

Slaves To A Myth:
Irish Indentured Servitude, African Slavery, and the Politics of White Nationalism

A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

A new myth is poised to enter the public consciousness as a popular misconception. It purports that the first slaves in the Americas were not Africans; that they were Irish men and women who were enslaved on English Caribbean sugar plantations in conditions much worse than any African had to endure. This myth is a deliberate lie. Irish immigrants to the Caribbean colonies were not slaves – they were a type of worker known as indentured servants. The Irish Slaves Myth does not seek to right an historical wrong against Irish people; instead, it has been created in order to diminish the African-American experience of slavery in the hyper-partisan political discourse of today. This thesis refutes the Irish Slaves Myth by directly examining 17th century British state papers in order to make clear the difference between an enslaved person and an indentured servant.

CHAPTER 1: THE IRISH SLAVES MYTH

Introduction

On March 25th, 1659, a petition was read out to the English Parliament as part of its daily business. The petition had come across the Atlantic Ocean from the small island of Barbados, a far-flung English Caribbean colony on the edge of the New World. Barbados was no isolated outpost of empire, however - it was home to several lucrative sugar plantations, a bustling port town, and a population that numbered over 30,000 colonists. Several Members of Parliament, already familiar with the island through prior or existing business connections, listened eagerly from their benches, but the petition did not bring good news. It alleged a very serious matter – that there were free-born Englishmen on the island living in a state of slavery.¹

The two originators of this petition – the magnificently-named Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle – had, along with some seventy other prisoners, been transported from England to Barbados three years prior for their collective part in a Royalist conspiracy. Now they were demanding their freedom, complaining that the group of prisoners to which they belonged, which included teenage boys and older men, were all being subjected to such hard labor and physical abuse on Barbados that their condition amounted to slavery. They called upon Parliament to curb the power of those Barbadian colonists that had subjected the prisoners to being traded between plantations like goods and chattel, sleeping in animal houses, and being whipped at whipping posts. Furthermore, their petition directly compared and likened these indignities to the state of slavery, something that was, in their view, against their inherent rights as free-born Englishmen. Foyle and Rivers argued that their condition was

¹Rivers, Marcellus. “England's Slavery, or Barbados Merchandize.”

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A74697.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. Accessed 2 February 2021. This is a digitized copy of the primary source.

unparalleled and an outright breach of English law.²

This petition is one of the first extant primary sources that refers to a concept of white slavery in the Americas. Almost four centuries later, sources like the Foyle/Rivers petition are the seeds of a modern white slavery myth that conflates a specific legal state known as *indentured servitude* (both voluntary and involuntary) with the generational chattel slavery imposed upon millions of Africans.

Since the turn of the third millennium, this myth-seed has been carefully nurtured by the right wing in the United States, who claim that white Europeans, mainly from Ireland, demographically made up the first slaves in the Americas. The myth alleges that white Irish slavery existed in the English Caribbean colonies prior to the arrival of enslaved Africans, that white slaves endured conditions much worse than any African did, and that the general public needs to be educated about this alarming “fact.”

For the past decade, this ugly and pervasive new myth has gained much traction online. It not only purports that the first slaves in the Americas were not black Africans, shipped in their hundreds of thousands across the Atlantic to feed a ravenous sugar industry that was growing in the Caribbean, but also falsely conflates the status of an indentured servant with that of a slave. This myth is shared in memes and on popular message boards in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. If the first slaves in the New World were Irish, the myth slyly asks, then why do African-Americans of today still make claims of institutional racism, seek reparations for slavery, and continue to equate themselves with their enslaved ancestors?

History, it seems, is not sacrosanct. Like any form of investigative scholarship, its veracity can be challenged, manipulated, and reshaped into new truths by those whose real interests lie outside academics. These 'new truths' are, in fact, new *mythologies* – they are constructs, often assembled in a

²Rivers', &c. Petition. House of Commons Journal Volume 7: 25 March 1659," in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 7, 1651-1660*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1802), 619-620. *British History Online*, accessed February 15, 2021, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/commons-jrnl/vol7/pp619-620>.

time and place far removed from those they claim to be examining, and often have little to do with a legitimate study of history, being more interested in propagating a radical social or political viewpoint in the world of today. As we in America know all too well, subjective truth and fact often become dearly held aspects of one's overall political identity, making it extremely difficult to counter these heartfelt myths with honest scholarship.

That does not mean that we should not try.

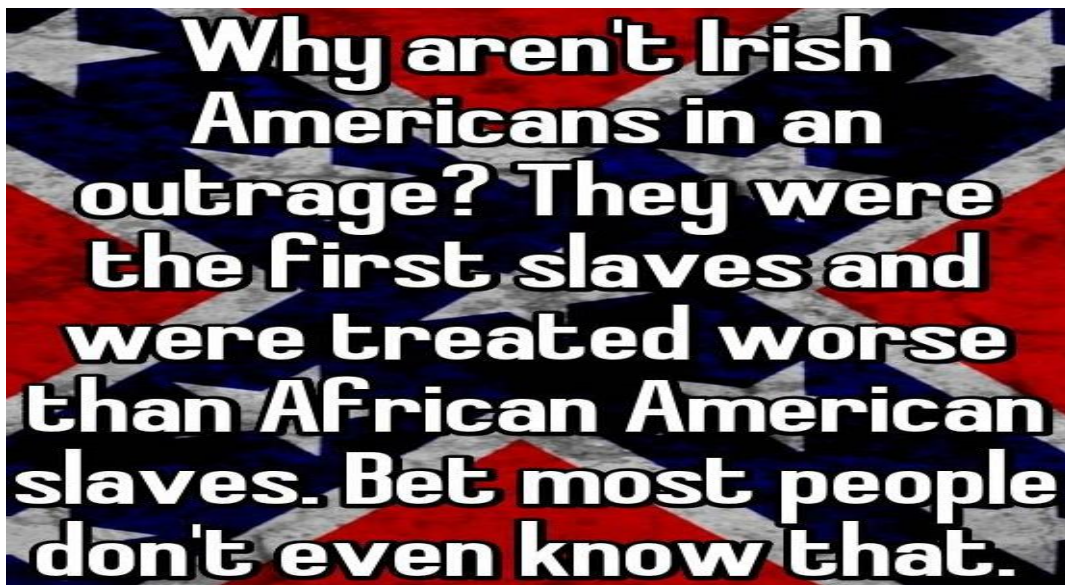


Illustration 1: A common form of the Irish Slaves Myth meme. The Confederate battle flag is used as a dog-whistle image that adds insult to the injurious slur against enslaved African-Americans. Retrieved from: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/04/19/how-myth-irish-slaves-became-favorite-meme-racists-online>

A Deliberate Fallacy

Although it began in print media, the myth has mushroomed online. It is disseminated through the Internet in the form of visually striking memes, often appearing on far-right or alt-right websites and message boards, spreading into the most popular news and celebrity sites through the comments sections, and has become so insidious that a simple Google search easily turns up many variations of the same meme. These memes make heavy use of dog-whistle imagery, such as the Confederate battle

flag; they display anachronistic elements designed to confuse or promote an emotional reaction from the reader; and they use dismissive language in order to advance their message. The proliferation of these memes across the Internet has not simply been confined to its darker corners either – the myth is now so widespread that it has appeared on popular Irish-American news websites, and even on the website of the Scientific American magazine.³ It is in danger of inculcating itself into the wider public consciousness as a benign common misconception, and is another example of how history can be weaponized by insincere actors to fit a contemporary political narrative. As the world saw in the storming of the United States Capitol by right-wing rioters in January of 2021, political attitudes have real-world consequences. This new alt-right construct is no longer a simple, if embellished, story about Irish slavery in the early modern Caribbean colonies – it is slickly manufactured, skillfully presented, and widely disseminated fallacy deliberately designed and promulgated to advance a specific political agenda in contemporary society. It is a Myth.

The Myth works by grounding itself in a nugget of truth. In the 17th century English Caribbean colonies, African slavery existed hand-in-hand with a status of work known as indentured servitude. An indentured servant was someone who sold their labor for a fixed period in order to repay the cost of transportation from one location to another, such as a trans-Atlantic voyage from the British Isles to one of the burgeoning Caribbean colonies. Indentured servants could be voluntary or involuntary - many Irish people became indentured servants in the English Caribbean colonies in the hopes of finding a new life, or were sentenced to periods of servitude on the island plantations as punishment for committing a crime at home. For the second half of the 17th century, indentured servants and enslaved Africans lived, worked, and interacted on the same plantations, but this does not imply equality of

³Scientific American. “We’re Probably All A Little Bit Irish – Especially In The Caribbean.” See the Update at the end of the article. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/it-8217-s-true-we-8217-re-probably-all-a-little-irish-mdash-especially-in-the-caribbean/>. For an example of the Myth being covered by an Irish-American website, see <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/ancestry/irish-roots-in-the-caribbean-run-deep>. Irish Central was founded in 2009, and according to its About Us page, receives upwards of three million site visitors per month, all of whom have potentially been exposed to the Myth.

either status or circumstance. There was a clear and notable disparity between the daily lives of a slave and an indentured servant; that disparity was enshrined both by law and in everyday practice on the plantations. Closer examination of the Early Modern period suggests that dividing societies into the binaries of slave and free is inaccurate because everyone was unfree to some extent – even aristocrats had their obligations to the Crown – but it is entirely accurate to conclude that an enslaved person was at the very bottom of society, lower than an indentured servant. Indentured servitude and slavery were two very different legal statuses in the seventeenth-century English Caribbean colonies – an indentured servant enjoyed rights and privileges that slaves did not.

The Irish Slaves Myth is in danger of becoming mainstream, of falling into the benign category of a common misconception that many people will simply assume to be true because they saw it while browsing the Internet. This represents a colossal victory for its perpetrators – by muddying the waters regarding the origins of slavery in the Americas, they will have succeeded in diminishing the African-American experience of that period in the hyper-partisan political world of today. It is true that history can, and should, be told from many different perspectives and voices, but in the case of the Irish Slaves Myth, the perspective that equates generational chattel slavery with a fixed period of indentured servitude is outright disingenuous.



Illustration 2: Note the use of a photograph in this meme to suggest correlation with an anachronous event. Also, by using the term “White History Month,” the meme seeks to diminish Black History Month. Retrieved from <https://limerick1914.medium.com/we-had-it-worse-eebe705c41a>. This website does not support the Myth, and actively works against it.

Origins and Development of the Myth

In 2000, the book *To Hell Or Barbados: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ireland* was published by the O'Brien Press. Written by Sean O' Callaghan, who died in the same year of its publication, the book posited that upwards of 50,000 Irish men, women, and children were transplanted to Barbados to be slaves on the growing sugar plantations during the 1650s.⁴ To be sure, it was not the first book that suggested that white slavery had occurred in the Americas, but after its publication, the book's claims sprouted and mushroomed in disparate corners of the Internet in a way that very few had done before. It was especially embraced by the far right, appearing on conspiracy websites like InfoWars, and was noted by anti-racism organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center.⁵ It was reissued in 2013 as an

⁴Profile of Sean O'Callaghan.

