

History: England's "Irish Slaves"

Categorized as "Indentured" Workers and "Servants" of the English Colonial Elites

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Global Research Editor's Note

In 2008 (reposted in 2015), Global Research posted a short Oped article entitled [The Irish Slave Trade: The Forgotten "White Slaves"](#). This article which skimmed the surface of a complex historical process has been the object of critical debate, controversy and confusion. The Article also included a number of factual errors.

In order to promote further discussion concerning the "Irish Slave Trade", with a view to providing a broader historical background, we bring to the attention of our readers a carefully documented article by Robert E. West.

The Irish slaves were sent to British territories in the Caribbean. They were categorized as "indentured" workers and "servants" of the English colonial elites.

Michel. Chossudovsky, GR Editor, June 9, 2016, July 22, 2023

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*Records are replete with references to early Irish Catholics in the West Indies. Gwynn in *Analecta Hibernica*, states: 'The earliest reference to the Irish is the establishment of an Irish settlement on the Amazon River in 1612.'(1) Smith, in *Colonists in Bondage*, reports:*

"a Proclamation of the year 1625 urged the banishing overseas of dangerous rogues (Irish Political Prisoners); kidnapping (of Irish) was common."(2)

*Condon states that the first considerable emigration from Ireland to the southern latitudes of America was to Guiana in 1629.(3) Newton declares that Antigua and Montserrat were occupied as early as 1632 and that many emigrant Irish came out among the early planters and servants in these islands.(4) Dunn, in *Sugar and Slaves*, asserts that, in 1636, Ireland was already a prime source of supply for servants: as early as 1637, on Montserrat the Irish heavily outnumbered the English colonists, and 69 percent of Montserrat's white inhabitants were Irish.(5) Lenihan writes: in 1650 "25,000 Irishmen sold as slaves in Saint Kitt's and the*

adjoining islands, petitioned for a priest..."(6)

In 1641, Ireland's population was 1,466,000 and in 1652, 616,000.

According to Sir William Petty, 850,000 were wasted by the sword, plague, famine, hardship and banishment during the Confederation War 1641-1652.

At the end of the war, vast numbers of Irish men, women and children were forcibly transported to the American colonies by the English government.(7)

These people were rounded up like cattle, and, as Prendergast reports on Thurloe's State Papers(8) (Pub. London, 1742),

"In clearing the ground for the adventurers and soldiers (the English capitalists of that day)... To be transported to Barbados and the English plantations in America. It was a measure beneficial to Ireland, which was thus relieved of a population that might trouble the planters; it was a benefit to the people removed, which might thus be made English and Christians ... a great benefit to the West India sugar planters, who desired men and boys for their bondsmen, and the women and Irish girls... To solace them."(9)

J. Williams provides additional evidence of the attitude of the English government towards the Irish in an English law of June 26, 1657:

"Those who fail to transplant themselves into Connaught (Ireland's Western Province) or (County) Clare within six months... Shall be attainted of high treason... Are to be sent into America or some other parts beyond the seas..."(10) Those thus banished who return are to "suffer the pains of death as felons by virtue of this act, without benefit of Clergy."(11)

The following are but a few of the numerous references to those Irish transported against their will between 1651 and 1660.

Emmet asserts that during this time, more that

"100,000 young children who were orphans or had been taken from their Catholic parents, were sent abroad into slavery in the West Indies, Virginia and New England, that they might lose their faith and all knowledge of their nationality, for in most instances even their names were changed... Moreover, the contemporary writers assert between 20,000 and 30,000 men and women who were taken prisoner were sold in the American colonies as slaves, with no respect to their former station in life."(12)

Dunn claims in Barbados the Irish Catholics constituted the largest block of servants on the island.(13) Higham estimated that in 1652 Barbados had absorbed no less than 12,000 of these political prisoners.(14) E. Williams reports: "In 1656 Cromwell's Council of State voted that 1,000 Irish girls and 1,000 Irish young men be sent to Jamaica."(15) Smith declares:

"it is impossible to say how many shiploads of unhappy Irish were dispatched to America by the English government," and "no mention of such shipments would be very likely to appear in the State Papers... They must have been very considerable in number."(16)

Estimates vary between 80,000 and 130,000 regarding the amount of Irish sent into slavery in America and the West Indies during the years of 1651 – 1660: Prendergast says 80,000(17);

Boudin 100,000(18); Emmet 120,000 to 130,000(19); Lingard 60,000 up until 1656(20); and Condon estimates

“the number of Irish transported to the British colonies in America from 1651 – 1660 exceeded the total number of their inhabitants at that period, a fact which ought not to be lost sight of by those who undertake to estimate the strength of the Celtic element in this nation...”(21)

It is impossible to ascertain the exact number of those unfortunate victims of English injustice during this period, but we do know the amount was massive. Even though the figures given above are but estimates, they are estimates from eminent historians.

The flow of the Irish to the American colonies throughout the remainder of the 17th century was large and continuous, but not nearly as massive as between 1651 and 1660.

