off to war and death than white, and particularly Irish, recruits. One Irish-American song of the era sums this up well:

Some tell us ’tis a burnin shame to make the naygers fight;
An’ that the thrade of bein’ kilt belongs but to the white;
But as for me, upon my soul! So liberal are we here,
I’ll let Sambo be murdered instead of myself on every day of the year.²⁷

In the end, the Irish solved their dilemma by insisting that they were enlisting for a war to defend the Union, but not to free the slaves. A popular Irish American poem of 1861 – in which there is a reference

to the prominent Irish-American anti-abolitionist Stephen Douglas – caught the Irish immigrant mood of the time:

To the tenets of Douglas we tenderly cling,
 Warm hearts to the cause of our country we bring;
 To the flag we are pledged – all its foes we abhor –
 And we ain't for the nigger but are for the war.²⁸

Although the Irish contribution to the success of the Union's war against the Confederacy is not to be underestimated – for example, thirty-eight Union regiments had the word 'Irish' in their title – not all the Irish were so eager to fight and die. An attempt in New York to draft Irish immigrants into the army led to widespread rioting in July 1863. The Irish did have some cause to feel unfairly treated; there was evidence that the Irish were being drafted in greater proportion than their numbers in the population merited, an anomaly that was later corrected. In addition, while \$200 could buy a person out of being drafted, this was not a sum that poor Irish labourers could easily find. But the ferment quickly spread beyond these legitimate grievances. The Irish rioters targeted black people and property in the New York riots. A similar pattern emerged in simultaneous riots in cities such as Milwaukee, Cincinnati and Detroit. Irish labourers were at the forefront of anti-black riots. Thus it is clear that the issue involved was not simply a localised instance of unfair draft procedures; rather, the riots represented one plank in the attempt of the Irish working class to remove black competition for their jobs, and in the process to establish once and for all their claim to be white.

In his remarkable account of this transformation in the status of Irish immigrants in America, Ignatiev points out that 'the first Congress of the United States voted in 1790 that only "white" persons could be naturalized as citizens . . . but . . . it was by no means obvious who was "white".'²⁹ Initially WASP Americans had viewed Irish Catholics even more disparagingly than they had viewed the Scots Irish before them; they referred to them as 'niggers turned inside out'. But the Catholic Irish eventually came to establish their 'white' credentials, 'came to boast the white skin as their highest prerogative'.³⁰ The Democratic Party wooed the Irish working-class vote. Bolstered by such attention, the Irish working class organised assiduously to exclude black people from trades and professions in which the Irish had a presence. Their trade union leaders attacked the abolitionists 'for placing the cause of the slave ahead of the cause of the free worker'.³¹ In short, the Irish astutely concluded that the road to upward mobility required them to distance themselves as far as possible from black workers.

To be acknowledged as white it was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market;

in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found.³²

The Irish monopolised a range of trades and occupations – house servant, cook, waiter, porter, longshoreman, labourer – by forcing black workers out. In that way, the Irish joined the white republic. As Frederick Douglass commented: ‘Every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly-arrived immigrant whose hunger and whose colour are thought to give him a better title to the place.’³³ The Irish climbed the social ladder by a rung or two, leaving the blacks at the bottom. They justified their mobility through racist sentiments no less intense and offensive than those of their WASP bosses. Douglass remarked on the incongruity of Irish racism:

Perhaps no class of our fellow-citizens has carried this prejudice against color to a point more extreme and dangerous than have our Catholic Irish fellow-citizens, and yet no people on the face of the earth have been more relentlessly persecuted and oppressed on account of race and religion than have this same Irish people.³⁴

He was not alone in this assessment. In 1836, Robert Purvis, co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, had met O’Connell in London and was as impressed by him as Douglass later was. Thirty years later, in a speech to the Society, Purvis stated: ‘O’Connell has gone, and, alas! his spirit with him. The foulest and bitterest enemies of freedom and the black man are countrymen of the great Liberator.’³⁵