<http://homepage.eircom.net/~killavullen/Famous%20People/Sean%20O%27Callaghan/Sean%20Ocal.htm>. This is the website of Sean O'Callaghan's home parish in County Kerry, although it states that O'Callaghan had made his home for many years in Malta. Specific numeric claims made in: O'Callaghan, Sean. *To Hell or Barbados*. O'Brien Press, 2000, introduction.

⁵InfoWars. “Irish Man Demands Reparations For Slavery!” <http://tv.infowars.com/index/display/id/6140>. This is an

e-book, showing a continuing market for these kinds of modern myth-constructs. The book continues to be cited in papers by various authors – at the time of writing, Google Scholar reports that *To Hell Or Barbados* has been cited almost ninety separate times.⁶ It is not the only book to have been written on the subject – other examples include Rhetta Akamatsu's *The Irish Slaves: Slavery, Indenture, and Contract Labor Among Irish Immigrants* and the Don Jordan/Michael Walsh collaboration *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America*. None of these writers are historians – Akamatsu describes herself as an “author and journalist”⁷, while Jordan and Walsh likewise have backgrounds in journalism.⁸ Although more honest than the O' Callaghan book, the Jordan-Walsh collaboration still uses the problematic word 'slavery' in its title.

Goal and Outline of the Thesis

The primary goal of this thesis is to refute the Irish Slaves Myth through scholarship of extant seventeenth century records. In order to accomplish this, the distinction between an indentured servant and a slave must be made clear – the legal and lived differences between the two groups are fundamental to understanding this. Therefore, this thesis must examine several factors of life on seventeenth-century Barbados. It will be rooted in close examination of primary sources, but will also delve into neighboring disciplines such as archaeology and linguistics to outline plantation life and sugar production methods. This will establish important context for the intertwined working lives and daily close encounters that occurred between indentured servants and enslaved people. Thereafter, a

InfoWars “news” video propagating the Irish Slaves Myth. For the SPLC's feature on the Myth, see “How The Myth of the 'Irish Slaves' Became A Favorite Meme of Racists Online.” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/04/19/how-myth-irish-slaves-became-favorite-meme-racists-online>.

⁶Google Scholar search result.

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=12711156890628534481&as_sdt=2005&sciodt=0,5&hl=en

⁷Rhetta's Books – And Other Sundry Writing. <https://rhettasbooks.com/>. This is the official website of Rhetta Akamatsu, and the location of her blog.

⁸The Viney Agency author profiles. http://www.thevineyagency.com/author_donjordan.html, and http://www.thevineyagency.com/author_michaelwalsh.html. These are links to their bios on the website of their writing agency, and make no mention of any background in History for either author.

synopsis of Irish immigration to Barbados will establish just what an indentured servant was and how an “indenture” worked, and will outline the drastic demographic shift that occurred on the island with the influx of enslaved Africans in the 1640s. Furthermore, we will see the strange stratum of society that was occupied by Irish people on Barbados during this time - above slaves, but below the English planter class - and it will be shown how the social and working relationships between slave and servant were much closer than might be imagined. This close relationship is something that the Myth always hails as proof of its assertions, but examination of primary sources like memoirs and official letters will show a clear disparity between the two groups. Using primary sources, the differing legal statuses of both indentured servant and slave will thus be made clear, conclusively showing that the Irish Slaves Myth is both factually incorrect and a grotesque distortion of history.



Illustration 3: Another photograph attempts to draw a comparison with Irish slavery in the Americas. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_slaves_myth.

The push-back against the Myth by legitimate scholarship is already ongoing. Most of the historical writing countering the Myth has been in the form of academic papers and journal articles, and many of these are of excellent quality. Scholars have also tackled the question of the Irish Slave Myth

from the perspective of archaeology and linguistics. Matthew C. Reilly, an anthropological archaeologist working in City College New York, has written several papers on Barbados, including a piece with Jerome Handler entitled “Contesting White Slavery In the Caribbean.” This paper goes into important detail on the differences between slaves and indentured servants and speculates on the origins of the term 'white slave.'⁹ It outlines the complicated layers of an already-stratified society in Barbados, giving nuance to the interactions between indentured servants (divided into 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' categories) and slaves, specifying how each could be treated under the law. For an Irish-centric perspective, another of Reilly's papers (“The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, and Legacy”) situates the Irish experience of indentured servitude in Barbados against the rise of powerful sugar plantations that, over the course of the seventeenth century, gobbled up most of the arable land on the island and contributed to the rise of a poor Irish underclass.¹⁰ This thesis, then, adds its voice to those, building upon previous work to refute the Myth. By grounding itself in heavy examination of extant seventeenth century primary sources that will clearly illustrate the difference between an indentured servant and a slave, it seeks to confront one of the methods of silencing contemporary Black claims to systemic racism and inequality in the United States today. That is the true core of the Irish Slaves Myth – it has nothing to do with Irish pride, but by appealing to Irish nationalism, finds a ready audience in many Irish-Americans willing to believe it.

⁹Reilly, Matthew and Handler, Jerome. “Contesting White Slavery in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and European Indentured Servants in Seventeenth Century Barbados.” *New West Indian Guide* 91. 2017. Pages 30-55. November 9, 2020.

¹⁰Reilly, Matthew C. “The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, Legacy.” *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 47-63. The University of the West Indies Press, 2015.



James Woods 
@RealJamesWoods



#Reparations

**American Colonies in 1619 were
100 white children from Ireland.
Truth Matters.**

The first slaves imported into the American colonies were 100 White children in 1619, four months before the arrival of a the first shipment of Black slaves. Many were brought from Ireland, where the law held that it was "no more sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute".



King James II, followed by Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, sold over 500,000 Irish Catholics into slavery throughout the 1600's onto plantations in the West Indies Islands of Antigua, Montserrat, Jamaica, Barbados, as well as Virginia and New England. Irish slaves were less expensive than African, and treated with more cruelty & death.

In the 17th Century, from 1600 until 1699, there were many more Irish sold as slaves than Africans. There are records of Irish slaves well into the 18th Century. Many never made it off the ships. According to written record, in at least one incident 132 slaves, men, women, and children, were dumped overboard to drown because ships' supplies were running low. They were drowned because the insurance would pay for an "accident," but not if the slaves were allowed to starve.

**White Slavery
History Denied, Covered Up, & Marginalized**

6:03 PM · Apr 17, 2019



12.2K



8.6K people are Tweeting about this

Illustration 4: The actor James Woods retweeted a meme of the Myth in April 2019. Woods has over two million followers on Twitter. The tweet has since been deleted. Again, note the use of a distressing photograph to draw a correlation with events of the 17th century. Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/BornandbreadP/status/1342826385698664457/photo/1>

Research Methodology

In researching this thesis, it was most important to access as many primary sources as possible, but the kinds of available sources are limited. There are not many extant records left by individual Barbadians regarding their lives and how they lived them, but we are fortunate that one main primary source – Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*, published in London in 1657 – does outline the social transformation of the island as the plantations began to take up more and

more land at the expense of everyone else. This book has been carefully dissected by many scholars, and although Ligon himself does not specifically condemn the institution of slavery, his book is a valuable resource regarding the attitudes of many English colonists towards slaves and indentured servants. He does lament the conditions that servants had to work in, musing that many plantation owners gave their slaves easier lives because a life-long slave was considered a more important financial investment than a temporary indentured servant.¹¹ Plantation owners worked their indentured servants harder, according to Ligon, precisely because their labor was only available for a fixed amount of time. The plantation owners were determined to get their money's worth out of their servants because at the end of their indenture, the servants became free to resume their lives again. Conversely, freedom was only possible for a slave if they were manumitted. This is one of the core arguments that refute the Myth – that even though slaves and servants may have lived side by side and shared the same work, an indentured servant was able to interact with power in a way that an enslaved person could never even hope to do.

The other group of primary sources that will be drawn on for this thesis are the official state papers of the colonial government of Barbados during the seventeenth century. These are plentiful, and many have been digitized into online databases. The biggest is British History Online, a large collection of over one thousand primary and secondary documents pertaining to British imperial history, including its early modern colonial history. The vast majority of primary sources for this thesis are drawn from the database entitled “Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America, and West Indies,” spread over forty-one different volumes.¹² This enormous body of work is in turn broken down into annual and monthly

¹¹Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Page 43.

¹²British History Online. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/cal-state-papers—colonial--america-west-indies>. A major criticism of this thesis might be the fact that it was written during the 2021 Covid lockdown, and does not physically access any state papers in either Barbados or the UK to support its arguments. Instead, it relies exclusively on a digitized primary database, and it seems apt to consider whether an entirely online writing process is as valuable to a baby historian as reading and interpreting actual documents held in the hand. This debate has been growing in recent years, and given that the Covid-19 pandemic has stymied travel abroad, it might be argued that something is lost from the work if the historian never visits the places they write about. The Irish Slaves Myth, though its gestation took place in the medium of print, really came to life when it materialized in the online world. It still uses digital propaganda to

entries – a mixture of official letters and missives between the colonial administration and their superiors in London, letters between the power brokers of Barbados and neighboring islands, records of laws passed by the Assembly of Barbados, and some public records of agreements between companies that conducted business on the island. It is a largely untapped well of records that could prove crucial to understanding the social history of the English Caribbean colonies. This, therefore, is where the main intervention of this thesis lies – a deep study of this particular archive will, using selected primary sources, prove the fact that that slaves and servants were differentiated both in law and in society. When assembled and presented, the sources from the Calendar of State Papers will conclusively show that servants could not be enslaved at all, and, depending on the conditions of their indenture, were free to leave at the end of their tenure, often with coin in hand.

