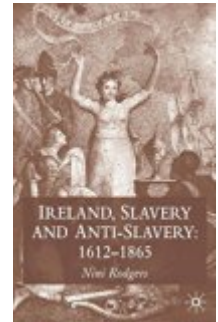


**Nini Rodgers.** *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 403 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-333-77099-3.



**Reviewed by** Padhraig Higgins

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In recent years Ireland has grappled with the impact of globalization. Economic growth has brought new wealth, demographic transformation, as well much agonizing over the implications of these changes for understandings of Irish identity. Nini Rodgers's important new study examines similar changes and questions in the context of Ireland's participation in an earlier global economy. Rodgers demonstrates how, despite Ireland's exclusion from the slave trade for much of the eighteenth century, the "Black Atlantic," an economic system underpinned by slave labor, impinged on all areas of Irish life. While one historian has recently posited a "Green Atlantic" focusing on the links between Irish radicalism and anti-slavery, Rodgers's study situates Ireland squarely in Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, throwing new light on the role of Irish men and women abroad in the development of slave plantations and the slave trade, as well as the centrality of slave-produced goods to the economy and politics of eighteenth-century Ireland. By focusing on slavery, the text engages with and complicates a range of issues central to Irish historiography. How did religious identities and Ireland's subordi-

nate political status shape the way the Irish engaged with the slave trade? How did debates over the slave trade and slave produce affect late eighteenth-century Patriot and radical politics? In what ways did Irish participation in the trade differ from other nationalities?

Historians have recently focused anew on Ireland's place in the British Empire and the Atlantic world.[1] But apart from popular memories of Oliver Cromwell's enslavement and transportation of Irish men and women to the Caribbean, or Daniel O'Connell's well-known opposition to slavery, Ireland's relationship with the Black Atlantic has been all but forgotten, perhaps because it sits uneasily with a self-image of colonial Ireland's solidarity with the oppressed. The recent Oxford history of Ireland and the British Empire, for example, makes only passing reference to the subject. While the analogy of slavery was often used to describe the situation of the Irish (by both others and themselves), and the slave experience of St. Patrick was often emphasized by both Protestants and Catholics, slavery has not loomed large in the Irish historical imagination.[2]

Building on research into trading diasporas, urban trade, and mercantile networks by historians such as David Dickson and Louis Cullen, while also utilizing an impressive range of primary material such as merchants' letter books, census data, newspapers, and memoirs, Rodgers provides a focused analysis of the ways in which slavery and the slave trade shaped Irish society, economy, and politics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The book is divided into three parts. After a brief overview of forms of slavery in early Ireland and pre-modern Africa, part 1 examines the role of Irish men and women as colonizers, planters, servants, and merchants in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Chapter 2, "Servants and Slaves," skillfully depicts the anarchic world of Irish adventurers in the early Americas and the ways in which religion and geo-political concerns offered possibilities, but also constrained the enterprising. Figures such as Phillip and James Purcell, who as Catholics subjects of a Protestant king negotiating with Catholic authorities and attempting to navigate the competing worlds of English, Dutch, Portuguese, and native authority on the Amazon, shifted "deftly among the complexities of the religio-political world" (p. 33). By the 1670s, networks of Irish merchants and planters were moving confidently around the Atlantic with some, such as Henry Blake of Galway, amassing small fortunes and Irish estates from sugar produced by African slaves. Montserrat in particular sustained a varied Irish population--nearly two-thirds of the island's planters and free and bonded servants--who engaged in tobacco, indigo, and cotton cultivation. Particularly among Catholics, an Irish Creole identity emerged on the island, cemented by religion and loyalty to the Stuart dynasty.

In chapter 3, "Creoles and Slaves," Rodgers makes useful comparisons between the experience of penal laws against Catholics in Ireland and the Caribbean, noting that while Catholics in Restoration-era Montserrat endured similar exclusions from government, they did not suffer the

same economic disabilities as Catholics in Ireland, maintaining the right to purchase land. However, by the eighteenth century, penal laws meant that wealth amassed in the Caribbean could no longer be converted into estates and status in Ireland. By the middle of the century the wealthy Irish planters of Montserrat were increasingly turning to London, where they purchased estates and married off their children, who quickly became integrated within the metropolitan world, spelling an end to a distinctive Irish Creole identity.

As planters on Montserrat turned increasingly to sugar production in the eighteenth century, slave labor became integral to the island's economy. While few sources survive recording slave perceptions of this "Irish island," Rodgers is fortunate that one of the best-known slaves, Olaudah Equiano, was brought to the island in 1763, leaving a valuable account of his varied experience on Montserrat and surrounding islands. Sugar plantations could bring great wealth and Rodgers reveals how the Irish benefited from the opportunities sugar presented. After emancipation, as the British government paid out compensation to plantation owners, it was James Blair of Newry who collected the largest single sum in the British Empire, claiming for over 1,500 slaves. While Ireland was excluded from participation in the slave trade for much of the eighteenth century, Rodgers traces numerous Irish individuals in the English trade, along with the Irish community in Nantes who were heavily involved in the French slave trade.

Profits from the trade in sugar and slavery often found their way back to Ireland. Part 2 shows the centrality of slavery and sugar plantations to the Irish economy in the eighteenth century, as well as the ways in which sugar, and other slave produce, played out in the politics of Patriotism in the 1770s and 1780s. Chapter 6, "Protestant, Catholic," shows how barreled salt beef and butter, along with more expensive items such as pickled tongue and spiced salmon, shipped to the Car-

ibbean from Cork to feed planters and slaves, stimulated trade in the town and contributed to the commercialization of agricultural production in South Munster. Wealth made from butter emboldened Catholic merchants in the town to challenge their second-class citizenship.

