• Was life for the Irish slave worse than that of the African slave?
• Has history of whites in bondage been censored by mainstream?

To Hell or Barbados

By Jenifer Dixon

It is best not to lose a war. On the face of it, that seems perfectly obvious—but the potential hazards are many, including loss of nation, loss of wealth, permanent loss of status, impoverishment, exile, death and enslavement.

The Irish lost to Oliver Cromwell in 1649 and suffered all of the above. The English, predictably, blamed the Irish and justified their assault on the “Emerald Isle.” So what happened?

The Civil War in England was over. Cavaliers, those who had fought for the Royalists, were rotting in prison. Charles I was executed and the monarchy put to an end, replaced by a republic headed up by Oliver Cromwell as president of its Council of State. This ruling body had 40 members, mostly merchants, with a few lawyers and army officers thrown in. The Royalists, who were Catholic, had lost, and unfortunately for the Irish, they were Catholic.

The English ruling class don’t like the Irish much. Not a news flash, but the degree of hatred was deep and old. To quote Cromwell himself:

I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God, upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much blood and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future.

The Irish had in fact murdered Brits in the rebellion of 1641, English and Scottish planters who had seized their lands. The rebellion started in Ulster, the most heavily colonized, and worked its way down the countryside. One royalist, who switched sides and joined Cromwell’s forces, declared the number of dead to be 200,000. The number today is considered to be closer to 4,000.

But that was not the reason for the devastation of Ireland that was to follow. Cromwell, as soon as he had seized power, feared losing it. Charles’s son had been declared king in Scotland after his father’s death. Cromwell feared that an invasion of England by Royalist forces that could comprise the French, the Scots, the Irish and the Spanish or some combination thereof from the island of Ireland would be his undoing so he believed he had to act and act fast. He needed propaganda and so a new aide-de-camp came up with the 200,000 figure and then they went looking for a speechwriter.
NO IRISH SLAVES RETURNED HOME

No Irish slave shipped to the West Indies or America has ever been known to have returned to Ireland. Many remained in the West Indies, which still contain a population of “Black Irish,” the mixed descendants of the forced mating of black and Irish slaves (not to be confused with the “Black Irish” of Ireland, a dark-haired phenotype appearing in people of Irish origin). Left, an old photo of an assortment of mixed-race slaves from Barbados—some purely white, ranging to apparently pure black, but all dressed miserably in rags and burlap sacks. Above, a derogatory cartoon from the period shows two slave workers, one a smiling black and one an Irishman, depicted as a bestial brute.

The Irish were then characterized as the very offal of men. Offal, not awful, though it is pronounced the same way and it is awful as offal refers to the inedible parts of meat, or carrion. They were also referred to as the dregs of mankind, the reproach of Christendom and the bots [fly larvae] that crawl on the beast’s tale. And it was the Puritans, or the Roundheads—Cromwell’s—crowd that felt this very deep hatred for the Irish. The Irish did take the king’s side in the English Civil War and so, in 1644, Parliament passed an ordinance that “no quarter shall henceforth be given to any Irishman or papist born in Ireland captured on land or on sea.”

Meanwhile the opposition party had a split in the ranks. James Butler, of an old Anglo-Irish Catholic family, had been raised in England as a Protestant. He was a Royalist but not a Catholic and the leader of the Irish, or at least one of them. Three of his Catholic brothers were in the upper ranks of his army. Despite that, he was said to have a hatred of Catholicism bordering on the pathological. Under him served Murrough O’Brien, known as Lord Inchiquin, who changed sides so many times that it would take a much longer article just to follow his vacillating political career.

As the Irish were nearly all Catholic, they had no trust in such leaders as these.

There was also a Catholic Confederation in Kilkenny, set up in 1643 with a standing army. The pope sent an emissary to this group, naturally enough. Among the leaders there was an actual Irishman, Roe O’Neill (Eoghan Ruadh O Neill), of the ancient O’Neill clan, who was raised in Spain, had fought with the Spanish on the continent and was clearly Catholic. James Butler—the 1st duke of Ormonde—and O’Neill hated one another.

In addition to the two antagonistic military leaders, Ormonde declared another king, this one the prince of Wales. Most of Ireland recognized this king and momentarily forgot their differences.

The first battle took place at Rathmines on July 22, 1649, and 3,000 Irish soldiers were killed and another 2,100 captured. It went downhill from there. The Royalists were determined to hold Drogheda but it was underfortified and with too few provisions. They lost and lost big. In all 44 captains, all lieutenants and ensigns, 220 “reformadores” (an officer without command but who still retained his rank) and 2,500 soldiers were killed by Cromwell’s forces, who had promised to give quarter but went back on his word.