CHAPTER 2: THE SUGAR INDUSTRY IN 17th CENTURY BARBADOS

Some time in the late summer of 1647, the merchant ship *Achilles* docked in Carlisle Bay on the island of Barbados. Aboard *Achilles* was a sixty-year-old Englishman named Richard Ligon, down on his luck as a result of choosing to support the losing side the recently ended first English Civil War, and who was now seeking a new life in the Caribbean colonies. Originally, he had intended to sail for Antigua, but a plague had broken out aboard *Achilles*. Ligon disembarked on Barbados in the company of a former Royalist colonel named Thomas Modiford, who himself had come to Barbados to oversee a

infect the public consciousness, and fighting its spread can seem as monumental as fighting a real-life pandemic. Therefore, if the Myth can be fought by using digitized archives, then it seems sensible to do so. Digitization has made these archives more accessible and equitable, especially to graduate students or faculty who do not have research or financial support. As the world grows more digitally inter-connected, equity of access to these online databases becomes ever more important, since these sources directly inform methodology and research. The depths of the Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America, and West Indies database are still online, and remain to be plumbed by anyone – historian or not – who has an interest in the subject, which implies hope that historical truth will not be lost in today's information-saturated society. Even though it was not possible to visit Barbados to assist in the researching of this thesis, the research itself was still possible because the seventeenth-century Caribbean lives on among the megabytes and HTML of the twenty-first century. The truth is waiting for us in the digital space, and it must be drawn out into the light. We may not be able to walk the land we write about, but for as long as the records remain, we can still bring it to life.

sugar plantation that was part-owned by his brother-in-law back in England. Modiford's brother-in-law, a prosperous London merchant named Thomas Kendall, had previously invested a full half-share in a Barbados sugar plantation owned by a man named William Hilliard. Ligon's purpose, then, was to assist Modiford in the running of the plantation that Kendall (Modiford's brother-in-law) had invested in, in case Modiford "should miscarry the Voyage."¹³

Richard Ligon lived on Barbados for over two years before contracting some kind of tropical disease that began with a fever. He took to his bed in Thomas Modiford's house, and the distemper progressed to severe constipation and internal pain, malaise, oliguria, and a kidney stone. He recorded that his ailment left him seemingly dead, but when he recovered, he did so quickly.¹⁴ Fearful that his health would continue to fail if he remained in the Caribbean, Ligon returned to England in April 1650, and thereafter wrote a memoir entitled *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. In the memoir, he gave an initial description of the island, drawn from memory as *Achilles* sailed along the shoreline. "The Plantations appeared to us one above another, like several stories in stately buildings," he wrote, recording that the sight "afforded us a large proportion of delight."¹⁵ Those plantations that so delighted Ligon were still there after he left, growing larger as they absorbed one another to increase the available land for growing sugar cane. Over the remaining course of the seventeenth century, the plantations swelled like ripening fruits, expanding outward in space and exerting increased influence on both their surroundings and on the lives of those people who interacted with them. By the end of the century, the sugar plantations, and the men who owned them, had carved up the interior of the island for themselves like it was a Sunday roast.

That sugar became such a lucrative commodity is the fulcrum upon which seventeenth-century Barbadian history turns. It galvanized conglomeration of the plantations, which swallowed up the best

¹³Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Page 22.

¹⁴Ibid, p.118.

¹⁵Ibid, p.21.

land on the island, leaving less and less land for those indentured servants to take possession of once they completed their terms of service. With sugar cultivation increasing yearly to match a rising demand at home, the industry needed a larger labor force to work the *ingenio* machines and cultivate the crop, and found the slave industry to be a crucial factor in its overall productivity. Like magnets, the plantations inexorably drew tens of thousands of slaves into their fields over the course of the seventeenth century. Sugar cultivation was highly profitable but so labor-intensive that a constant stream of plantation workers was always needed – at first, these workers were indentured servants, but later, plantation owners brought in enslaved Africans to work their land.

It is worth noting that this chapter will likely show a semantic support of the Myth, since it will be seen that the processes of sugar production were very likely carried out by both servant and slave. It is an easy thing to suggest, as the Myth does, that those doing the same work must mean that they of the same social status, or that it is hair-splitting to attempt to make clear a distinction between the two groups. Later, it will be shown that this fallacious conflation is not accurate.

How Sugar Harvesting Worked

A Barbadian sugar plantation was not a small family business. It was an industry unto itself, requiring many workers to plant, cultivate, harvest, and process the sugar cane. It was both labor and capital intensive. Likewise, a plantation was not just a large plot of land covered with the crop – it would have needed specialized buildings to work efficiently, such as a boiling house, a curing house, stables for working animals like cattle and horses, and accommodation for the owner and all the workers.

There were several reasons why sugar was a good choice of cash crop on Barbados. Sugar cane (genus *Saccharum*) is a member of the grass family and requires 12-18 months to grow from seed to maturity. The grass flowers atop a tall, bamboo-like stem. In mid-seventeenth century Barbados,

growing the cane required large fields and constant hard physical labor in order to cultivate and harvest it. Because Barbados does not have sharp changes or contrasts in temperature, the growing season was able to last year-round. The planting was done between July and December, when there was more chance of rain – the cane was never harvested during this time, as wet sugar cane quickly rotted where it lay. To maximize profits, the life cycle of the cane was carefully monitored.

When it eventually was harvested, the grass was separated from the cane and discarded, and the cane itself was quickly taken to the plantation mills. A crushing machine named an *ingenio* (plural *ingenios*) was used to compress the cane as quickly as possible before it got too dry. These mill-powered machines, usually pulled by yoked cattle, had been in use in Europe since the 1400s, being used to crush olives or flax with large, heavy wooden rollers, between which was passed the sugar cane. The juice released from the crushing process was gathered in special cauldrons named “coppers,” which were stored in their own buildings in a straight line under fire-pits in order to keep them at various levels of heat. Large coppers of a low heat led down a line to smaller coppers of increasing heat. The cane juice was transferred from copper to copper, moving from low heat to high heat. Along the way, various distilling processes including clarification (getting rid of the solids in the liquid by letting them fall to the bottom or straining them out) and evaporation (boiling the liquid so that it was reduced down to syrup) took place, with the juice being ladled from copper to copper by the plantation

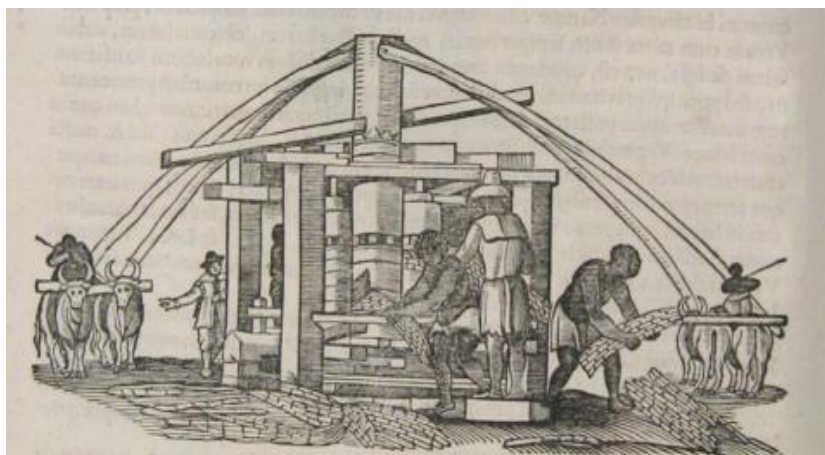


Illustration 5: Ox-Driven Sugar Mill (*ingenio*) in Brazil, woodcut illustration. Enslaved Africans are passing the sugar cane between the *ingenio*'s rollers. Page 108 from Willem Piso, "*Historia Naturalis Brasiliae*." Amsterdam, 1648.

workers. After the last copper, the sugar was poured out and cooled quickly (“struck”) by being put into a separate container and dunked into cold water.¹⁶

Further refinements of the now-crystallized damp sugar altered the juice into brown sugar (called “muscovado”) or white sugar, and any low-quality cane juice left over from boiling was mixed with the impurities from the coppers to ferment, creating alcoholic rum. The plantation workers who drove these processes were not just simple farm-hands – a certain amount of skill and experience was needed to know when to transfer the cane juice between the heated coppers. Early or late transfer risked destabilizing or burning the entire batch, and spoiled batches naturally ate into overall profits. Whether the workers were indentured servants or slaves, or both groups working together, it can be imagined that the process of sugar production was stiflingly difficult in the already hot climate of the Caribbean.¹⁷

As the sugar industry on Barbados mushroomed in the 1640s, plantations grew larger and larger in response, thus necessitating a dramatic increase in their labor forces, even running into the hundreds of hands.¹⁸ By the time Richard Ligon left Barbados in 1650, he noted that the plantations “were much better'd” in their proficiency in working with sugar.¹⁹ One of the sugar plantations he was familiar with had dramatically swelled in value from £400 to £7,000 over a six year period.²⁰

¹⁶Hicks, Dan. “The Garden of the World: An Historical Archaeology of Sugar Landscapes in the Eastern Caribbean.” BAR International Series 1632. 2007.

¹⁷Ligon goes into much more detail about the farming of sugar in his book. As well as sketches and plans of *ingenio* machines, a boiling house, still house and curing house, he also wrote about the specific dimensions of *ingenio* machines that he was familiar with, the care and keeping of animals were used to power the mills, and detailed the processes by which Muscovado (brown) sugar and Lump (white) sugar was made. See Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Page 85-96.

¹⁸Ibid, p.55.

¹⁹Ibid, p.85.

²⁰Ibid, p.86.

Demographic Changes on the Plantations

In parallel to the growth of the sugar industry, the arrival of such an influx of enslaved Africans meant that enormous demographic changes were wrought on Barbados. For the first two decades of the colony's existence, many tens of thousands of people from Britain and Ireland arrived in the Caribbean colonies, often as indentured servants – a worker who sold their labor for a fixed period, usually between five and seven years, in exchange for the cost of the trans-Atlantic crossing and a job with food and board. At the end of their indenture, these workers were often paid a stipend and/or given a parcel of land elsewhere on the island as their own property. This made indentured servitude an attractive proposition for all kinds of people from the lower strata of society in Ireland and Britain, especially those displaced in war or as a result of the ongoing colonization of Ireland.²¹ However, as the demand for more workers in the sugar industry grew, more and more African-born slaves were brought to Barbados to fill those gaps. By the turn of the eighteenth century, the number of African and Afro-Caribbean people on Barbados had doubled, while the number of white people had halved.²²

Barbados had not always been so prosperous. The first English settlement had begun on the island scarcely twenty years prior to Ligon's arrival, and plantations were a part of the island's economy from the outset. Early Barbadian planters grew a variety of cash crops such as tobacco, cotton, ginger, tropical fruits, and indigo, as well as engaging in their own subsistence farming, but most planters were unable to prosper *without* devoting at least some of their land to cash crops that they could sell on for profit. Sugar was not grown on a large scale on Barbados until the 1640s – prior to this, planters did experiment with growing it, and were helped along by visitors to the island who were familiar with the crop and who shared their experiences of farming sugar on other colonies. These people were not

²¹It was also possible to be sentenced to periods of indentured servitude on Barbados for crime at home. This was referred to as getting “Barbadosed.”

²²Reilly, Matthew C. “The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, Legacy.” *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 47-63. The University of the West Indies Press, 2015.

always English – Portugal and Spain had been cultivating sugar in the Americas since the mid-sixteenth century.²³ The 1640s marked a shift in the colonial economy of Barbados – as the sugar market boomed, planters began to devote more and more land to its cultivation, and sought to expand their labor force by bringing in more enslaved Africans, radically changing the racial demographics of the island.²⁴ At the same time, a now-distinct planter class was beginning to buy up and amalgamate the existing plantations, converting more and more land towards the cultivation of sugar.

