



Slave Trade

abolition

Slavery: marking the
200th anniversary
of the Abolition of the
Slave Trade Act

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Foreword

March 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the passage of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act which outlawed the slave trade throughout the British Empire and made it illegal for British ships to be involved in the trade. It marked the start of a process which ended the barbaric transatlantic traffic in human beings.

This bicentenary gives us the opportunity to remember the millions who suffered from slavery and to focus on its lasting and pernicious legacy of racism – which was developed to justify this vile trade - and inequality.

Many will already know of Daniel O'Connell's statement to the House of Commons in 1831 that Ireland "has its glory, that no slave ship was ever launched from any of its numerous ports". However, as this fascinating pamphlet shows, the story of Ireland's involvement in the slave trade was not quite so simple. Some in Ireland, North and South, undoubtedly grew wealthy on the proceeds of black slavery.

But Ireland did indeed have its glory: the many people from all walks of life and from all traditions who campaigned and fought against slavery – people of courage and principle who made their voices heard and took action when it might have been unpopular to do so.

This pamphlet, based on the work of historian Nini Rodgers, charts the involvement of Ireland in the slave trade and celebrates the efforts of those who campaigned against slavery. I hope that it will prompt everyone across the island of Ireland, North and South, to take this opportunity to focus on the importance of the abolition of the slave trade and its relevance to us today.

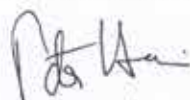
Today, it is difficult to understand how this appalling crime against humanity – fuelled by racism and greed – was ever acceptable, let alone legal. But what is even harder to comprehend is that, although slavery was finally legally abolished, after a long struggle in the Americas, in 1888, it still continues in practice today.

Well over 20 million people across the world are estimated still to be suffering in the miserable daily reality of slavery and servitude. Modern day slavery – including human trafficking, enforced prostitution and bonded labour – remains an extremely lucrative industry, generating an estimated £25 billion in profits every year.

I spent the early part of my life in South Africa and witnessed at first hand the appalling policy of apartheid. My parents were both anti-apartheid activists and I myself campaigned for many years against it after my family was forced into exile in Britain in 1966. As with slavery, apartheid was defeated by the many, many people – both black and white - who campaigned for freedom.

In recent years, Northern Ireland has seen increasing numbers of people from all over the world coming to settle. The vast majority of local people recognise the contribution that these new arrivals have made and have welcomed them. Regrettably, a small minority have abused, intimidated and attacked these newcomers. And there are those who would exploit them.

Government has taken action to tackle this scourge. But Government cannot do it on its own. It is only by people from all backgrounds joining together – just as they did to counter slavery and apartheid – that we will defeat racism. We must do so.



The Right Honourable Peter Hain MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
March 2007

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Slavery and the Campaign for Abolition on the Island of Ireland

Today the international community is concerned about finding resolutions to issues including global warming, third world debt and fair trade.

A generation ago, the international community was united in opposition to the Apartheid regime in South Africa where a white minority oppressed the black majority, denying them access to basic civil rights.

History is peppered with events where people and nations have stood shoulder to shoulder to right a wrong.

That was the case over 200 years ago when opponents to the slave trade - where young men and women from Africa were ripped from their homes and sold in servitude to plantation owners in America - came together to bring an end to this evil human trade.



The origins of European involvement in African slavery go back to at least the 15th century. In the beginning, these merchants were actually more interested in the gold and ivory that Africa had to offer, but with the discovery of the Americas, and the subsequent opening up of vast tracts of land for settlement, the market for slave labour grew rapidly.

By the 18th century the economies of many African states depended to a great extent on their ability to sell large numbers of slaves to European traders to work the plantations.



Toiling in great heat, these slaves usually worked, and lived, in inhuman conditions, and had a very low life expectancy.

It was during this era that Britain emerged as the most significant of the Atlantic slave traders.

Manning The Slave Ships – The Irish Contribution To The Slave Trade

Restrictions imposed by the British Parliament at Westminster meant that Ireland, unlike England, was unable to develop its own slave trade.

This restriction did not prevent Irish people from all backgrounds playing their part in the trade and many served as sailors, surgeons and captains, sailing out on slave ships from London, Bristol and Liverpool.



