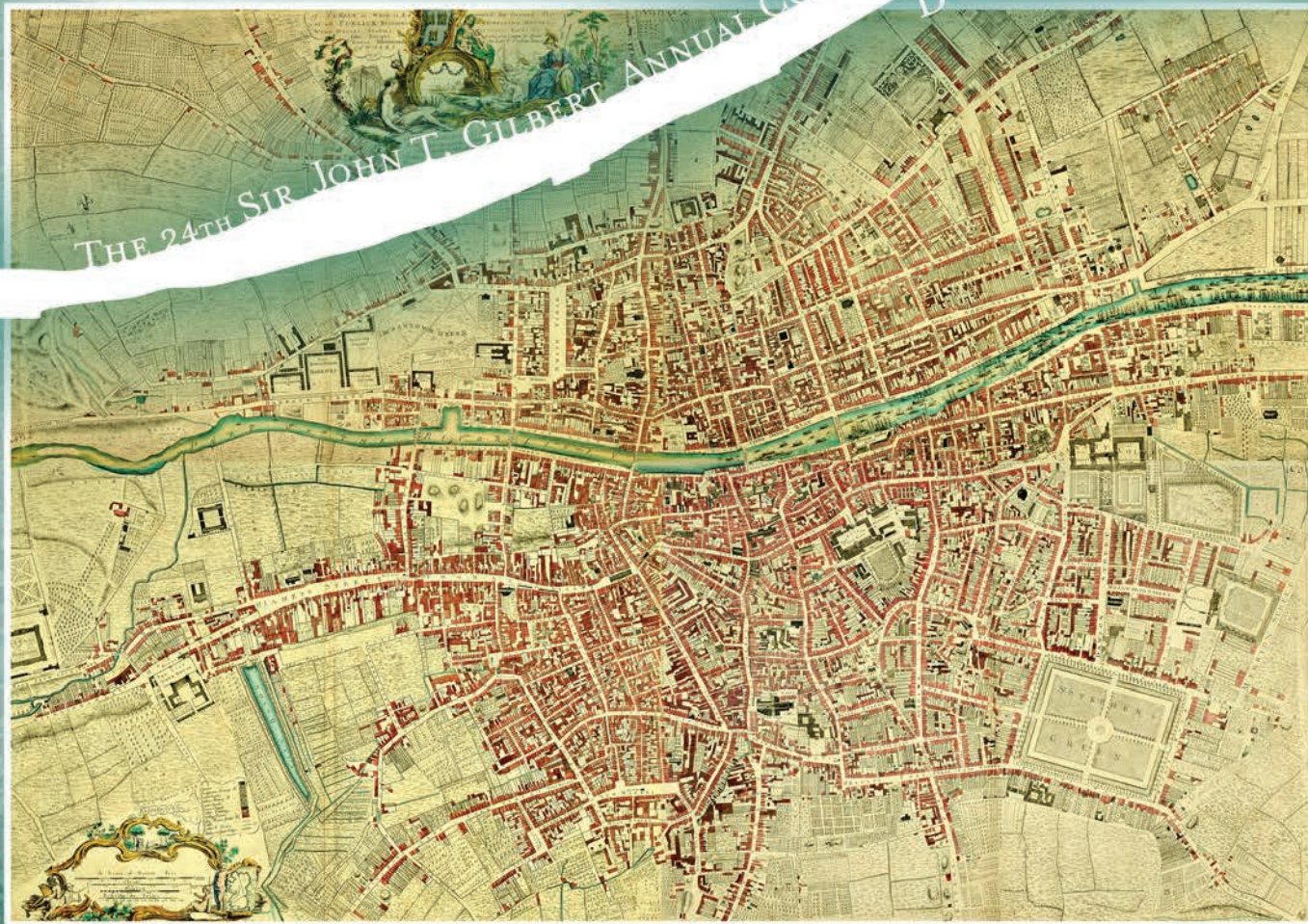


THE 24TH SIR JOHN T. GILBERT ANNUAL COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE, 2021
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THE PUBLIC HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN DUBLIN