Prior to the arrival of slaves, solving the problems of the labor shortage was not confined to the planter class of Barbados. They were rich; then, as now, money proved to be a powerful political lubricant. The planters were able to wield political influence back in London, sending many petitions and missives back home calling for their labor demands to be satisfied. Eventually, the English government's Council for Foreign Plantations began to actively consider how best to move more and more people from the British Isles to the Caribbean. Although constrained by law, the Council nevertheless proved to have all the scheming *nous* of any modern bureaucracy – they advised Parliament to encourage upstanding people to emigrate to the colonies through public outreach, especially ministers who could moralize the uncivilized settlers, but also recommended that some kind of law be passed that would also transport vagrants and other undesirables across the ocean.²⁵ The sugar industry, and the income it generated, always needed to be kept moving forward.

²³Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Page 85.

²⁴Reilly, Matthew. “The Irish In Barbados: Landscape, Labor, and Legacy.” Chapter 3 of the book *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Donnell, et al. University of the West Indies, 2015.

²⁵“Instructions for the Council Appointed for Foreign Plantations. ” (December 1st 1660) *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies* (hereafter *CSPC*): *Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 492-498. At this point in time, the mass movement of African slaves to the sugar plantations in the Americas was already well underway and the numbers of indentured servants was dropping quickly – what we see here is an arm of the English government suggesting ways to arrest and reverse the latter trend.

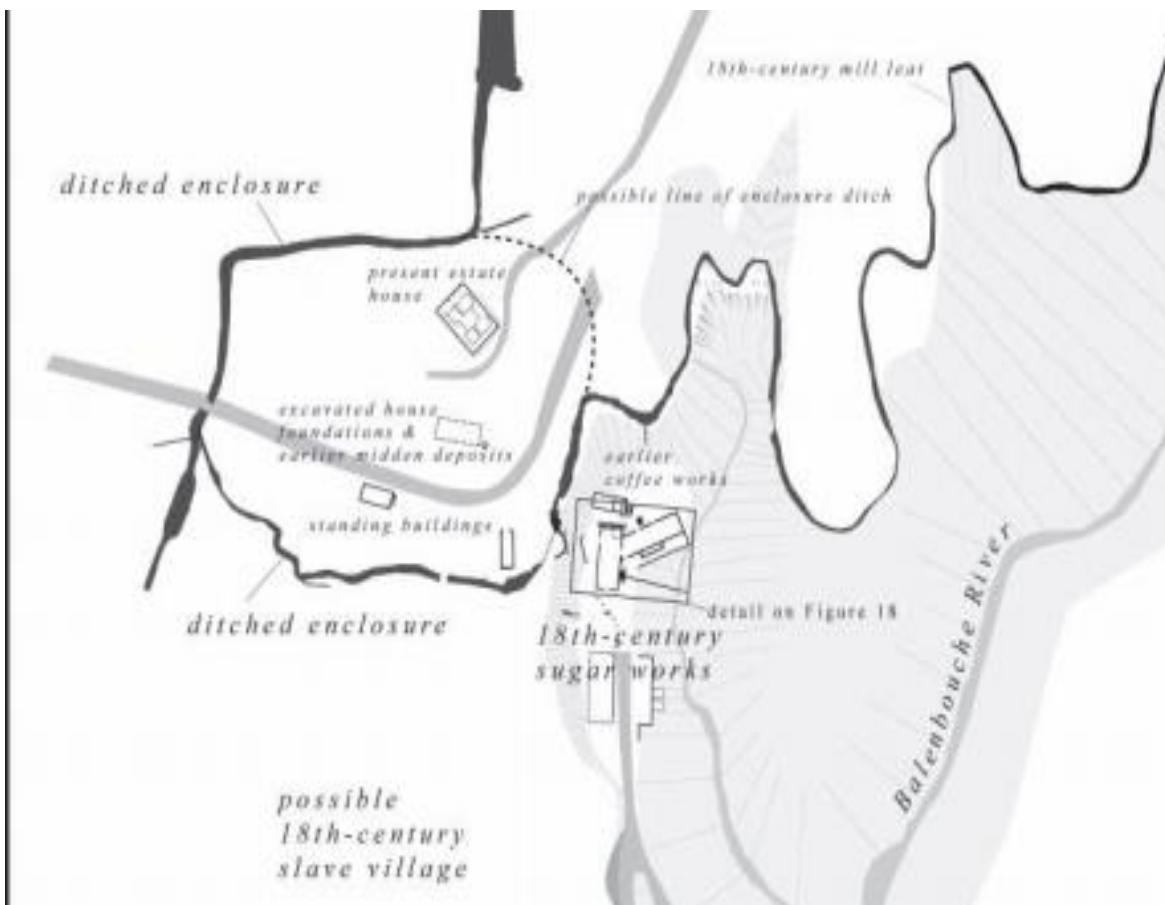


Illustration 6: Cropped picture showing possible sugar plantation layout. *Original picture from Dan Hicks' "The Garden of the World," BAR International Series 1632, published 2007. Page 54.*

To achieve these enormous profits, Barbadian planters imported tens of thousands of enslaved Africans to the island, putting them to back-breaking work in the sweltering cane fields. When the Africans came to Barbados, however, they joined a significant labor force that was already present in the plantations. These were white people from all over the British Isles, often from the island of Ireland, who were living and working on Barbados under a labor contract known as an *indenture*. In order to further understand the difference between an indentured servant and a slave, we must next examine the status and lives of the former group.

CHAPTER 3: THE IRISH IN BARBADOS

In early March of 1686, an Irishman named Cornelius Bryan lay dying in his home on Barbados. He was not as rich as an English plantation owner, but he was quite prosperous by Irish immigrant standards. He was married to a woman named Margaret, who had borne him six surviving children. The Bryan family lived in a mansion house on twenty-two acres of land. It was far more than one man could work alone, so Bryan owned eleven enslaved Africans to assist him in the running and maintaining of his property. When his last will was made on the 12th of March of that year, Cornelius Bryan bequeathed all that he owned in life – the house, the land, and the slaves – to his wife and six children. Yet, thirty years prior, Cornelius Bryan was a convicted criminal – he had been sentenced to be lashed twenty-one times and then exiled from Barbados for publicly declaring that he would cheerfully cannibalize any and all Englishmen. His return to the island, and subsequent prosperity in later life, stand in stark contrast to the notion that all Irish immigrants to the Caribbean were a downtrodden, oppressed lot.²⁶

It must be remembered, however, that the ultimate prosperity of Cornelius Bryan represents an outlier in the broad story of Irish immigrants to Barbados in the seventeenth century. In order to advance its argument that Irish people were akin to, or treated worse than, enslaved Africans, the Myth often exaggerates downward the status of Irish settlers in the early modern Americas. It is true to say that Irish immigrants occupied the lower rungs of society, being held in deep suspicion by the ruling planter class, but it is not accurate to suggest that this experience was universal and ubiquitous. Before the sugar plantations absorbed all the best land and made indentured servitude obsolete by importing so many thousands of chattel slaves, there were certain avenues of upward mobility for those Irish settlers who were shrewd enough, or lucky enough, to take advantage of them as Cornelius Bryan did.

²⁶Block, Kristen. “Subjects Without An Empire: The Irish In The Early Modern Caribbean.” *Past and Present*, no. 210 (Feb.2011). The original will (document **RB6/40 f. 398**) is held by the Barbados Department of Archives, inaccessible to me during Covid.

Irish people had been coming to Barbados since the 1620s. Their homeland had suffered through a major decade-long rebellion and war at the end of the sixteenth century, and in its aftermath the English government instituted the Plantations of Ireland – the confiscation of Irish-owned land by the Crown and the granting of that land to settlers from the island of Britain. Irish Gaelic culture was in its twilight. The great clans were either destroyed or evolving into a new Anglo-Irish ruling class, something encouraged by the English government who portrayed Gaelic culture as barbaric and backward, and sought to negate any expression of it. The demographic shift in Ireland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was startling – during the first century of English colonies in the New World, more English people colonized Ireland than they did Chesapeake Bay.²⁷

There was always a gender imbalance represented in the Irish immigrants to Barbados. The English government often sought to rectify this by pushing the transportation of women across the ocean – from anywhere in the British Isles, and without their consent if necessary. It was thought that the presence of women on Barbados would curb the rebellious nature of Irish men, many of whom had been sentenced to periods of servitude in the Caribbean colonies following the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland.²⁸

In Ireland, the Plantations displaced many thousands of individuals and families, creating a surge of destitute Irish people stripped of their property. Many of these people chose to take whatever they had left and cross the Atlantic in search of a new life. It is difficult to put an exact figure on the numbers of Irish people who came to Barbados in the first half of the seventeenth century, but it has been estimated that by 1650 there were about 30,000 white people living on the island, the vast majority of whom came from the British Isles.²⁹ Before 1680, over half of all Irish emigrants went to

²⁷O'Reilly, William. "Ireland In The Atlantic World: Migration And Cultural Transfer." *The Cambridge History of Ireland*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. p.385-408.

²⁸Doan, James. "The Irish In The Caribbean." *CAHSS Faculty Presentations, Proceedings, Lectures, and Symposia*. 278. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cahss_facpres/278

²⁹Reilly, Matthew C. "The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, Legacy." *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 47-63. The University of the West Indies Press, 2015.

the Caribbean, in part because of anti-Catholic sentiments in New England.³⁰ Ligon, our contemporary source, reckoned that at the time he was writing (1650) there were over 50,000 people living on Barbados, not including enslaved Africans.³¹

Indentured Servants

Three-quarters of Irish immigrants to the Caribbean colonies came as indentured servants. An indentured servant was someone who sold their labor for a fixed period of time in exchange for the cost of passage and for bed and board at the destination. Indentured servitude was not necessarily working in the sugar fields of the Caribbean colonies – it could involve working aboard a ship for several seasons, for example - but it did usually involve some kind of reciprocal relationship between the parties engaged in the indenture. It was also not unheard of for someone to indenture themselves in return for learning a trade.³² As well as the cost of passage, the indentured servant bound for the sugar plantations on Barbados could also expect their contract to include some kind of bonus payment when it eventually ended – in land, in animals, or in coin, as a means to help them settle elsewhere on the island and thus keep the colony going.³³ An indentured servant was also not guaranteed of staying in the same place for the duration of their period of work – contracts, and their remaining periods of time, could be bought and sold among planters, but it is unclear whether the consent of the contracted person was required in order to buy out their contract.

Nevertheless, the trade in contracts would have made it easy to commodify the indentured

³⁰O'Reilly, William. "Ireland In The Atlantic World: Migration And Cultural Transfer." *The Cambridge History of Ireland*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. p.385-408.

³¹Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Page 43.