Many captains wanted to become slave merchants and records obtained from the ports in Bristol and Liverpool show that many Irish captains made the transition to slave merchant.

The wealthiest and most notorious Irish slave traders were the Walsh family, who had left Ireland to settle in Nantes, France's most successful slaving port.

Between them they were responsible for transporting more than 12,000 Africans across the Atlantic. One member of the family, Antoine Walsh took Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) to Scotland to launch his ill-fated rebellion in 1745 in a well armed slave ship.



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The Walsh family was granted nobility by the French King and Antoine himself eventually retired, in some luxury, to his plantation on St Domingue (now Haiti), then the greatest sugar producing colony in the Caribbean.

It was not necessary to sail to Africa to make your fortune. Other second-generation Irish emigrants were doing very well trading slaves between the islands of the Caribbean.

In the 17th century, many of the Irish who had settled in what was then the British West Indies found themselves pushed onto the tiny volcanic island of Montserrat.

By the 1730s these included the Tuite (Westmeath), Ryan and Skerrett (Galway) and Farrell (Longford) families, who combined their roles of plantation owner with that of merchant, selling both slaves and Irish provisions to the expanding British, French, Spanish and Danish islands in the area.

Supplying The Slave Plantations

While not being involved directly in the transportation of slaves, there were trading opportunities for Irish ships.

They were encouraged by the British to sail directly to America and the Caribbean to supply the colonies with much-needed provisions. The first Irish port to grow rich on this trade was Cork.





As ships sailed out to the Caribbean loaded down with supplies from Ireland, like firkins of butter, barrels of beef, smoked salmon and pickled tongues, Cork's quays, butter market and slaughter houses expanded rapidly.

When Britain found itself at war with France, the government tried to prevent any supply of food to the enemy, but Irish merchants busy in the Caribbean simply saw this as a new opportunity.

The Belfast firm of Greg and Cunningham made a great deal of money during the Seven Years War bringing in prize goods of French sugar, coffee and tobacco while continuing to smuggle Irish provisions to the French islands.

With the wealth gained from these activities, Thomas Greg and Waddell Cunningham built new quays in Belfast, improved the navigation of the Lagan to make it easier for big ships to reach the quays and helped fund new Presbyterian churches.

They were also to the fore in the building of the White Linen Hall (where Belfast City Hall now stands) which made Belfast much more competitive than Dublin in the increasingly important linen industry.

Not all the wealth returned to Ireland. Money was also invested in the Caribbean where Irish investors now set out to buy slaves and expand sugar production.

As a result slave plantations in the British islands began to acquire names such as Dublin, Phoenix Park, Belfast and Derry.



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The Irish Anti-Slavery Movement

By the late 18th century, the anti-slavery movement was getting stronger and more vocal across Ireland.

Thomas McCabe, a Belfast radical, subsequently declared that he had personally ruined the plans of the town's leading firm of merchants, Waddell Cunningham, to start a slaving venture.

The anti-slavery movement was brought to Ireland by the Quakers whose belief in the equality of all people made them natural champions of the cause.

In 1774, Quakers in Philadelphia and London decided to expel any of their members who owned slaves, both decisions influencing the Quakers in Ireland.

In 1787 English Quakers composed the majority of the new Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, who decided that they would have more chance of success if they focused on abolishing the slave trade, rather than slavery itself.

The MP for Hull, William Wilberforce, agreed to be their spokesperson in parliament and the campaign to abolish the slave trade was finally underway.



The campaign was reported in Irish newspapers but, as Ireland had her own parliament in Dublin and no companies directly involved in the slave trade, it was difficult for sympathisers to participate. The Dublin Quakers, however, did



what they could, packing a meeting of the city's chamber of commerce and voting in support of the London Committee.

The early efforts of the London Committee met with failure and when, in both 1791 and 1792, Westminster rejected motions to ban the trade, the most radical anti-slavery sympathisers turned to direct action.

They called on the public to stop buying sugar, which, they argued, would end slavery, as the plantation owners, unable to sell their crops, would be forced to free their slaves.