BY CIARAN O'NEILL



Comhairle Cathrach
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Dublin City Council

THE PUBLIC HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN DUBLIN

*The 24th Annual Sir John T. Gilbert Commemorative Lecture
delivered on 26th January, 2021*

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Comhairle Cathrach
Bhaile Átha Cliath
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THE SIR JOHN T. GILBERT
ANNUAL COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE, 2021

THE PUBLIC HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN DUBLIN

BY CIARAN O'NEILL

DUBLIN does not associate itself with slavery. Despite its status as a major port city serving Britain and Ireland at the peak of the transatlantic slave economy the subject has little traction in the public history of the city. It is absent from our memory. There are solid reasons for this. If compared with the major port cities of Britain like Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow, it seems clear that Dublin never reaped the same direct economic dividends from Atlantic trade. Barred from direct trade to the colonies for generations, the city did not at any point develop a financial sector that could rival that of London or Edinburgh. The economic centrality of London and its credit lines to the empire project meant that Dublin always played second fiddle to it, and the removal of an active Irish political elite from the city following the Act of Union meant any dividend that descended from the eventual opening of free trade with the colonies in the 1780s – already very late in the day – never translated into compelling physical evidence of Irish profits from the slave economy. Thus Dublin has a very weak understanding of its own connection to the slave economy. And yet it certainly has a connection, and a more elaborate connection than one might think.

Slavery has been a feature of human society across time and space, and Dublin is no exception to that. Dublin had an active slave market between the 9th and 12th centuries in the Viking period, with a peak period in the late eleventh century when it had briefly become an international slave trading centre.¹ Dublin's role in the mature transatlantic slave economy from the mid-eighteenth century to about the mid-nineteenth century is much less well understood. Nini Rodgers devotes an impressionistic chapter to Dublin in her seminal history of Ireland's role in slavery and anti-slavery, lacking the definition and ballast of her accounts of Belfast and Cork. David Dickson's seminal history of Dublin likewise steers clear of the issue, beyond noting the presence of sugar-importers and sugar-bakers, as had Gilbert's history of Dublin before him.² And yet there were influential Dubliners involved in the slave economy, either as secondary suppliers or importers, or (more rarely) directly engaged in the enterprise themselves as planters, traders, or re-sellers in the American South and in the Greater Caribbean. In recent years scholars have re-estimated the impact of Atlantic-trade on European economies and widened their definitions beyond the traditional and narrow focus on the slave trade itself to include transport, re-export, financial management, and supply chains. Seen in this light, Dublin's connections to the broader slave economy can be more clearly delineated, and they are more profound than we once thought.

¹ Poul Holm, 'The slave trade of Dublin, ninth to twelfth centuries' *Peritia*, 5 (1986), pp 317-345. For a wider context see David Wyatt, *Slaves and warriors in medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Brill, 2009); David Dickson, *Dublin: The Making of a Capital City* (Cambridge MA, 2014), p. 10.

² Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery, and Anti-Slavery 1612-1865*, (London, 2007), pp 159-196; Dickson, *Dublin*, p. 286; John T. Gilbert, *A History of Dublin*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1861), p. 354.

Dubliners and Slavery in the early colonial period

How deep are Dublin's connections to the early colonial period? Recent work by Jane Ohlemeyer and others has begun to shed some light on Irish involvement in India, with the figure of Dubliner Gerald Aungier – 2nd Governor of Bombay – emerging as a key postholder in the early expansion of the East India Company.³ But the Irish were every bit as prominent in the expansion of the empire westwards. Some ten percent of the property owners in Jamaica in 1670 were Irish, and it is in places such as Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, and Trinidad that Irish merchants flourished, along with the American colonies of Virginia and the Carolinas.⁴ The first governor of Carolina was an Irishman – James Moore – who came there via Barbados. Moore was reputedly the Dublin-born son of Jane Barnewell and Rory O'Moore – the rebel leader of 1641 – and he enslaved thousands of indigenous people, presumably applying lessons learned during his time in Barbados.⁵