Some of the many statements by historians give evidence of this Irish tide. Higham reports that in 1664 the Irish took the place of the French on St. Bartholomew’s.(22)

Smith claims that during the four years leading up to 1675, already 500 Irish servants were brought to Jamaica by ships from Bristol, England that stopped in Ireland for provisions.(23)

During 1680 on the Leeward Islands, Dunn posits:

“with so many Irish Catholic servants and farmers... The English planters became obsessed with the fear of popery.”(24)

Dunn also states that in Jamaica in 1685 the 2nd Duke of Aberlmarle, after his appointment by James II, a Catholic, mustered his chief support from the Irish Catholic small planters and servants and that the indentured servants who constituted the island militia were mainly Irish Catholic.(25) In reporting on Father Garganel’s statements, Lenihan claims:

“in 1699 Father Garganel, S.J., Superior of the island of Martinique, asked for one or two Irish Fathers for that and the neighboring isles which were ‘fill of Irish’ for every year shiploads of men, boys and girls, partly crimped, partly carried off by main force for the purposes of slave trade, are conveyed by the English from Ireland.”(26)

Smith has recorded that “Servants sailed from every port in the British Isles, but by far the greater number came from London, Bristol, Liverpool, Dublin and Cork, and, doubtless, it was principally the merchants of Bristol, Whitehaven and Liverpool which conducted trade with Ireland.”(27)

Emmet clarifies Smith’s statement in detail by asserting:

“the early and continued emigration of the Irish to this country during the 17th century has been lost sight of in consequence of this change to English surnames and from the fact that no vessel was knowingly allowed to sail from Ireland direct, but by law was obliged first to visit an English port before clearance papers could be obtained.

Consequently, every Irish emigrant (slave, servant, etc..) crossing in an Irish or English vessel from either England or Ireland, appeared in the official records as English, for the voyage did not begin according to law until the ship cleared from an English port, and all passengers on arrival in this country (American Colonies) were rated as English.”(28)

It is also of importance to be aware of the fact, as Dunn confirmed, that most population lists for Barbados, Jamaica and the Leeward Islands concern only parish registers of the Church of England, all other people were essentially ignored in the head count.”(29)

The English government variously referred to Irish to be transported as rogues, vagabonds, rebels, neutrals, felons, military prisoners, teachers, priests, maidens etc. All historians call them servants, bondsman, indentured servants, slaves, etc., and agree that they were all political victims. The plain facts are that most were treated as slaves. After their land was confiscated by England, which drove them from their ancestral homes to forage for roots like animals, they were kidnapped, rounded up and driven like cattle to waiting ships and transported to English colonies in America, never to see their country again. They were the victims of what many called the immense “Irish Slave Trade.”

All writers on the 17th century American colonies are in agreement that the treatment of white servants or white slaves in English colonies was cruel to the extreme, worse than that of black slaves; that inhuman treatment was the norm, that torture (and branding FT, fugitive traitor, on the forehead) was the punishment for attempted escape. Dunn stated:

“Servants were punished by whipping, strung up by the hands and matches lighted between their fingers, beaten over the head until blood ran,” –all this on the slightest provocation.(30) Ligon, an eyewitness in Barbados from 1647-1650 said, “Truly, I have seen cruelty there done to servants as I did not think one Christian could have done to another.”(31)

It is a matter of great importance to realize that most of the white slaves, servants and small farmers abandoned the West Indies for the mainland colonies in America. Dunn reports: “Between 1678 and 1713, Leeward sugar planters became more rich and powerful and controlled all local councils and assemblies so white servants and small farmers abandoned the Leeward Islands.

“(32) Craven said that between 1643 and 1667, about 12,000 left Barbados for other plantations(33) and Dunn said the white population of the Leeward Islands was reduced by 30 percent between 1678 and 1708.(34) According to Craven, in Colonies in Transition, prior to the 1680’s, the hopes which sustained the Carolina venture continued to depend chiefly upon the migration of settlers from the older colonies, especially from the West Indies.(35) Smith asserted that after 1670, the emigration of whites from the smaller islands at least equalled the immigration.(36) Condon declared: “In [the] course of time many of those who had been transported to the West Indies in this manner found their way to the colonies on the continent, in search of greater freedom and a more healthful climate.”(37)

All writers on the 17th century history agree that between one-half and two thirds of white immigrants in the British West Indies and mainland America were servants, most of them severely mistreated.

Most all Irish immigrants were 'servants.' Irish were almost exclusively Catholic (at least they were when they left Ireland) and most were of ancient Irish families even though they appeared in English records as English, if recorded at all. After 20,000 Puritans arrived in the American colonies from 1630-1640, migration of English colonists all but subsided. Some writers say after 1640 only a trickle of English colonists arrived. In 1632, many Irish were on Antigua.

In 1637, 69 percent of whites on Montserrat were Irish. In 1650, 25,000 Irish were on St. Kitt's and Nevis and some were on other Leeward islands. In 1652, prior to the wholesale transportation of Irish, most of 12 thousand political prisoners on Barbados were Irish. From 1651 to 1660, between 80,000 to 130,000 Irish were transported. From 1660-1700, there was a large steady flow of Irish immigrants. Most whites, especially servants, slaves and small farmers went to the American mainland for more freedom, a healthier climate and economic betterment.

There are no verifiable records on the white population of all the American colonies in the 17th century. Some estimates include blacks, some do not. Some list only members of the Church of England. Estimates are made for Barbados for a certain year while estimates are made for the Leeward Islands for other years. The same applies to Jamaica and the mainland colonies. One estimate for the mainland colonies, white and black included, was given at 204,000 in 1689.

In the absence of reliable records, I believe it is necessary to take the following into very serious consideration:

- migration trends,
- prolificness of people of varying national origin,
- laws in effect in the country from which people migrated;
- the prevailing conditions in the country undergoing emigration;
- the amount of control the emigrating people had over their own destiny;
- and the fact that all American colonies both mainland and the West Indies were very intertwined,

Well over one-half of white immigrants to the West Indies during the 17th century were Irish Catholic servants, most whom, in the course of time, abandoned the West Indies for the mainland American colonies.

The source of this article is the newsletter of the: Political Education Committee (PEC), American Ireland Education Foundation, 54 South Liberty Drive, Suite 401, Stony Point NY 10980, first posted in the internet by [Eternal Word Television Network](#)

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