³²"Minutes of a Committee for Providence Island." (May 27, 1633) *CSPC: Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 165-166. This particular source declares that one Edward Williams is taking on an indenture for three years aboard a ship named *Falcon*, whose master will teach Edward the skills of navigating at sea. Even though the indenture dates from 1633 and was made in Providence, Rhode Island, it illustrates the kind of reciprocal arrangement that often underpinned the relationships between indentured servants and those who took them on.

³³Reilly, Matthew and Handler, Jerome. "Contesting White Slavery in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and European Indentured Servants in Seventeenth Century Barbados." *New West Indian Guide* 91. 2017. Pages 30-55.

servants, to dehumanize them by comparing and reducing them and their labor to goods of trade. This may explain why, as archaeology suggests, that early close working relationships between the planters and their servants gave way to a more hierarchical society once the money began to flow.³⁴ There are several letters extant, written by merchants in Britain to their factors in the Caribbean, instructing them to trade the services of Irish youths in exchange for more mundane items like shipping equipment.³⁵ At first glance, this commodification appears to be a form of slavery, but we must remember that it was not the person being traded, it was the labor contract. To argue this is not semantics – it is one thing to buy a human being, body and soul, to do with as you will, but quite another to buy the labor of another person, who is possessed of inherent rights and protections under the law, for a fixed period of time. Indentured servants had the right to sell their labor, and many did so voluntarily. The two forms of commodification of human beings – servant and slave - were very different.

Voluntary Indenture

To many people displaced by war and colonization, selling themselves into indentured servitude was an attractive proposition. It gave them a new start in an established colony far from home, and promised the ownership of new property upon completion of the contract. There was always a demand for workers, right from the beginning of the colony, and the Barbadian planters were not shy about petitioning Parliament for more whenever they started to run short. When bad weather hit the colony and disrupted sugar production in 1656, for example, the planters sent a frantic message to London seeking speedy resupply of both animal and human resources.³⁶

³⁴Douglas V. Armstrong & Matthew C. Reilly (2014). “The Archaeology of Settler Farms and Early Plantation Life in Seventeenth-Century Barbados.” *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*. 35:3, pp.399-417.

³⁵“Petition of William Penoyre, merchant, concerning a factor of his at Barbadoes, to be referred to Committee for Foreign Affairs for their report.” (4th February 1653) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 398-400.

³⁶“Petition of Martin Noell, Wm. Chamberlain, Col. Draxe, Col. Hooper, Peter Leere, Capt. Manyford, and Mr. Batsen, merchants, planters, and traders to Barbadoes, to the Lord Protector and Council.” (18th November 1656) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 450-452. See specifically the fourth entry for November 18th of the year 1656, but also note the other petitions from other Caribbean colonies for similar resupply on the same pages. Note also in this document the distinction made between servants and slaves.

The trans-Atlantic crossing would not have been easy. The average voyage took between a month and six weeks, and certainly all the hazards of being cooped up in close quarters with many other people – sickness, disease, frayed tempers – were present, alongside the dangers of ocean storms. Janet Schaw, an eighteenth-century diarist, traveled in 1774 from Scotland to the West Indies on a ship full of emigrating indentured servants. She was shocked at how little food they had to eat and the conditions they had to live in, remarking “It is hardly possible for human nature to be so depraved as to treat fellow creatures in such a manner for so little gain.”³⁷ However, the ocean crossing for these indentured servants was not the same for enslaved Africans, who had to somehow survive being tightly chained to wooden planks so that free movement was almost impossible, coupled with the strong chance of being isolated from family or familiar cultural groups.³⁸ One wonders how much more shocked Schaw would have been had she ever seen the lower decks of a dedicated slave ship, with many hundreds of naked and traumatized human beings shackled together in cramped conditions, usually arranged lying down with almost no headroom. Even before their arrival on Barbados, distinctions like these were visible between slaves and indentured servants.

Working on a sugar plantation was no easy life. Those Irish indentured servants that survived the ocean crossing to Barbados could look forward to long days under a hot sun, coupled with the possibility of poor living standards. As we saw in the Rivers/Foyle petition, many plantation owners treated their indentured servants very badly. Ligon, too, noted that a servant's lot was usually dependent on the whims of their master. “If the masters be cruel,” he wrote, “the servants have very wearisome and miserable lives.”³⁹ It was noted by an anonymous writer in 1667 that many indentured servants – Irish people among them - were at work “in the parching sun, without shirt, shoe, or stocking.”⁴⁰

³⁷Schaw, Janet. *Journal of a Lady of Quality*. Yale University Press, 1921 edition. Page 53.

³⁸As an example, the Library of Congress holds prints (first published 1788) of the interior of the *Brookes*, a ship that made six slave trading voyages between 1780-1800. Viewable at: <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a34658/>.

³⁹Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Page 44.

⁴⁰“Some observations on the island of Barbadoes.” No specific date given except that this paper was recorded in 1667. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 520-534.

Protests at working conditions could result in brutal beatings, something that Ligon claimed to have witnessed personally, but he also noted that, at the time of his memoir, the lives of servants were becoming better. “Discreeter and better-natured men” were, in his opinion, coming to rule in Barbados, increasing the quality of food, clothing, and housing being given to the island's indentured servants.⁴¹

Involuntary Indenture

Not all Irish people came voluntarily, of course. Like nineteenth-century transportation to Australia, it was possible in the seventeenth century to be “Barbadosed” - that is, sentenced to a period of servitude on one of the English Caribbean colonies. Prior to the 1640s, most Irish immigrants to Barbados were voluntary indentured servants, but in the aftermath of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (that centered around the two English Civil Wars of the 1640s), thousands of defeated prisoners of war were Barbadosed. About 12,000 of them were Irish soldiers or clansmen who had fought on the losing side, and it seems that the plight of these men forms the initial core of the Irish Slaves Myth, being a focus of the aforementioned O'Callaghan book *To Hell or Barbados*. In a September 1649 letter to the Speaker of Parliament, Oliver Cromwell famously wrote that he considered transportation to Barbados “a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches” following his army's razing of the walled town of Drogheda during his brutal military campaign in Ireland.⁴² His dehumanizing language notwithstanding, Cromwell also couched his oppression of Irish people in religious terms, and this suspicion of Catholicism followed those Irish indentured servants across the ocean.

It was not just prisoners of war who came involuntarily, either – those guilty of crimes at home could be sentenced to transportation to the Caribbean for a duration of time, long or short. In October 1654, the English Council of State recommended that all English, Scottish or Irish prisoners in

⁴¹Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Also page 44.

⁴²Carlyle, Thomas. “Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches.” Wiley & Putnam. New York, 1845. Pages 381-387. Accessed online at https://www.loc.gov/law/mlr/Lieber_Collection-pdf/Cromwell_Vol-1.pdf

Dorchester jail be Barbadosed or sent to the New England colonies.⁴³ Transport was not confined to those prisoners taken on land, either – being captured at sea and accused of piracy was also cause for involuntary indenture.⁴⁴

The mid-seventeenth century also saw an epidemic of child kidnappings in Ireland. As startling as it sounds, thousands of young Irish children were kidnapped, put aboard ships, and brought to the Caribbean colonies as involuntary indentured servants.⁴⁵ This abhorrent practice does not seem to have been confined to the Caribbean, either – records exist of licenses issued to merchants in both Old and New England for the transportation of hundreds of Irish children, indicating widespread forced relocation.⁴⁶ These next generations of Irish men and women were torn away from their homeland before they could grow up and sow the seeds of the next rebellion against English rule, and were transplanted half a world away to where they could not pose a challenge to the Crown. To modern eyes, there is no justification for acts of forced relocation like these, and the shock and outrage provoked by being informed of such facts often provide fertile ground that the Myth can embed into in order to argue its own veracity, thus planting the seeds by which its ultimate goal is achieved.

The Position of Irish Settlers in Society

If we blend all these elements of indentured servitude together – the Plantations, the rebellions, the prisoners, the kidnapped children – it makes for a disturbingly familiar relationship between English and Irish on Barbados. Forced or involuntary emigration would have caused old antagonisms and enmities to be transplanted in those ships that carried Irish people across the ocean to the New

⁴³“Order of the Council of State.” (October 19th 1654) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 418-419.

⁴⁴“Orders of the Council of State.” (September 3rd 1655) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 428-431. Note the phrase “thought not to be fit to be tried for their lives,” which may imply that transportation to Barbados was summary judgment against the prisoners in the source.

⁴⁵Reilly, Matthew and Handler, Jerome. “Contesting White Slavery in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and European Indentured Servants in Seventeenth Century Barbados.” *New West Indian Guide* 91. 2017. Pages 30-55.

⁴⁶“Order of the Council of State.” (September 6th 1653) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 407-409.

World, and the colonial government of Barbados knew it too, taking a very dim view of Irish immigrants to the island. Irish people, especially Irish men, were seen as potentially violent and rebellious, and the English ruling class were not slow to take action to keep them in line.

There were numerous incidents of this antipathy towards Irish settlers. In 1657, police constables on Barbados were being instructed to whip any Irish man or woman who was found wandering the island and not working on a plantation.⁴⁷ One Francis Sampson, writing a letter in June 1666 to his brother John regarding an English attack upon the then-French colony of St. Kitts, lamented that the Irish were “always a bloody and perfidious people to English Protestant interest” because Irish soldiers conscripted for the action proved less than enthusiastic in their duty to the Crown.⁴⁸ The next year, the governor of Barbados, Lord Willoughby, grumbled that although there were two thousand Irish fighting men on the island, he would much prefer Scots instead of them.⁴⁹ Thirty years later, as yet another rebellion engulfed Ireland in the wake of the Glorious Revolution in England, warnings were sent from London to the governors of the English Caribbean colonies regarding the possibility of Irish settlers revolting – the governor of Montserrat received a missive from Antigua cautioning him that, according to the colonial government's numbers, Irish settlers outnumbered his military forces by three to one, and that he should take steps to secure or ensure the loyalty of Irish settlers there.⁵⁰

In June 1660, the Council of Barbados held a meeting in which it was decided to use the militia to count the exact number of Irish people on the island, for the purposes of weeding out “turbulent and dangerous spirits.”⁵¹ The aforementioned governor of the island, Lord Francis Willoughby, was deeply

⁴⁷Block, Kristen. “Subjects Without An Empire: The Irish In The Early Modern Caribbean.” *Past and Present*, no. 210 (Feb.2011). The original document (Lucas MSS 1.368, dated September 22 1657) is held by the Barbados Department of Archives, inaccessible to me during Covid.

⁴⁸“Francis Sampson to his brother John Sampson.” (June 6th, 1666) Document 1212. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 384-392.

⁴⁹“Governor Wm. Lord Willoughby to his much esteemed friend Williamson.” (May 7th, 1667) Document 1477. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 463-471.

⁵⁰“Lieutenant-General Codrington, Council and Assembly of Antigua to the Deputy-Governor of Barbados.” (March 1st, 1690) Document 789 IV. *CSPC Volume 13, 1689-1692*. Pages 224-243.