Irish men were to be found at the other end of the supply chain of human misery. Another Irish Catholic, William Ronan, had worked for a decade in West Africa 1687-97 for the Royal African Company and was for a time chairman of the Committee of Merchants at Cape Castle, in present day Ghana. He too enslaved thousands.⁶ In May 1716, two Dublin ships, the *Sylva* and *Sophia*, purchased enslaved people off the coast of Gambia, though this was certainly a rare event as the Irish were very effectively cut out of the British triangular trade.⁷ Irish traders were sanguine about which flag they traded under, and were often to be found operating under the protection of the French or Spanish empire. Son of a Dublin and Kilkenny family, Antoine Walsh based his slave trade out of Nantes where by the 1740s he even had his own private joint stock company devoted to it: the Société D'Angole.⁸ He enslaved people for more than two decades along with a whole bloc of Irish merchants operating out of Nantes.⁹ In the same period 1700-40 Dublin had enjoyed something of a competitive advantage over rival Irish ports, specializing

³ Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Eastward Enterprises: Colonial Ireland, Colonial India' *Past and Present*, 240/1 (2018), pp 83-118.

⁴ Nini Rodgers, 'The Irish in the Caribbean 1641-1837: an overview,' *Irish migration studies in Latin America*, 5/3 (2007), pp 145-156.

⁵ Kinloch Bull, 'Barbadian Settlers in Early Carolina: Historiographical Notes' *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 96/4 (1995), pp 329-339; Mabel L. Webber, 'The First Governor Moore and His Children' *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 37/1 (1936), pp 1-23; Andrew A. Johnson, 'Enslaved Native Americans and the Making of South Carolina, 1659-1739,' (PhD: Rice University, 2018).

⁶ Nini Rodgers, 'The Irish and the Atlantic Slave Trade' *History Ireland*, 15/3 (May/June 2007), p. 17.

⁷ Nigel Tattersfield, *The Forgotten Trade* (London, 1998), p. 349.

⁸ John Gibney, *The Irish Diaspora* (Barnsley, 2020), p. 65.

⁹ For the Nantes Irish see Natacha Bonnet, 'L'organisation du travail servile sur la sucrerie dominguoise au XVIIIe siècle' in Philippe Hrodej (ed.), *L'esclave et les plantations de l'établissement de la servitude à son abolition*, Rennes (Presses universitaires), 2019 (open edition) <https://books.openedition.org/pur/97625>; Guy Saupin, 'Les Réseaux Commerciaux des Irlandais de Nantes sous le Règne de Louis XIV' in David Dickson and Jane Ohlmeyer (eds.), *Irish and Scottish Mercantile Networks in Europe and Overseas in the eighteenth century* (Ghent, 2007), pp 115-46.

in high value imports of wine, tobacco, fine textiles, hardwood, and unrefined sugar, the majority of which was routed through Glasgow, Bristol, or Liverpool. In the same period Cork was an export-oriented port, selling butter, yarn, and beef, much of it provisioning the West Indies, and the North American colonies.¹⁰