This was not a new concept in Ireland. Throughout the century similar campaigns had been organised to stop people buying textiles from overseas in order to help the local textile industry.

A Sugar-Free Solution to Slavery

The pioneers of this campaign in Ireland were the Shackleton family, who lived in the village of Ballitore in Co Kildare, where Abraham Shackleton ran a boarding school.

These anti-slavery campaigners targeted women, trying to persuade them that they could influence the debate by refusing to buy the sugar that was produced on the back of the slaves' misery.

Abraham Shackleton's daughters were soon drawn to the campaign and set about organising the printing and distribution of pamphlets throughout Ireland.

The first pamphlets were reprints of English material. But very soon a Dublin Quaker produced her own pamphlet appealing to Irish women to spread the campaign.



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By now women from Anglican backgrounds were also joining the campaign, refusing to buy sugar and donating the money they saved to charity.

One of the supporters of the campaign was Dr William Drennan, a Presbyterian doctor from Belfast working in Dublin, who was a founder member of its Society of United Irishmen.

He wrote home to his sister suggesting that the ladies of Belfast publish a recipe book of sugarless pies and puddings.

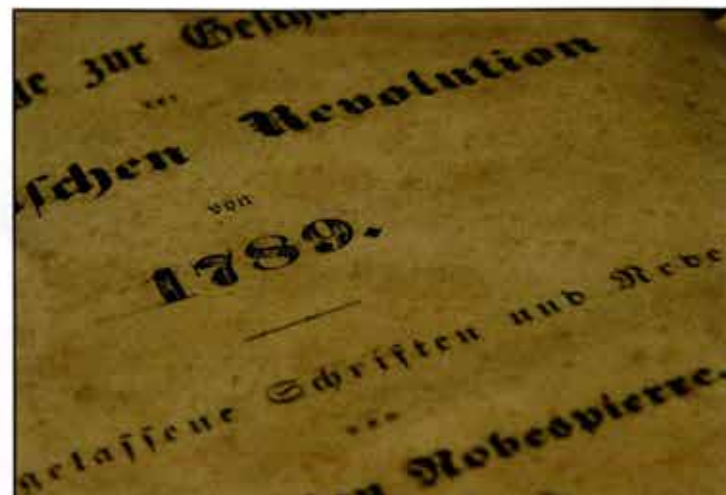
Freedom For All; Anti-Slavery And Catholic Emancipation

The French Revolution, which began in 1789, helped to spread the ideal of freedom around the world and was responsible for bringing many radical people into the anti-slavery movement.

As the call for equality for all began to emerge from France, those who wanted to see the Dublin parliament reformed to give more rights to Irish Catholics, also called for freedom for slaves.

In 1793, the Dublin parliament repealed more of the penal laws that discriminated against Catholics and though they could still not become MP's, Catholics could once again vote for the Dublin parliament.

The failure of the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen, which was followed by the Act of Union in 1801, meant that, rather than have its own parliament in Dublin, Ireland would now send 100 Irish MPs to Westminster instead.



This would move the focus of the Irish involvement in the anti-slavery campaign back to London.





The Irish In Westminster – Helping To End The Slave Trade

It was hoped by anti-slave campaigner William Wilberforce that the 100 additional Irish MPs at Westminster would change the balance of votes in his favour.

In 1804, all the Irish members then in London voted as a group to abolish the slave trade and the abolitionists won a triumphant victory in the House of Commons which Wilberforce hoped would put pressure on the House of Lords.

However three readings of the bill were required and, over time, the motion eventually failed with many of the Irish members either changing their vote or leaving for home before it was finally taken.

The Slave Trade Is Finally Abolished

But this was merely another delay and three years later, on 25 March 1807, Parliament finally passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which abolished the slave trade in the British colonies and made it illegal to carry slaves on board British ships.

However, the battle was not yet won. If the slave trade had finally been banned, enforcing that ban would prove far from easy.



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It was now that Wilberforce found help from a Presbyterian MP from Co Down and the then Foreign Secretary Viscount Castlereagh who, on the passing of the Act, had moved quickly to stop the supply of slaves to Britain's most recent conquests in the Caribbean.