African American support for Ireland

Remarkably, the prejudice does not seem to have been reciprocated. Despite how they have been treated by Irish Americans, many African American thinkers and activists expressed admiration for and support of the Irish struggle for freedom. One of the most remarkable expressions of solidarity occurred only a short time after the Irish-led anti-black riots. Following Emancipation and the Civil War, each state in the Union had a Black State Convention to plan the future political progress of America’s black citizens. One such Convention, held in California, adopted the following resolution on 27 October 1865:

Resolved – That we sympathize with the Fenian movement to liberate Ireland from the yoke of British bondage, and when we have obtained our full citizenship in this country, we should be willing to assist our Irish brethren in their struggle for National Independence; and 40,000 colored troops could be raised to butt the horns off the hypocritical English bull.³⁶

No such troops were ever sent to Dublin – and it is likely that the citizens of that city would have been as astonished by their arrival, albeit for different reasons, as the British army garrison. But the expression of solidarity is one that is repeated on many occasions. The struggle of Irish republicans from 1916 to 1921 – which included the Easter Rising and the War of Independence – was viewed with particular interest by black activists. For the most part, those African Americans who were nationalists tended to identify with the Irish struggle, while those who were socialists were drawn more to the Russian Revolution. At the same time, there were socialists like Claude McKay, who lived in London from the end of 1919 to the beginning of 1921 – a key period in Anglo-Irish relations. He was not starry-eyed about the Irish or their politics. He recognised that the Irish were racially prejudiced, but he did not find them hypocritical like white English and Americans, and although he was under no illusion about the socialist potential of Sinn Féin in 1921, he still identified with that movement's political struggle. He wrote sympathetically of the Irish revolution in articles such as 'How Black sees Green and Red' in the *Liberator*, the socialist African American periodical.³⁷

Some went further than words. In 1919, Cyril V. Briggs formed a secret society, the African Blood Brotherhood for African Liberation and Redemption; it was modelled on the Irish Republican Brotherhood.³⁸ S. A. G. Cox, who had been a law student in London in 1905, the year the Irish Republican Party Sinn Féin was formed by Arthur Griffith, returned to Jamaica and named his nationalist newspaper *Our Own*, a direct translation of *sinn féin*.³⁹ Cox had been a founder of the National Club of Jamaica, an assistant secretary of which was Marcus Garvey. Garvey later established the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the United States and kept a close eye on developments in Irish politics. In 1919, he named his UNIA headquarters in New York after the headquarters of James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army in Dublin – Liberty Hall. In the same year he called for an 'International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World', modelled directly on the third Irish race convention which had drawn a crowd of 6,000 the previous week in Philadelphia. When his black convention met in August 1920, Garvey telegraphed Eamon De Valera, leader of Sinn Féin: 'We believe Ireland should be free even as Africa shall be free for the Negroes of the world.'⁴⁰ Garvey was very active in relation to the case of the Sinn Féin mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, who died on hunger strike in England. He hosted a meeting of Irish longshoremen in Liberty Hall, New York, to plan a boycott of British ships, and announced that he had sent a telegram to Father Dominick, the priest attending MacSwiney, offering the 'sympathy of 400,000,000 Negroes'. When asked on one occasion to explain the significance of the UNIA's tricolour, Garvey

replied: 'The Red showed their sympathy with the "Reds" of the world, and the Green their sympathy for the Irish in their fight for freedom, and the Black – The Negro.'⁴¹

It is one of the sad facts of the history of those times that Garvey's support for Irish revolution does not seem to have been directly reciprocated. De Valera did not telegram Garvey pledging his support for black liberation. Nor did Arthur Griffith, recipient of another telegram from Garvey congratulating him on the treaty negotiations – 'your masterly achievement of partial independence for Ireland'⁴² – respond in kind. Instead, when Griffith wrote the introduction to *Jail Journal*, the memoirs of John Mitchel, the Young Ireland revolutionary and supporter of American slavery, he defended Mitchel's racism vociferously:

Even his views on Negro-slavery have been deprecatingly excused, as if excuse were needed for an Irish Nationalist declining to hold the Negro his peer in right. When the Irish Nation need explanation or apology for John Mitchel, the Irish nation will need its shroud.⁴³

Conclusion

Many Irish emigrants never returned to their native island. Some did, however, especially those who left rich or became rich during their sojourn abroad. They brought back not just their fortunes, but also their ideology. Thus, Waddell Cunningham, who set up a shipping business in New York at the age of 27, shipped slaves between the islands of the Caribbean and also owned a slave plantation on the island of Dominica. He returned to Belfast in 1765, a rich and influential citizen, and in 1786 attempted unsuccessfully to establish a slave trading company in Belfast.⁴⁴

Even if the poorer emigrants did not return, they were not all illiterate; they wrote letters to family back in Ireland and, in doing so, helped relatives and friends to see the world through their eyes. Some letters from Scots Irish emigrants to America in the eighteenth century have survived.⁴⁵ Many, but not all, were from the better-educated, more middle-class emigrants. They tend to focus on news about family and friends, as well as thoughts on religion. But they also provide an insight into the hazardous experience of the Atlantic crossing and the opportunities and setbacks encountered in America. In addition, there is no doubt that they gave people in Ireland, who would never themselves meet Native Americans, a sense of the pioneers' views of the native population. Take one letter, in 1733, admittedly not sent back across the Atlantic, but surely expressing sentiments of some of those letters which, unfortunately, have not survived. It is from a Scots Irish

emigrant named James Magraw to his brother. James was one of the Scots Irish who had ventured into the wilderness of the Cumberland valley to start a settlement; his brother lived in the already settled area of Paxtang. James's letters are full of accounts of clearing land, of planting and hunting. They talk of fevers that claim the lives of young children. And they also speak of his relationship with the native population: '... get some guns for us. There's a good when of injuns about here.'⁴⁶ Through such contacts the Irish at home could learn to be racist.

But it would be wrong to end on such a bleak note. There is wonderful historical symmetry in the fact that at about the same time that the Black State Convention in California was offering black troops to Irish Fenians, the Fenians themselves were proposing to send guns and advisers to the Zulus in South Africa. Admittedly, there was more than altruism involved: 'one million cartridges placed in the hands of the Zulus would help the Irish cause more than the equivalent amount of arms landed in Ireland', argued the chief protagonist of the scheme, J. J. O'Kelly.⁴⁷ At the same time, the internationalism involved is significant. Thus there have frequently been Irish revolutionaries who recognised, unlike Mitchel, that the logic of liberation is that it should apply to other people than merely themselves. In 1886, Michael Davitt, a member of the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, campaigned unsuccessfully to have Dadabhai Naoroji, an Indian nationalist, returned to the House of Commons as a member for an Irish constituency. Six years later, Naoroji was returned for the Central Finsbury constituency. Maud Gonne was involved in an attempt to help Indian nationalist Veer Savarleer escape from Brixton prison in 1910. Her contemporary Roger Casement, hanged in England for attempting to smuggle arms from Germany to Ireland in 1916, had previously, as a British government official, been a key campaigner against the brutality of the Belgians towards the native population of the Congo. Perhaps most notable of all is the paradox that was Daniel O'Connell. A monarchist and in many ways conservative, he was committed to international causes throughout his life. In 1839, he was a founder of the British India Society, whose goal was to focus public attention on the abuses of the East India Company. He was a leading figure in the British abolitionist movement, even at the cost of support from Irish Americans for his campaigns for Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the Union.⁴⁸

Such actions are in stark contrast to the racism enthusiastically embraced by the Scots Irish and Irish Catholic immigrants in their new found home of America. As such, they point to a vibrant current of anti-racism in Irish history. The intermingling of racism and anti-racism has left its mark on contemporary attitudes in Irish society.

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