

Finola O’Kane & Ciaran O’Neill (eds.), *Ireland, Slavery and the Caribbean: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2023. xxii + 368 pp. (Cloth US\$140.00)

With a foreword from Sir Hilary Beckles, one of the pioneers of studying the Irish in the West Indies, Finola O’Kane and Ciaran O’Neill hope to trigger more research on Irish links with the archipelago. Indeed, the fact that Ireland was an island is their opening reason for creating this collection of 18 essays ranging across history, literature, art, and architecture. Beyond the geographical reality, however, the main intellectual benefit of this comparison is that “What Ireland does share with the Caribbean is a history of colonization” (p. 2). Comparison is particularly useful here in complicating the traditional decolonization views of Ireland by examining “the extent to which the Green Atlantic partook, enthusiastically, in the colonization of the Black Atlantic” (p. 5).

The collection begins with an excellent overview by David Dickson of the economic connections between Ireland and the Caribbean during the highpoint of the British West Indian plantation economies in the 1700s. Ireland, particularly its most southern part, Cork, provided substantial provisions to sustain the enslaved workforces on islands such as Barbados. Yet, even at this highpoint in the trading relationship, Dickson finds the economic impact on Ireland fleeting and shallow. Most earnings seem to have been invested, by the mostly Anglo-Irish benefactors, in the English rather than the Irish economy. It was only the slavery compensation scheme of the 1830s that led to a serious “capital transfer” to Ireland (p. 28).

As the book’s title indicates, slavery, specifically Irish links to it, is a central focus. Researching Barbados, David Brown cuts through the mythology of the “Irish slaves” there but highlights that for those Catholics transported from Cromwellian Ireland “only in death was it possible to separate enslaved Africans from white Irish servants” as “the Irish had to be buried according to Christian custom” (p. 57). Further essays from David Fleming, Nuala Zahedieh, Jenny Shaw, Thomas Truxes, and Ciaran O’Neill, focus on examples of Irish merchants/planters/adventurers who profited from slavery and sugar production in the Caribbean. In total though, Legacies of British Slavery project director Nicholas Draper finds only 200 direct Irish absentee slave owners who received compensation for emancipation in the 1800s, making up just “3–4 percent of the total British and Irish absentee owners identified to date” (p. 105). He admits that his findings do not “allow us to assess the importance either of slavery to Ireland or of Ireland to slavery” (p. 104). Finola O’Kane and José Brownrigg-Gleeson bring welcome attention to Irish participation in slavery in the French and Spanish Caribbean. Overall, though, the evidence in this collection, while

tentative in places, indicates that slavery was not very important in economic terms to Ireland beyond some local interests. Even in these, it was the Anglo-Irish ascendancy class who benefited most from it. Though Irish in the sense of being from Ireland, with a growing sense of Irishness through the eighteenth century, they still remained more part of the British Atlantic World than the “Green Atlantic.”

More significant, it seems, are the cultural comparisons between Ireland and the Caribbean made by Claire Connolly, on the Caribbean influences on Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth; Aaron Graham’s analysis of similarities and differences between the anti-Catholic penal laws and slave codes in the British Caribbean; and artistic/architectural links laid out by Emily Mann, Charles Ivar McGrath, Finola O’Kane, and Louis P. Nelson. Nelson’s chapter on how the designs for houses with “square corner towers” (p. 261) popular in Ireland (and the Anglo-Scottish border), reflecting settler colonial origins, were transferred to Jamaica, is particularly interesting. The collection concludes with two essays focused on contemporary issues—the “Irish slave myth,” by Natalie Zacek, and racism in Ireland today, by Sandrine Uwase Ndahiro. Zacek describes the online debate between scholars such as Liam Hogan and popularizers of the idea that the Irish were slaves too, and explains why Irish indentured servitude and convict transportation were different from chattel slavery. Ndahiro chronicles well the current issues of racism in Ireland, though the connection of these to historical links between Ireland and the Caribbean remains unclear. Nonetheless, Ndahiro highlights the fact that understanding Ireland in the Caribbean may “affect the way I am perceived [in Ireland] in both a positive and negative sense” (p. 345).

*Ireland, Slavery and the Caribbean* shows the fruitful insight gained from this kind of comparative work; the contributors and editors should be commended for pointing out new directions for research.

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