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815 he tried to persuade the other great powers to ban the slave trade but when this was rejected managed to get the other countries at least to declare that the slave trade was wrong and should eventually be abolished.

Castlereagh also managed to negotiate bilateral treaties with both Spain and Portugal which committed them to stop their involvement with the slave trade north of the Equator.

The Liberator And The American Slave Trade

Because of the difficulty of stopping the now illegal slave trade, the anti-slavery movement was revived in the 1820s. But now the focus was not on the banning of the slave trade but abolishing slavery itself.

In 1823 a new society was founded which aimed to abolish slavery within the British Empire. In the same year, Daniel O'Connell founded the Catholic Association, a mass movement which would eventually succeed in pressuring parliament to pass Catholic emancipation.

While he was in London Daniel O'Connell also joined the anti-slavery campaign which he saw as a basic human rights issue. In 1840, like many anti-slavery activists, he turned his attention to the United States of America and called on Irish emigrants there to support the cause.



The Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society



By the 1830s, Ireland finally gained its own society to campaign directly against slavery. The two driving forces behind the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society were two old boys of the school at Ballitore, where Ireland's anti-slavery crusade had begun, William Haughton and RD Webb.

Haughton, a miller, and Webb, a printer,

shared a fierce commitment to good causes. Webb was a member of the Relief Committee during the Great Famine of the 1840s and he used his influence with the contacts he had made in the United States to raise money for the cause of anti-slavery in Ireland.

In the 1860s when the American Civil War broke out, Webb published an influential book in support of abolitionism – 'The Life and Letters of John Brown'.

In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, all slaves in the United States were freed. With the greatest power in the region abolishing slavery, Cuba and Brazil found it more difficult to defend and by the 1880s they too had abolished it.



A Terrible Testimony



The most effective forms of publicity against the evils of slavery were the testimonies of the slaves themselves and several autobiographies by slaves who had achieved freedom had a great impact.

The first of these, 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African' became a best seller in Britain and Ireland in the 1790s.

But the most famous slave narrative of all, published 50 years later, was the 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself', the work of a runaway slave from Maryland who had succeeded in fleeing to the northern states where he became an anti-slavery journalist and lecturer.

Both these talented men had learnt to read and write while they were slaves, an achievement that was both difficult and often dangerous. Their appearance before anti-slavery supporters, many of whom had never actually seen a black man, invariably had a startling impact.

Both Equiano and Douglass visited Ireland. As a freeman and a successful author, Equiano spent some eight months travelling around Ireland to promote his book, recording that he found "the people extremely hospitable, particularly in Belfast" (he arrived there in the year of the Volunteer procession celebrating the fall of the Bastille).

In 1844 Frederick Douglass left the United States for the first time in order to seek international support for the emancipation of the slaves in his homeland.

He sailed for Dublin, where RD Webb produced the first edition of his book to be published outside America. In Ireland Douglass filled theatres and churches with his dramatic lectures, in which he recounted his suffering and that of his fellow slaves.