Cromwell had the flower of the Irish army in his possession, and he crushed it. He then gave the command that neither man, woman or child was to be spared. And

“This is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches [the Irish], who have imbruéd . . . so much blood.” —Oliver Cromwell
particular cruelty was inflicted on men of the cloth as well as Catholic nuns.

And that wasn't all: Dundalk, Trim, Wexford, Cashel—they all fell. Cromwell's soldiers ran amok, killing with glee. Clergy were singled out and tortured before being killed. At Wexford 300 women were killed, their ring fingers hacked off. The war was over, but it had hardly begun.

The first problem was what to do with the 40,000 POWs in prisons and jails all over Ireland? Ship them out, of course, and so the fighting Irish were sent to any country not at war with England: France, Spain, Austria or Poland.

Dependents, however, were to be left behind. By the Act of Good Affection, any Irish chieftains who had taken part in the rebellion of 1641 were sentenced to death; 200 were hanged at Kilkenny alone. All of the Anglo-Irish people who had taken the Irish side were sentenced to death or banishment and their lands confiscated. Even Catholics who had lain low were sentenced to banishment. An act of Parliament in 1653 under Cromwell authorized the wholesale clearance of the land. The wealthier provinces of Munster, Leinster and Ulster were set aside for English settlers while the Irish of any station not sentenced to hang were sent to County Connaught, barren at best, and further ravaged by the British. The peasantry was allowed to remain to till the soil.

And hence the famous Irish phrase, “Go to hell or Connaught” (Cúige Chonnochta), as the two were pretty much equivalent. But then there came the Isle of Barbados. Today Barbados is famous as a lush tropical isle for the rich and indolent, but in the 17th century it served as a veritable death camp for the defeated Irish.

And it was to this island that the wives and children of the defeated Irish gentry, priests and nuns and other undesirables were sent as slave labor. Ireland in 1641 had a population of 1,668,000; by the year 1652 it had been reduced by a third, to a population of 1,100,000. Those 568,000 had been “wasted by the sword, plague, famine and hardship.” But they might have been considered lucky compared to those shipped out to Barbados, the “Tobacco Island.”

Given that hanging was the punishment for those refusing to “transplant,” many did. Estimates of those transplanted vary from 50,000 to 80,000. Other sources claim that 300,000 Irish were sold into slavery after the revolt, and that the population was reduced from 1,466,000 to 616,000. It was, in any case, devastating. As the English ruling class did not keep the same exacting records on the Irish people as they did on other com-

modities, it is hard to say how many were killed and how many were enslaved with certainty.

They were shipped to the Island of Barbados in conditions similar to those of African slaves except that the beginning of the voyage was necessarily much colder. “Man-catchers” operated mainly in the cities as the countryside of Ireland had been left devastated. We read:

The countryside was a wilderness. Very little was left growing after the Cromwellian soldiers had devastated it with fire and the scythes that Cromwell had thoughtfully provided for just this purpose. Famine was endemic, and some writers have mentioned that cannibalism was rife.

And:

The few persons that were occasionally to be met with in the rural parts were wandering orphans, whose fathers had embarked for Poland or Spain, and whose mothers had died of hunger; or were miserable old people, who would quarrel over a putrid carcass raked from a stagnant pool; and some of whom were seen to eat human flesh, cut from the corpse of a fellow creature, that lay broiling on the fire before them.

Man-catchers armed with whips rounded up wives and children of the long-gone soldiers, priests and nuns, and other poor unfortunates and held them in pens outside the cities where they were branded with the initials of the ship that would carry them to Virginia, Barbados or New England. Roped together by the neck they were provided barely enough food to sustain themselves. Those who had died of starvation were left where they had dropped.

Young women “marriageable and not past breeding” were in particular demand by plantation owners who had wearied of mulattresses and nessesaries. And then there were children.

Over 100,000 young children, who were orphans or who had been taken from their Catholic parents, were sent abroad to 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.

The Irish slaves were distributed among the African ones because as they had no one common language the danger of revolt was thus thought to be lessened. Some of the Irish at that point in history would not have understood English (being Gaeilge monoglots) and so were at a loss to understand commands.
Business was brisk; the Bristol slave merchants had already petitioned Cromwell for a license to transport Irish slaves to Barbados. And the Commissioners of Ireland were only too happy to get rid of an intractable and potentially dangerously rebellious population.

Barbados originally had been a tobacco island. But as Virginia tobacco was far superior, the planters turned to cotton, but when the bottom of the cotton market fell out in 1640, they turned to sugar, and it was sugar that made them rich.