⁵¹“Minutes of the Council of Barbadoes.” (June 26-27 1660) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Page 480-483.

suspicious of Irish settlers, writing in September 1667 that he did not feel secure on Barbados because of the “strange composition of blacks, Irish, and servants.”⁵² He wrote numerous letters back to London and complained so much about the quality of settlers to Barbados that the Council for Foreign Plantations reported that the colony seemed to be “in an ill condition, in regard of the multitude of negroes and Irish.”⁵³

These primary documents show the odd position occupied by Irish immigrants in the English Caribbean colonies. Prior to the arrival of enslaved Africans in the 1640s, the ruling class on Barbados was always wary of trouble from Irish settlers, but there were so many Irish people coming as indentured servants to the island that the planters contented themselves with watchful toleration. After the arrival of enslaved Africans in the 1640s, however, governors and assemblies of several Caribbean colonies grew worried of a potential slave revolt that might well be aided by disaffected indentured servants. The Irish, generally perceived as a disloyal fifth column, might well choose to join that revolt, so needed to be elevated above, and differentiated from, the influx of enslaved Africans. This led to a rethink on the part of the authorities – should they treat Irish settlers with less of a heavy hand, given that they might be useful to keep the ballooning numbers of slaves in line? Indeed, an anonymous London report in December 1667 mused: “...now there are many thousands of slaves who speak English, and if there are many leading men slaves in a plantation, they may easily be wrought upon to betray it, especially on the promise of freedom.”⁵⁴ The sugar industry was booming, and Barbados' economic value was clear. No-one in London was desirous to lose one of their primary cash-cow colonies, so a new approach towards Irish indentured servants was needed.

⁵² “Gov. Wm. Lord Willoughby to the King.” (September 16 1667) *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 494-502.

⁵³ “Report of the Committee for Foreign Plantations.” (March 12th 1668) Document 1712. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 552-555.

⁵⁴ “Some observations on the island of Barbadoes.” Document 1657. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 520-534. This source has no originator noted, and is not addressed to anyone by name. It could be someone's written notes regarding the situation on Barbados, or may be part of a more official report made to some government body, perhaps the Council for Foreign Plantations.

As became the case in the United States in the nineteenth century, the ruling class began to pit the Irish indentured servants against the enslaved Africans, placing them in a social position higher than the slaves, but lower than the plantocracy themselves. Allowing the Irish a modicum of social standing, and the ability to perhaps better one's fortunes such as Cornelius Bryan was able to do, would have been a powerful psychological ploy to ensure that, although Irish indentured servants might well be unhappy with their own individual station, they were also aware that they were held in higher esteem than an enslaved person was. This would have made sense to Irish servants, too – they would likely have felt that they had more in common with other white European settlers than with enslaved Africans – and from the English perspective, kept the Irish on Barbados in a useful limbo. They occupied a level not high enough to wield any political power or influence, but not low enough to *not* bear some moral weight for the dehumanizing position that African slaves lived in, and thus suffer potential consequences in the event of a slave revolt. This is another strong counter-argument to the Myth that the Irish were slaves – they simply did not exist on the same social level as enslaved Africans.



Irish Slaves Could be beaten to death legally

Illustration 7: Another use of a photograph to push an absurd claim. Irish people were not slaves, and indentured servants had inherent rights under English law. No indentured servant, Irish or not, could be legally beaten to death, although they could be executed if found guilty of a crime that warranted such a sentence. Retrieved from: <https://limerick1914.medium.com/the-imagery-of-the-irish-slaves-myth-dissected-143e70aa6e74> (this website does not promote the Myth and actively works against it).

Patois and Gaelic Language Links

However, it is absolutely clear that indentured Irish servants and enslaved Africans experienced close relationships on the plantations. One of the more fascinating arguments made in support of these kinds of close relationships has been in the field of linguistics, where studies of modern Caribbean island *patois* languages suggest that their origins may not be in English, but in the Irish Gaelic language. In the seventeenth century, Irish Gaelic was still the primary language of most Irish people, who would have learned English as a secondary language – perhaps not encountering it fully until they came to Barbados. Faced with assimilating thousands of new African slaves, the majority of whom would not have been able to speak English either, it may well have fallen upon Irish indentured servants – who made up the largest white underclass on the island and who, on an individual level, may well have learned English as a second language – to teach English to these new arrivals. Hiberno-English draws its structure from the Gaelic language, in which the verb is placed at the very beginning of the sentence, and draws in several more tenses than past, present, and future. In Hiberno-English, it is possible to say *I go, I am going, I bees going, I does go, and I does be going*, which bear striking resemblances to speech markers from modern Creole *patois*.⁵⁵ These distinctive Creole languages are still spoken today on several Caribbean islands, especially on Montserrat, where there was a sizable Irish population, and several Anglo-Irish governors, during the seventeenth century.⁵⁶

If African slaves learned pidgin English from Irish indentured servants who themselves learned English as a second language, then those slaves may well have picked up Hiberno-English speech patterns, giving us more proof that these two groups were mixing closely with one another. However, contrary to what the Myth would like to insinuate, this does not prove that both groups enjoyed similar

⁵⁵For more information, see Perekhval'skaya, Elena. "Irish in the West Indies: Irish Influence on the Formation of English-based Creoles." *Studia Celto-Slavica* 7 (2015), pp.181–192.

⁵⁶"The Black Irish of Montserrat." YouTube, accessed February 15 2021. This is an upload of a 1976 report by the Irish current affairs television program "Radharc" ("The View"), that links the seemingly Hiberno-English accents of modern Montserratians with the Irish accent. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jfip96k1cE0&ab_channel=LarryLawlor.

social status. It is far more likely that Irish indentured servants were used as slave overseers or foremen on the sugar plantations, and taught their version of English to their slaves for better efficiency in their task. This would again place Irish indentured servants in a middle ground – higher than the slave, lower than the master – that runs contrary to what the Myth alleges.

Redlegs

In the late seventeenth century, it became more difficult to entice Irish people to take an indenture in the Caribbean. As the slave population increased, so too did the white population decrease – no planter was likely to pay for an indentured servant to work in the sugar fields when enslaved people, who worked until death for no pay, were for sale. Like a spreading virus, the plantations amalgamated until they had taken over the best land on Barbados, leaving very little land available for those who reached the end of their indenture. When those indentured servants left the plantations, their places were taken by enslaved people. With few prospects open to those without property or capital, and unable to afford to make the ocean crossing home, many Irish indentured servants chose to remain on Barbados at the end of their indenture, forming a white underclass on the island. These people grouped themselves together into poor communities on the eastern side of the island, eking out what living they could in the rugged highlands, free but impoverished.⁵⁷ Archaeological research has found that they often lived alongside manumitted slaves, forming inter-racial settlements on the edge of society.⁵⁸ Detested by the plantocracy, but without any means to extricate themselves from their situation, these Irish settlers gradually lost their connection with their homeland as their lives ground on. Their children kept their names, but their *patria* declined year by year until a new descriptor of this white underclass appeared. By the end of the 1600s, poor white people on Barbados were known as

⁵⁷Reilly, Matthew C. “The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, Legacy.” *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 47-63. The University of the West Indies Press, 2015.

⁵⁸Hicks, Dan. “The Garden of the World: An Historical Archaeology of Sugar Landscapes in the Eastern Caribbean.” *BAR International Series* 1632. 2007.

redlegs, a grim witticism about the impact of sunburn upon the white skin of their parents and grandparents. These anti-nomian redlegs, living alongside and at the same social level as manumitted African slaves, must have directly contradicted any prevailing plantocracy notions about white people being superior to black, yet slavery on Barbados carried on into the eighteenth century just as it had done for the previous half-century. Any notion of Irishness on Barbados, as well as our examination of such, must therefore end at the turn of that century - time, distance, and poor social prospects all conspired to morph the descendants of Irish indentured servants first into redlegs, then finally into Barbadians.

Today, the cultural legacy of these Irish settlers on Barbados remains only in echoes. Irish place names and family names still exist on the island, lingering like ghosts tethered by memories – of a lost and burning home, of a dangerous trans-Atlantic crossing, of salt air, of blinking in the sunlight of a new world, of stifling heat, of tongues licking strange new words, and of human blood spattering the sugar cane. Like so many places and so many lives in history, only the embers of memories remain.

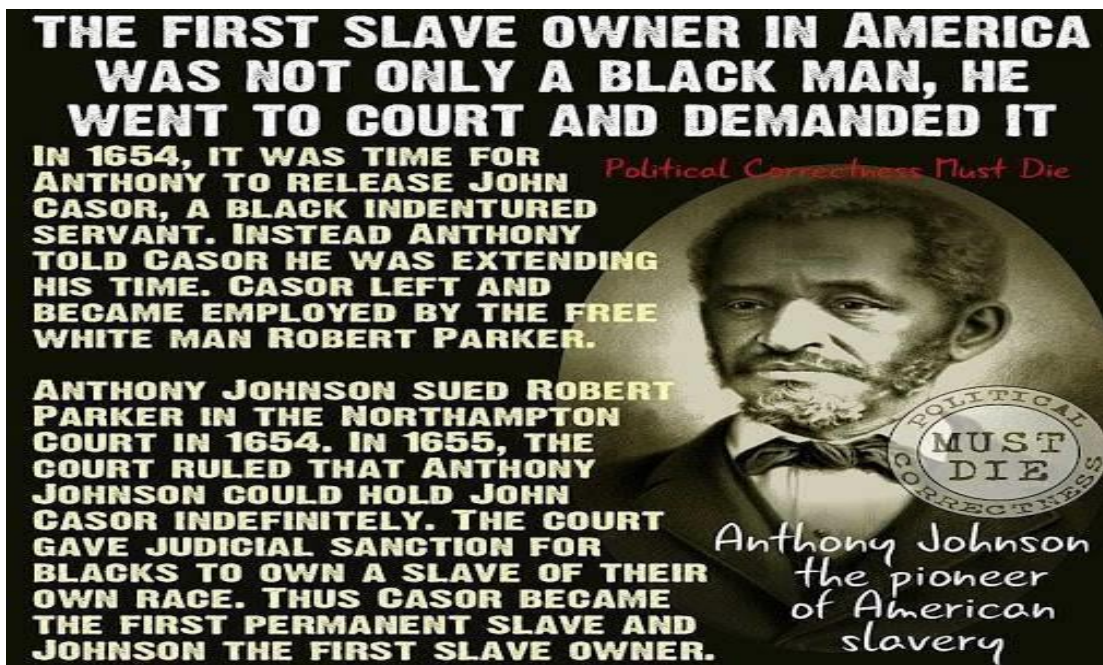


Illustration 8: This meme uses an historical event to push its true agenda of ending "political correctness" today. What this meme is describing did happen, but the meme deliberately blurs the lines between slave and indentured servant to diminish white responsibility in American slavery. In a similar way, the true goal of the Irish Slave Myth is set in the volatile politics of today, not the seventeenth century. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/09/slavery-myths-seven-lies-half-truths-and-irrelevancies-people-trot-out-about-slavery-debunked.html> (Feb 28 2021)

CHAPTER 4: SLAVES AND SERVANTS

As discussed above, a great influx of enslaved African arrived on Barbados during the 1640s, drawn there by the twin evils of unregulated proto-capitalism and Mammon. The actual specific date they first arrived in the Caribbean is unclear, but Portugal and Spain brought enslaved Africans to the Americas quite early in their colonization effort – by no means was the English use of slave labor in their seventeenth-century colonies a novelty. There were a small group of enslaved Africans among the first colonists of Barbados in the 1620s, and over the ensuing decades their numbers swelled dramatically. By 1655 there were over 20,000 enslaved Africans on the island.⁵⁹ In December 1667, an anonymous source estimated the number of enslaved people to be over 50,000.⁶⁰ These enslaved people

⁵⁹Reilly, Matthew C. "The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, Legacy." *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 47-63. The University of the West Indies Press, 2015.