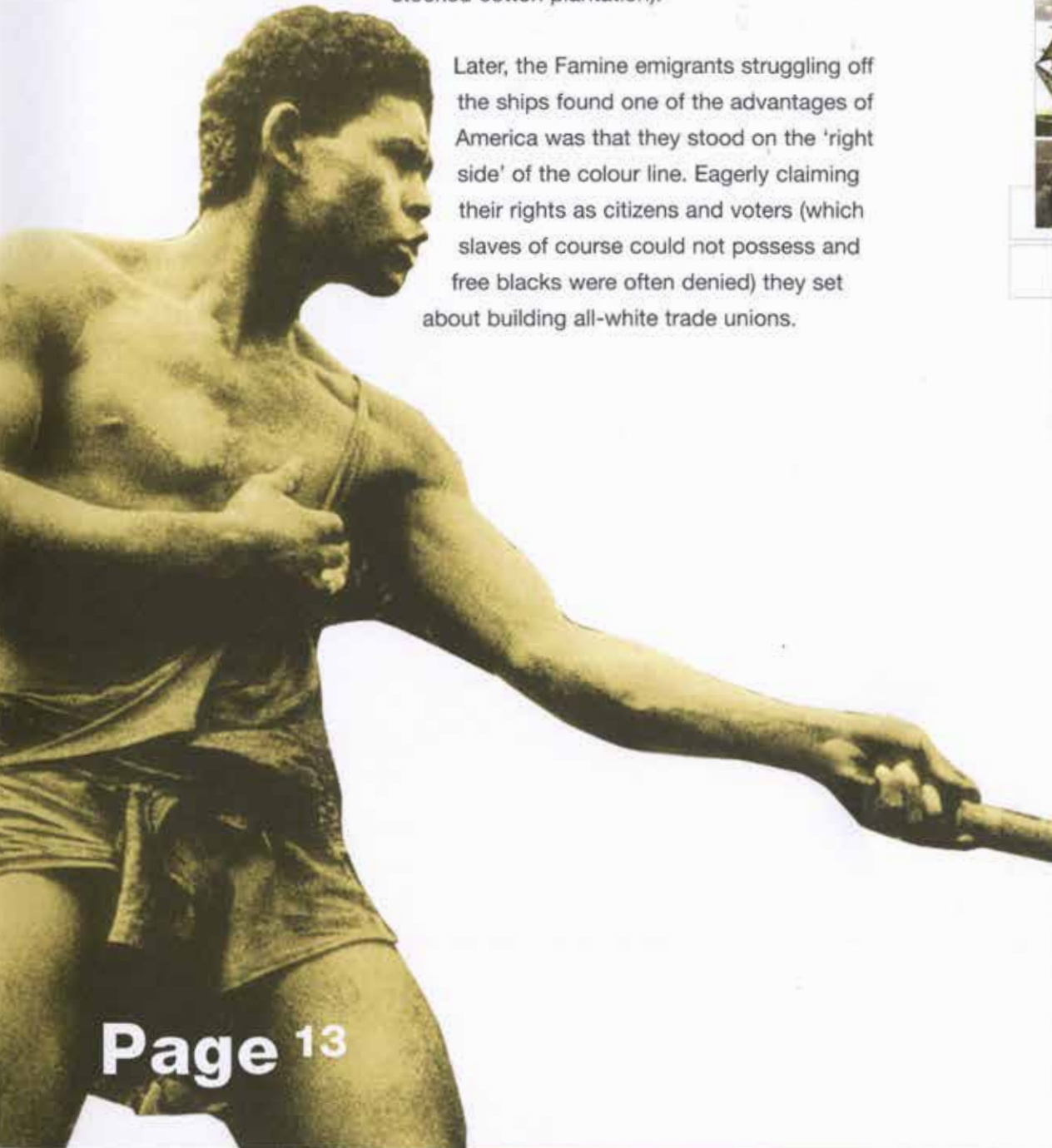
Universal Freedom?

Sadly, Ireland's attitude to racism was not as simple as that. In Ireland anti-slavery could strike a chord with a varied audience, including reformers, radicals, women, Catholic liberals and Protestant evangelicals.

But when Irish emigrants crossed the Atlantic to America and found themselves in a slave holding society, the newcomers felt they needed to grasp any advantage they could.

United Irishmen, who once accepted black freedom as part of universal progress, were now confronted with the opportunity to become slaveholders on newly opened land in the south and west (Alex Haley, author of 'Roots', traced the white strains in his ancestry back to a family of Presbyterians from County Monaghan who settled in Alabama, where they developed a well-stocked cotton plantation).

Later, the Famine emigrants struggling off the ships found one of the advantages of America was that they stood on the 'right side' of the colour line. Eagerly claiming their rights as citizens and voters (which slaves of course could not possess and free blacks were often denied) they set about building all-white trade unions.



The Legacy

Today, like 19th century America, both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland receive immigrants from all around the world. The arrival of large numbers of people will, inevitably, cause tensions in society and this has resulted in both physical and verbal abuse directed at these newcomers.

But the legacy of the anti-slavery campaigners of the last two centuries provides a strong and enduring tradition. The principles pioneered by anti-slavery campaigners around the world have been passed on down the years to other movements and institutions, such as the civil rights movement in the United States, the World Council of Churches, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and human rights legislation adopted by the European Union.