And it was the production of sugar that made the lives of the poor souls who worked it unbearable. Originally the islands had used indentured servants from Europe but the Civil War in Britain had created a shortage of ships, while some indentured servants had died of cholera and dysentery in the islands. Those who might have served as indentured servants got caught up in the conflict at home.

The Dutch Jews, who controlled the sugar production and trade in Brazil, brought in Africans, but they were intractable and so planters and slave merchants turned to the Irish. Between 1647 and 1690 a lively trade was carried on between the mother country and the plantations, as the colonies were called. In fact, there were more Irish shipped into the Caribbean than Africans in the last half of the 17th century.

Political differences were laid aside in the pursuit of wealth. The planters lived in huge homes, which were also fortified in case of the ever-present threat of slave revolt, ate off gold plate, dressed in the latest London fashion and were attended to by a retinue of "bewigged butlers, pages, coachmen and postillions." Then and it was off to the hunt.

But for the Irish who found themselves in Barbados after a couple of months tossed at sea, it was an entirely different picture. In the words of a contemporary traveler:

They are just permitted to live, and a very great part [of the] Irish, derided by the Negroes, branded with the epithet "white slaves." ... I have for my particular satisfaction seen 30, sometimes 40, Christians, English, Scotch and Irish at worke in the parching sun without shirts, shoes or stockings."

The slaves were divided into the two classes of field and house slaves. The planting of the sugar was done with a hoe and without benefit of cow or plow. And then there were the endemic diseases and the lack of any medical care. Also there was the cruelty of the planter class of the Caribbean Islands.

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Ireland’s “September 11”

Oliver Cromwell visited Drogheda on September 9, 1649. The invader summoned Sir Arthur Aston, the “governor” of the town, to surrender. Cromwell had 12,000 men and 11 cannon, Aston had 2,300 men but rejected the summons. Cromwell ordered his artillery to bombard a church, and during the day an incessant hail of solid shot rained on the church and churchyard. On the 10th, Cromwell turned cannon against the heart of the town, also opening breaches in the south and east walls. But the garrison kept him from entering while several of his soldiers fell around him. On September 11 the town was taken, and over the next days Cromwell’s army murdered the garrison, including Aston, after promising to spare their lives. Many survivors were transported into slavery in the New World.

As with slaves in America, they were sold on an auction block, stripped naked for inspection, while their mouths were pried open to determine the state of their dental health. The old were disposed of quickly at minimal prices, while the young boys and men were tested for muscle strength. Then came the women, the younger ones creating a stir as they were generally bought as sexual playthings by the planter class. The physical exam was thorough, including the use of midwife to determine if they were in a virginal state.

The boys were sent to the fields, except in the case
of very young boys, who were often bought by homosexual pedophiles, while the girls went to “the big house.” And there, if they were beautiful, it was their undoing.

Their beauty was their ruin and attracted their master’s lustful eyes, and in that land of tropics, and trade winds, they lived as in a prison, their faith banned, their race and nation despised, their virtue outraged, their tears derided, and as they looked out on the waving fields of sugar cane, they sadly thought of their own dear land with its fields so fertile and so green, now separated from them forever by thousands of miles of rolling sea.

One often thinks of scientific breeding or the manipulation of the gene pool as a modern scientific development, but in Barbados of the 17th century, the most unfortunate of these young girls were taken to stud farms to be bred with the most favored of the black slaves, Coromantine or Mandingo men, in order to produce sex slaves, young mulatto girls, who were raised and trained to please their masters. The young Irish girls, having suffered loss of family and home and raised as Catholics, were not so eager in the role of prostitute as the self-indulgent planters, also separated from the restraints of European society who had come to desire and expect.

All those Gothic novels of life set in the Caribbean islands of the 17th and 18th centuries are not pure fabrications, as it turns out, but based on fact. The practice was eventually ended by law, but not for moral reason, but rather because it interfered with the profits of the lucrative slave trade.

And in an interesting correspondence to the situation of Greek slaves in Rome, many of the Irish slaves were literate while the planters were not and were thus used in the home as teachers. Despite that the Irish were treated worse than the Negro slaves, who were given better food. As the Negroes had been paid for and the Irish merely captured, the Negroes were a more valuable commodity.

And there were rebellions, which were dealt with severely. The Irish were often at the center of these rebellions that occurred in the last half of the 17th century. Planters were dragged from their coaches, hacked to death by machete; their weapons confiscated. The planters blamed the “bloody papists” for the rebellions that were rarely successful as the runaways were only able to run so far on such small islands. Punishment was severe. In one case the captured runaways were nailed to the ground, their bodies in the shape of a cross, while a burning torch was applied to their feet and run up their body. Finally they were decapitated.