⁶⁰"Some observations on the island of Barbadoes." Document 1657. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 520-534.

were put to work in the growing sugar plantations, living alongside and interacting with Irish and other indentured servants on a daily basis. There was no way they could not have done so – the new plantation slaves needed to be shown where to cultivate and harvest the sugar cane, instructed how to work the *ingenio* machines, and needed experience in the fine art of boiling the juice in the coppers. This was not something which could have been done in a vacuum – the plantation's existing white labor force would have been used to teach, and later to oversee, the coerced efforts of the newcomers, slotting into the middle ground between planter and slave – and it was increasingly happening all over the Caribbean. As planters realized the economic viability of an unpaid labor force, they began to clamor for more and more slaves. In February of 1665, one Thomas Lynch wrote a letter in which he hailed Jamaica as an island of great monetary potential, if only there were more slaves to work the plantations. “The want of negroes is the grand obstruction,” he wrote glumly.⁶¹ In January 1679, an account of the English Caribbean sugar plantations lamented that the sugar industry could not operate at full capacity thanks to “the want of free trade, the want of a sufficient supply of negroes, Christian servants... and [because the islands are] being governed by those who have no estates in the island...”⁶²

Distinction in Daily Working Life

These primary sources often mention servants and slaves in the same breath, but again, this does not imply, and we should not infer, any kind of parity between the two groups. Always, a distinction between the two remains. If indentured servants were *not* held in higher esteem than slaves, it is likely that a generic word – slave or servant – might have been used to refer to them. Instead, the sources are definite – a servant was not the same thing as a slave, and was written in contemporary sources as being distinct from one. Servants were often referred to as such, or by their nationality, or in religious

⁶¹“Lieut.-Col. Thos. Lynch to Sec. Sir Henry Bennet .” (February 12th 1665) Document 934. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 273-284.

⁶²“An Account of the English Sugar Plantations.” (January 23rd 1668) Document 1679. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 534-546.

terms as “Christians.” Slaves were invariably reduced to their race or skin color. This distinction was not confined to the Caribbean, either – as slavery spread all across the New World and became the basis for colonial economies, local governments had to come to terms with the tilting demography between indentured servant and slave. In 1661, the Assembly of Barbados sent a letter to the Council of Foreign Plantations, complaining that the price of sugar was decreasing even as the cost of “servants, negroes, cattle, horses, and dry goods” had doubled.⁶³ In 1663, the Assembly of Maryland passed an Act entitled “Concerning English Servants that Run Away in the Company of Negroes or Other Slaves.”⁶⁴ In 1665, a bounty was put out by the Governor of Jamaica against rebellious slaves on the island, declaring that “any servant or slave bringing in one of these negroes shall be free.”⁶⁵ These all indicate a distinction between slave and servant not only in colonial law, but also in daily colonial *life*.

As the seventeenth century continued, slavery boomed on Barbados in response to the labor needs of the sugar economy. Opportunities for indentured work were dwindling fast, as planters reduced the numbers they took on and European settlers saw that there were not so many prospects on Barbados after their term was concluded. The most viable farming land had been swallowed up by the plantations, and many indentured servants began to look elsewhere for opportunities, including to the Thirteen Colonies. The Barbados Assembly, faced with the stark population differential between black and white, began to cast ideas around to keep as high as possible the number of white people living on the island and who could also be employed in gainful work. In December 1664, a law was proposed by the island's grand jury which stipulated that no free-born subject of the king should be permitted to keep more enslaved Africans than he had indentured servants, and that no foreigner living on the island

⁶³“Petition of the President, Council, and Assembly of Barbadoes to His Majesty's Commissioners for Foreign Plantations.” (May 11th 1661) Document 85. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 27-35.

⁶⁴“The Titles of Twenty-Nine Acts Made at the General Assembly Begun at St. Mary's ...” (September 15th 1663) Document 564. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 158-164. The “Other Slaves” referred to in the Act's title likely refers to enslaved Native American peoples.

⁶⁵“Orders of the Governor and Council of War in Jamaica.” (September 1st, 1665) Document 1049. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 321-323.

be permitted to keep any slaves at all. This proposed law was not born of magnanimity towards the plight of the tens of thousands of slaves already living on Barbados. Instead, the proposed law stated that this would ensure “more employment for His Majesty's free-born subjects.”⁶⁶ If slaves and servants were of equal status, as the Myth insinuates, then there would be no need for such laws to ever be proposed.

There is a saying that death ends all tyrannies. Unless they escaped, died, or were manumitted, a slave was a slave for life. If they were permitted to marry on the plantation, it was only to another slave. If that marriage produced children, then those children were born into the state of slavery, and all of them – mother, father, and child down through the generations - could be bought or sold like cattle at a market. This was absolutely not the case for indentured servants, whose contracts specified a time limit on their indenture. When the pinnacle *Golden Falcon* docked at Providence Island in late spring of 1633, a report was sent by the Providence Island Company to Captain Bell, the governor of the island, specifying selling terms for “the disposal of ordnance, servants, and negroes,” who were aboard the ship, including those servants “whose times are nearly up.”⁶⁷ Providence Island is not anywhere near the city of Providence, the capital of the modern American state of Rhode Island. Rather, Providence Island was a colony founded by English Puritans in the far west of the Caribbean, about 120 miles off the coast of Nicaragua. Today, Providence Island is named *Isla de Providencia*, and is part of the territory of the Republic of Colombia. Three years later, in the first week of March 1636, the arrival of a new governor on the island, Robert Hunt, necessitated the hiring of twenty servants by the Providence Island Company, to be dispatched to Brooke House, the governor's seat. Less than a week later, eight more servants were hired, their provisions and clothing paid in advance by the Company for a period of

⁶⁶“Presentments and Requests of the Grand Jury ...” (December 13th 1664) Document 875. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 258-265.

⁶⁷“The Company of Providence Island to Capt. Bell, Governor.” (July 1st, 1633) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 166-171.

four months.⁶⁸ The language is clear – servants and slaves were two distinct groups and were named as such in the correspondences regarding them. No slave would ever have been hired under terms like these indentured servants were – slaves were bought and sold as human chattel, but it was the labor of servants that was for hire, often for fixed periods of time under a contract of employment.

The Lost Humanity of Enslaved Africans

Europeans often indulged in outright hypocrisy to justify their enslavement of Africans. Some, like Juan Gines de Sepulveda in his famous public debates with Bartolomé de las Casas, embraced the Aristotelian viewpoint that some human beings were natural-born slaves. De Sepulveda made his argument regarding the indigenous peoples of New Spain, blending it with Catholic theology, but it would have been an easy matter to make the mental connection between enslaved Native Americans and enslaved Africans.⁶⁹ Other Europeans broadly accepted a variant, more secular rationale – since warfare was endemic among native Africans, who sold their enslaved prisoners to European buyers, then, it was reasoned, the Europeans themselves were not enslaving anyone. They were simply purchasing a commodity, and by doing so, were ensuring that the slaves remained alive to have children and thus propagate themselves and not disappear from the Earth. In this line of thinking, Europeans absolved themselves by simply abrogating the sin.⁷⁰ Later in history, the Curse of Ham was linked with West Africa, giving a Biblical justification for the enslavement and forced transportation of Africans to the Americas.⁷¹

In his memoir of life on Barbados, Richard Ligon wrote of several encounters he had with an

⁶⁸“Agreement between the Company for Providence Island and Mat. Downes.” (March 9th, 1636) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 222-232.

⁶⁹For more information on the Spanish debates and justification of slavery in their American colonies, see Hanke, Lewis. *All Mankind Is One: A Study of the Disputation Between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Gines de Sepulveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indian*. Northern Illinois University Press. Reprint 1994.

⁷⁰For more, see Rushforth, Brett. *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous And Atlantic Slavery in New France*. University of North Carolina Press, 2013. See Chapter 2, especially the section entitled “There Are No Slaves In France.”

⁷¹Braude, Benjamin. “The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods.” *William And Mary Quarterly*. Volume 54, No. 1 (January 1997), pp. 103-147.

enslaved African named “Sambo,” a man who Ligon described “as ingenious, as honest, and as good natur'd a poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green.” Sambo asked Ligon if he could convert to Christianity, and Ligon approached the master of the plantation to see if it was possible. The conversation that followed was an example of European cognitive dissonance – knowing that Christianity prohibited the enslavement of other Christians, the plantation master refused to allow Sambo to convert because he would then be forced to free him, and a precedent would have been set whereby other slaves might have done the same. Sambo could never be baptized; his soul was rejected in order to make sure he would always and forever remain a slave.⁷²

Sambo's treatment was surely not an isolated case. His desire to move closer to the world of the white settlers might well be interpreted by a modern reader as genuine - Ligon later writes of Sambo betraying a plot by other slaves to sabotage the plantation's boiling house - or we might also consider the extenuating circumstances that were Sambo's daily lived reality.⁷³ Sambo might have thought that if he was more similar to his captors by adopting their religion, then perhaps his humanity would be more plain to see, but the labor and financial incentives of Barbados' proto-capitalist economy were enough to render the question moot – that is, if Ligon was even thinking about it at all. In any case, no indentured servant ever needed to seek recognition of their humanity in the same way that Sambo did – the primary sources repeatedly refer to them as “Christians,” their national origins irrelevant and often omitted.

The ultimate question of whether African enslavement in the Caribbean was caused by racism, or capitalism, or one growing out of the other, is a complex one and beyond the bounds of this thesis. Even though slaves lived in Europe, the European colonizers of the Americas – Portugal, Spain, France, England, Holland – were slave-holding societies in Europe, and were not dependent on slavery

⁷²Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*. Humphrey Mosely, London, 1657. Pages 49-50.