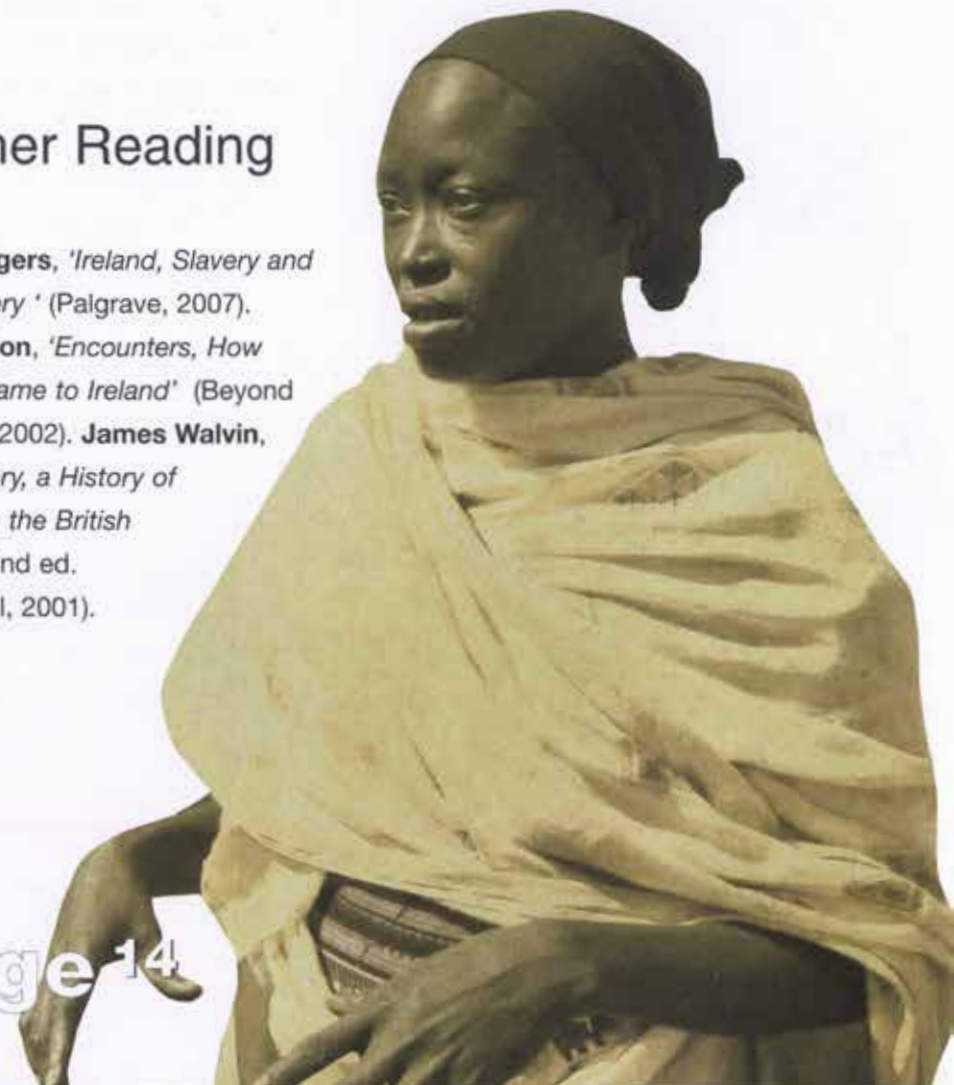
As a result, whereas 19th century America possessed institutions which enshrined racism, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, like many other countries today, possess laws and institutions created to combat racist attitudes and behaviour.

The history of slavery on the island of Ireland is one of first, complicity in the barbaric trade; then, later, the triumph of freedom over evil as the abolitionists won the day.

Further Reading

Nini Rodgers, *'Ireland, Slavery and Anti-slavery'* (Palgrave, 2007).

Bill Rolston, *'Encounters, How Racism came to Ireland'* (Beyond the Pale, 2002). **James Walvin**, *'Black Ivory, a History of Slavery in the British Empire'* 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2001).