Likewise, in Limerick exporting provisions and importing slave produce contributed to the making of merchant fortunes, civic improvements, and the intensification of political struggles between Catholics and Protestants in the city. By 1784, hoping to take advantage of the removal of restrictions on Irish participation in the slave trade, efforts were made by merchants to establish an "African company" in the city to purchase West African slaves and exchange them for sugar in the West Indies, though nothing came of this venture. A similar venture, proposed by the colorful Belfast merchant Waddell Cunningham, also came to nothing, but Rodgers does an able job not only in tracing Cunningham's turbulent career in New York and Belfast, but also in showing how wealth created by slave labor was important in laying the foundation for the city's later growth.

As the eighth chapter demonstrates, while not as reliant on West Indian trade or wealth for its expansion and growth in the eighteenth century, slave economies were nonetheless central to both the economy and politics of Dublin. Sugar importing and refining interests were considerable in the capital by the mid-eighteenth century, when it became the country's most valuable import and a chief source of government revenue. Once again, Catholics were at the fore in this industry, involved in petitioning the House of Commons in favor of protective duties in 1780 while also involved in the increasingly assertive Catholic Committee. Rodgers offers new insights on the well-worn topic of Patriotism and "free trade." Significantly, Rodgers places plantation goods and disputes over sugar duties at the center of the "free trade" agitations in 1779 and the eventual concession of an independent Irish parliament in 1782,

suggesting that sugar in Dublin in 1780 was not far from being as explosive as tea had been in Boston in 1774.

Rodgers provides a wealth of information on Irish attitudes to the slave trade, complicating our understanding of familiar figures and recovering neglected sources, particularly the writings of Irish women in opposing the trade. Edmund Burke, recently championed by postcolonial critics as a friend of the oppressed, is shown to have been initially more interested in the slaving interests of his brothers (both of whom held posts on sugar islands) and of his Bristol constituents than in opposing the slave trade. By 1789 however, he did come out in favor of William Wilberforce's motion, influenced in part by his close friends, the Shackletons of Ballitore, a Quaker family that had long put pressure on Burke to oppose the trade. By the 1780s, in Ireland as elsewhere, criticism of the slave trade became common. Chapter 10, "Anti-Slavery Literature, Mostly Imaginative," explores the writing of Irish women, such as Mary Birkett and the young Quaker, Mary Leadbetter of Ballitore, attacking the trade. The literary propaganda of the United Irishmen also attacked slavery, as did their banners and symbols. In 1791, for example, United Irishmen in Belfast adopted sentimental depictions of fettered African slaves in their Bastille Day celebrations. The following year Olaudah Equiano was warmly received by several United Irishmen, including Samuel Neilson, when he visited the city as part of a book tour to promote an Irish edition of his autobiography.

As Rodgers observes, anti-slavery would "never have been the formative influence on Irish life which slavery itself had been" (p. 196) and perhaps for this reason the final part of the book is less compelling than what precedes it. Part 3 focuses on Ireland and emancipation, with chapters on the relationship between Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation and antislavery, Frederick Douglass's visit to Ireland, the Young Irelander John Mitchel's racist

ideology, and a comparison of the experience of the Irish poor and black slaves. The examination of O'Connell offers some interesting insights into the frequent twinning of Catholic emancipation and the emancipation of slaves, though this chapter tends to focus on a summary of well-known high politics and parliamentary debates. A greater focus on the popular aspects of anti-slavery in Ireland would have been welcome here. More attention could also have been paid to the way in which Irish material culture was transformed by slave produce. While scattered reference is made to the place of tobacco and sugar in popular culture, recent work by Toby Barnard, for example, shows the way in which sugar and the accoutrements of sugar, such as sugar bowls and tongs, were eagerly adopted by Irish consumers.[3]

*Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery* is too nuanced a work to provide anything like a balance sheet of how complicit or blameless the Irish were in this trade. Rodgers concludes that, while the Irish "behaved according to European norms" in their treatment of slaves, they were distinctive in several ways, most importantly perhaps in that they provided "a high proportion of that layer of white society immediately above the slaves" (p. 331). This lowly social status placed many Irish in the contradictory position of exploiting racism to improve their own position while also identifying with the "difficulties faced by the socially despised" (p. 321).

This book offers important new ways to think about the variety of Irish men and women—servants, planters, sojourners, merchants, officials, and humanitarians—who participated in the formation of Black Atlantic. Just as importantly it shows the ways in which Ireland's economy and politics were transformed by participation in the slave trade. As questions of migration, race, and Irish identity become increasingly urgent in contemporary Ireland, this work offers a compelling historical perspective on a set of similar issues and (despite a prohibitive price) will be of great

interest to scholars and students of Irish history, the slave trade, and the Atlantic world.

#### Notes

[1]. Kevin Kenny, ed. *Ireland and the British Empire*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Kevin Whelan, "The Green Atlantic: Radical Reciprocities between Ireland and America in the Long Eighteenth Century," in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, and David N. Doyle, eds., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). On Atlantic trade see David Dickson, *Old World Colony: Cork and South Munster, 1630-1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

[2]. The recent exceptions here are popular histories that represent the Irish as victims of slavery. Sean O'Callaghan, *To Hell or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* (Kerry: Brandon Books, 2001); and Des Ekin, *The Stolen Village: Baltimore and the Barbary Pirates* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2006). For a study of the Irish community on one particular sugar island see Donald Harman Akenson's typically idiosyncratic *If the Irish Ran the World: Montserrat, 1630-1730* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

[3]. Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

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