Later, Ligon described how Sambo revealed the existence of a plot by other enslaved people to destroy the plantation's boiling house. He described Sambo's act as one “*that might have beseem'd the best Christians...*” (p.54)

⁷³Ibid, p.54

at home. By contrast, colonies such as Barbados could not maximize its sugar industry without slave labor and could not fulfill its purpose – making money for the mother country - without slave labor. English plantation owners, therefore, made a conscious and deliberate choice to use African slave labor to maximize their profits. The American colonies, then, were slave societies, driven and dependent on African slave labor. Dehumanization enabled commodification.

White Slavery

White people could not be taken as slaves. As discussed above, it was their labor that was bought and sold by the planters, not their freedom. They had rights, and it was not permitted under English law for them to be enslaved. In the summer of 1667, a soldier named William Harwyn was one of a group of young people who were taken without their consent aboard a ship named *Conquer*, which was about to sail away from London bound for the West Indies. Upon learning what was transpiring on *Conquer*, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London, Sir John Barkstead, was dispatched to the ship to investigate whether there were any more people aboard who were not there of their own volition, and his remit specifically included people who were under indenture – the terms of their contracted service were to be checked by Barkstead to make sure that they had not been kidnapped or otherwise coerced aboard by the crew of *Conquer*. If Sir John found anyone there against their will, he was under orders to release them at once.⁷⁴ The implications here are clear – an indentured servant could not be treated like a slave, and the bounds of their indenture must be respected.

When he liberated William Harwyn from below decks of *Conquer*, Sir John was following the letter of English law. It was one thing for a colonial Assembly across the ocean to pass an ordinance differentiating between an indentured servant and a slave, but in 1664 the Council for Foreign Plantations made a report, twenty articles long, to the English Parliament entitled “Certain Propositions

⁷⁴“Similar Order [of the Council of State].” (August 6th 1657) *CSPC Volume 1, 1574-1660*. Pages 457-458.

for the Better Accommodating the Foreign Plantations With Servants.” In this report, the Council for Foreign Plantations categorized “servants” into two types - white and black. At first glance, this report seems to give a glimmer of truth to the Myth, but the Council's report then went into exact, specific definitions as to what constituted a servant, and what constituted a slave:

“The servants are classed under two heads, blacks and whites. The blacks bought by way of trade, and sold about 20*l.* a head, the most useful appurtenances of a plantation and perpetual servants. The whites divers ways gathered up in England, few from Ireland or Scotland, transported at the rate of about 6*l.* per head, are entertained by those to whom they are consigned or are exchanged for commodities at different rates according to their condition or trade; after certain years these are free to plant for themselves or take wages for their service, and have to the value of 10*l.* to begin planting for themselves. Ways of obtaining these servants from felons condemned to death, sturdy beggars, gipsies, and other incorrigible rogues, poor and idle debauched persons.”⁷⁵

The above distinction is crystal clear and is the final nail in the coffin of the Irish Slaves Myth. Blacks are “bought” as “perpetual servants” - the Council declined to use the word “slave” even though it is clear that this is what is meant – and white servants, recruited from Britain and Ireland, are free to work with the expectation of land or money at the end of their tenure. When it is suggested that servants be “exchanged for commodities at different rates,” this is not the buying and selling of a human being for their lifetime – it is the purchase or exchange of a person's labor for a fixed period, at which point the servant is free to resume their life. No slave would ever be offered working terms and conditions like this. Furthermore, it is also made clear that these terms and conditions might also be offered to people convicted of high crimes like murder, a sure sign that white labor was lacking in the Caribbean at the time of its writing.

The Council for Foreign Plantations submitted this report to Parliament suggesting that an Act be passed to give their recommendations the power of law, but it is not known if Parliament ever chose to pass an Act based on it. Whether Parliament did or did not is irrelevant – the very fact that such a report was published for the English government illustrates that high-ranking civil servants and

⁷⁵“Report of Committee of Council for Foreign Plantations, entitled, 'Certain Propositions for the Better Accommodating the Foreign Plantations with Servants,' in 20 articles.” Document 791. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 222-231.

noblemen who would have been members of a council such as this were aware of, and responsive to, the legal questions surrounding indentured servitude and chattel slavery in the Caribbean colonies. High-placed men in the government, representative of power in English society, were concerned enough about the legal difference between slave and servant to spend their time drafting, writing, and recommending a report to Parliament itself.

Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle, the two men whose petition five years earlier had reached the floor of Parliament, would have been delighted.⁷⁶ They had cried out that they were not slaves and had protested their treatment on Barbados, arguing that they were free-born Englishmen and possessed of certain protections under the law, and they would have felt vindicated by a report such as this. An indentured servant, involuntary like Rivers and Foyle, or voluntary like so many thousands of Irish men and women who crossed the broad Atlantic in search of a new life, was not akin to a slave.

These primary sources, that clearly delineate the roles and rights of indentured servants and slaves, have conclusively refuted the Irish Slaves Myth. The horrific individual experiences of some servants do not prove the Myth to be true any more than do the memes that insist the contrary. History is crammed full of injustices that will never be made to rights – it does not need invented ones.

⁷⁶ See page 1 of this thesis.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis, a deep analysis of the primary sources within the Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America, and West Indies database has shown that the popular misconception known as the Irish Slaves Myth is a falsehood. These sources, coupled with a synthesis of secondary scholarship on the subject, has shown that indentured servants and enslaved people occupied two very different levels of seventeenth century Caribbean society. Using the sugar plantations of Barbados as our primary example, we have seen that, even though both groups had close working relationships and did very similar work on the sugar plantations, they had very different rights under the law. This is one of the main focal points of the Irish Slaves Myth – that because both groups were essentially doing the same work, then it is a short, simple step to conflate them into one oppressed mass. Yet the truth is that numerous laws existed to protect the rights of indentured servants in ways that a slave could only dream about. Even though most indentured servants on Barbados were Irish, their legal status was not that of a slave, nor could it ever be. Therefore, the conflation of servant and slave in books like *To Hell or Barbados* and *White Cargo* relies on a false equivalency that is not borne out by the primary sources.

As a final caveat, it must be noted that proponents of the Myth occasionally bring up a legitimate primary source that refers to Irish servants on Barbados as slaves. This reference is taken from an anonymous observation of life on the island dated December 1667 and reads:

“Not above 760 considerable proprietors and 8,000 effective men, of which two-thirds are of no reputation and little courage, and a very great part *Irish, derided by the negroes as white slaves*; and indeed except the proprietors, merchants, tradesmen, officers, and their dependents, the rest are such as have not reason to discern their abuses, or not courage to leave the island, or are in debt and cannot go...”⁷⁷

Those spreading the Myth would use a source like this to argue that, since even the enslaved Africans are referring to the Irish indentured servants as fellow slaves, then the Myth must be true.

⁷⁷“Some observations on the island of Barbadoes.” Document 1657. *CSPC Volume 5, 1661-1668*. Pages 520-534. Emphasis on italicized and underlined section is mine.

Again, this is problematic in several ways. Even if we ignore the anonymous nature of the source, which may, for example, have been written by someone with anti-Irish sentiment, we also have extant sources (such as Ligon) that acknowledge that the life of an indentured servant could be very harsh if their master were inclined to treat them as such, and that many planters saw slaves as more “valuable” because they represented a lifetime's direct financial investment. Be that as it may, nothing about this anonymous source changes the fact that slave and servant found themselves occupying very different social strata in the seventeenth-century Caribbean, nor does it alter the reality that white servants enjoyed more privileges and held more inherent rights than a black slave could ever hope to have. It also must be remembered, as this thesis has argued, that the primary purpose for spreading the Myth is not to right an historical wrong committed against Irish indentured servants; rather, it is to diminish the black experience of slavery in order to advance the often-dangerous political ideas of today.

If the Myth is to be successfully refuted, however, scholarship of primary sources alone will not be enough to do it. The Myth touches on so much more than the history of slavery that, like water seeping through a lattice, it has many openings in which to nourish the seeds of doubt planted in the minds of its readers. To be sure, muddying the discourse on slavery is the Myth's primary means to its distasteful end, but it can be introduced to a reader through studies on Irish nationalism, the social history of Barbados or another English Caribbean colony, or even through a study of the plantations in the Thirteen Colonies. The American Civil War, its bloody schism embedded in and inseparable from the institution of slavery, provides more fertile ground for the Myth to grow, entwined on the same vine as the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. It has been eloquently argued that the plantations in Barbados were, in fact, the fore-runners of the plantations in the Thirteen Colonies – that the plantocracy that would eventually lend their support to American independence from Britain had learned how best to make their work as brutally efficient as possible through the experiences of their predecessors on

Barbados.⁷⁸ Likewise, using Irish heritage as a means of propagating the Myth has disturbing echoes of class warfare – pitting two lower-strata groups against one another to distract from a larger issue has been part and parcel of plutocratic politics for as long as there has been immigration to the western hemisphere. The 1863 New York Draft Riots stand as an example of how racial tensions could spill over into violence between these groups, even though Irish immigrants to the United States often occupied the same social level as African-Americans. In a culture of immigrants, many Irish and Irish-American people became anti-immigrant.⁷⁹

Even though it is a dangerous fallacy, the Irish Slaves Myth has purchase. If its spread cannot be halted, or at least contained, then learning about the distinction between indentured servitude and slavery in the seventeenth century becomes absolutely pivotal. Owning another human being is not the same thing as owning their labor. Taking a screaming child and selling it to someone else is not the same thing as selling the remainder of someone's indenture. These are not small differences. The Myth's glib, simplistic conflation of two disparate groups of people needs to be battled right to the very end.

⁷⁸Reilly, Matthew C. “The Irish In Barbados: Labor, Landscape, Legacy.” *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 47-63. The University of the West Indies Press, 2015.

⁷⁹Noel Ignatiev wrote a (controversial) book outlining how, in his view, Irish immigrants triumphed over American nativism by inflicting violence upon free black people and embracing slavery. Ignatiev, Noel. *How The Irish Became White*. Routledge, 1995.

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It may have been noted by the reader that the footnotes pertaining to the Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America, and West Indies are not all presented along the same lines. This is because the information in the digitized archive is likewise not the same for each document. Although the archive is separated into monthly entries for each year, there are many documents which do not have an exact date or a reference number assigned to them. In the footnotes of the thesis, I have provided as much information as possible – dates, names, and document numbers where they are available.

This weblink is the front page of the Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America, and West Indies: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/cal-state-papers--colonial--america-west-indies>. The search function encompasses both keywords and by title. The Calendar of State papers Colonial, America, and West Indies is divided up into 41 volumes, but not all have been digitized, and only those volumes pertaining to the 17th century were researched. Each individual volume is further divided into entries by year, and then by month. Those primary sources that I selected for analysis in this thesis came from:

Vol. I (1574-1660): <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1>

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