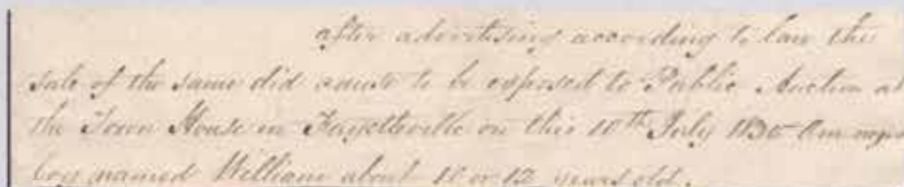
Research Material

SLAVERY AND THE ARCHIVES AT PRONI

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) in Belfast holds great quantities of historical documents. Historians and students who wish to research and write about the important events in history make sure that they examine these documents in considerable detail in order to shed light on their topic of research. Slavery and its eventual abolition is one such topic and careful research will reveal a wealth of information on the subject, mostly in the personal papers of people who lived at that time and whose documents are held in PRONI.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS and DIPLOMATS

For example, among the Castlereagh Papers (PRONI reference D/3030) you will find documents relating to Viscount Castlereagh's term as Secretary of State for War in the Colonies in 1807 and as Foreign Secretary in 1812 in which references to slavery and the slave trade proliferate. In this same archive there are even letters to Castlereagh from William Wilberforce, Member of Parliament for Hull, who, along with Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharpe, spearheaded the anti-slavery movement in Britain. (PRONI reference D/3030).



*after advertising according to law the
sale of the same did result to be exposed to Public Auction at
the Town House in Georgetown on the 11th July 1836 an negro
boy named William about 11 or 12 years old.*

The Belmore family papers (PRONI reference D/3007) contain references to the second Earl of Belmore's term as Governor of Jamaica (1828-1832). Although slave trading had been abolished, slavery itself still existed. This was a turbulent period in the island's history. There were 300,000 slaves in Jamaica owned by a relatively small white population and with a growing movement towards emancipation led by Baptist and Methodist clergymen trouble was inevitable.

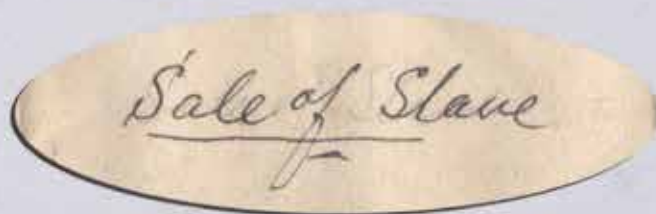
One group of slaves, believing that emancipation had been granted by the British government but that their owners were obstructing it, rebelled in December 1831. This rebellion is considered by some as the most dangerous and destructive in the island's history. The archive contains official



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dispatches from the Colonial Office to Lord Belmore and a royal proclamation denying false reports that the slaves in the West Indian colonies were about to be emancipated. In addition there is the correspondence of Major-General Sir Willoughby Cotton, commander of the forces in Jamaica and a proclamation from Lord Belmore offering pardon to the rebellious slaves who had given themselves up or returned peacefully to their owners.



Among the correspondence relating to slavery in the Abercorn papers (PRONI reference D/623) there is a letter from the Marquess of Abercorn to William Wilberforce about the slave trade and the draft of a speech on the abolition of the slave trade. There is also further correspondence relating to the East African slave trade and an alleged diplomatic involvement in the slave trade in Morocco to be found in the Dufferin and Ava archive. (PRONI reference D/1071/H/B/C/95/61).

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY RADICALS

Other documents containing references to slavery and its abolition are those relating to Belfast's eighteenth century radical reformers. See, for example, the William Drennan papers, in particular a body of correspondence between William Drennan, a Presbyterian doctor, his sister Martha and her husband, Samuel McTier, in which they discuss the issue of slavery. (PRONI reference T/765).

The voice of the ordinary man and woman is far from silent on this topic. There are numerous letters written by Irish immigrants to America and the West Indies some of whom are witnessing the phenomenon of slavery and slave trading at first hand. Many are sympathetic to the plight of the slaves; others appear to be deeply insensitive describing their own 'gay social life' and the auctioning of slaves in the same breath.



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