Given the extreme imbalance between the planter population and the slave one, the fears were unfounded. In addition, the planters feared the Irish being able to escape the island and ally themselves with French or Spanish Catholics on the Leeward or Windward islands. Their knowledge of the geography and fortification of Barbados could have devastating consequence once conveyed to the enemy.

By 1680 indentured servants were on their way out and Africans began to take the place of white slaves and indentured servants. In many cases, the longed-for freedom did not feed them and they starved to death. As a matter of fact, food rations in the last year of indentured servitude were actually cut. To quote a governor of the island in the year 1689: “They are dominated over and used like dogs, and this in time will undoubtedly drive away all the commonality of the white people and leave the island in a deplorable condition, to be murdered by Negroes or vanquished by the enemy.”

Today there is a population of black Irish, the descendants of African and Irish slaves in the Caribbean who speak Gaelic and a smaller population of Red Legs, those few descendants of the original Irish slaves to Barbados, who live marginally and in deep poverty among the largely black population of Barbados.

Yes, it is better not to lose a war.

ENDNOTES:

Jenifer Dixon is an avid student of neglected history. She is also interested in everything to do with current-day politics, life around the globe and different cultures, worldviews and the perspectives and the deeper roots of religion and mythology and its influence in history. Other interest include Celtic music, photography and cooking.
Heroic Irish Slave Revolts in Ireland, Barbados
Dealt With Violently on Both Sides of Atlantic

By John Tiffany

From 1641 to 1652, in the 12-year period during and following the Confederation Revolt (aka the Irish Uprising) and subsequent Cromwellian invasion, over 550,000 Irish folks were killed by the English army, and 300,000 were sold as slaves.

In 1650, 25,000 Irish people were sold to planters in St. Kitts.

The English Parliament passed the Act for the Settlement of Ireland in 1652, which classified the Irish population into several categories according to their degree of involvement in the uprising and subsequent war. Those who had participated in the rising or assisted the rebels in any way were to be hanged and to have their property confiscated. Other categories of the Irish population were sentenced to banishment, with whole or partial confiscation of their estates.

While the majority of the resettlement took place within Ireland, to the province of Connaught and County Clare, Dr. William Petty, physician-general to Cromwell's army, estimated that as many as 100,000 Irish men, women and children were transported to the colonies in the West Indies and in North America as indentured servants. The population of Ireland fell from 1,466,000 to 616,000—a loss of 850,000 souls.

Soldiers enslaved or banished were not allowed to take their wives and children. The result was a population of homeless women and children, who were declared a public nuisance, rounded up and sold as slaves for great profit.

All did not go smoothly with Cromwell's extermination/slavery plan, as Irish slaves revolted in Barbados in 1649. Unfortunately the revolt failed. They were hanged, drawn and quartered, and their heads were put on pikes, prominently displayed around Bridgetown as a warning to others.

Cromwell then fought two short wars against the Dutch in 1651, and thereafter monopolized the slave trade. Four years later he seized Jamaica from Spain. Jamaica then became the center of the English slave trade in the Caribbean region.

Another law was passed on June 26, 1657, stating: “Those who fail to transplant themselves into Connaught or County Clare within six months... shall be attainted of high treason [and] are to be sent into America or some other parts beyond the seas... those banished who return are to suffer the pains of death as felons by virtue of this act, without benefit of clergy.”

Although it was not a crime to kill any Irish, and soldiers were encouraged to do so, the slave trade proved too profitable to kill off the source of the product. Chartered shippers sent gangs out with quotas to fill and, in their zest as they scourched the countryside, they kidnapped a number of English, too. On March 25, 1659, a petition of 72 Englishmen was received in London, claiming they were illegally in slavery in Barbados. In addition, 7,000-8,000 Scots taken prisoner at the Battle of Worcester in 1651 were sold to the British plantations in the New World, and 200 Frenchmen had been kidnapped, concealed and sold in Barbados for 900 pounds of cotton each.

Subsequently some 82,000 Irish were sold to Barbados and Virginia alone. In 1656, Cromwell’s Council of State ordered that 1,000 Irish girls and 1,000 Irish boys be rounded up and taken to Jamaica to be sold as slaves to English planters. As horrendous as these numbers sound, they only reflect a small part of the evil program, as most of the slaving activity was not recorded.

Emancipated slaves in New Orleans in the mid-1860s.