Later in the century – in West Africa – we find the Dublin-born Joseph Wall, educated at Trinity College Dublin, and governor of the key slave trading outpost at Goree, in present day Senegal in 1779.¹¹ An Irish Catholic, Wall had a peripatetic colonial career spanning subaltern service in Havana in 1762, then in Bombay, and then West Africa where he served successively under the Governor of the Province of Senegambia, Colonel Charles O'Hara, the illegitimate son of the Irish-born 1st Baron Tyrawley, and his successor Matthias McNamara, a wealthy Irish Catholic from County Clare.¹² Wall became governor after a dispute with McNamara, who had placed him in solitary confinement for 10 months in a six-by-eight foot cell over a disagreement. Wall was awarded £1000 in damages for this dispute and succeeded to the post of his torturer in 1778.¹³ His own governorship ended in court as well. Wall had been accused of flogging several of his own soldiers to death at Goree Island in brutal circumstances in 1782 but had evaded capture by fleeing to the continent in 1784 for 17 years before offering himself up for trial in 1802. The Old Bailey trial found him guilty of murder, and he was hanged at the age of 64 for crimes committed some 20 years previously.¹⁴ Wall's verdict was believed by many to have been motivated by the need for public confidence in the justice system to be restored in the aftermath of the mass court martial and execution of soldiers involved in the *Nore* mutiny, as can be seen in contemporary commentaries such as that shown in Figure 1: an image of an Irishman hung for crimes against other enslavers at the cutting edge of the slave economy. Senegambia itself was a short lived African British colony 1765-83, brutally mismanaged by all three of its Irish governors, and an estimated 63,738 enslaved Africans were shipped from there during their tenure.¹⁵ If Goree was one of the main points of departures from the African continent, Dubliners were also to be found at the other side of the middle passage.

¹⁰ Dickson, *Dublin*, pp 125-6.

¹¹ Most accounts of Wall's life note that he was born and raised in Dublin, but was the son of an Abbeyleix farmer, Garret Wall, in Queen's County.

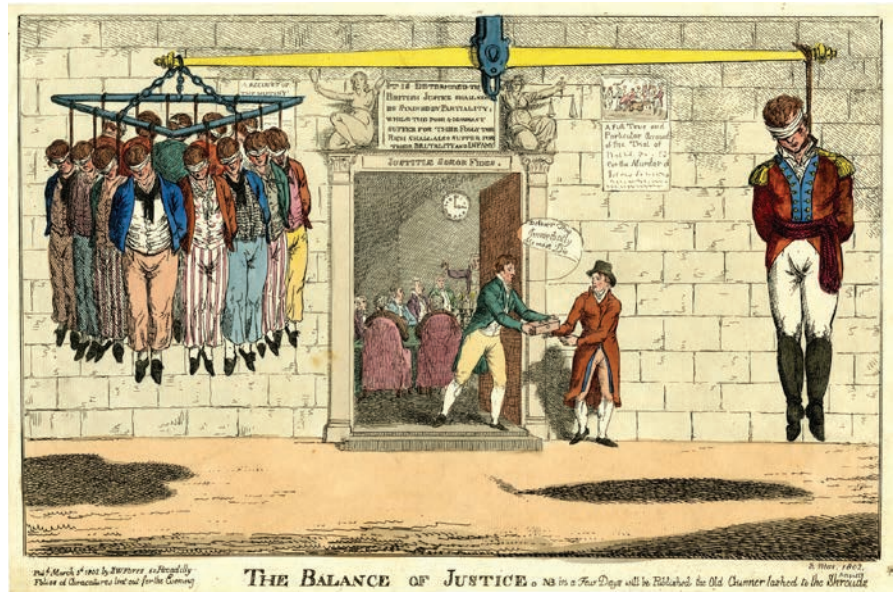
¹² John Bergin, 'Sir Charles O'Hara (d.1724)', *DIB*. Matthias McNamara was a brother of Daniel McNamara, an influential Irish Catholic lawyer in London and part of a network of Irish sugar planters based there. See John Bergin 'Irish Catholics and their networks in eighteenth-century London' *Eighteenth-Century Life* 39, no. 1 (2015), pp 66-102, at pp 90-91.

¹³ Jonathan Spain, 'Joseph Wall, 1737-1802,' *DNB* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28526>; David Dean, 'Joseph Wall of Goree Island' *African Affairs*, 57:229 (Oct., 1958), pp 295-301; T. B. Simpson, 'Governor Wall' *Juridical Review* 35, no. 2 (1923), pp 155-173.

¹⁴ Anonymous, *An authentic narrative of the life of Joseph Wall, Esq.* (London, 1802); *The trial of Governor Wall: executed at the Old Bailey, Jan. 28th, 1802...* (London, 1802).

¹⁵ Paul E. Lovejoy, 'A Forgotten Colony in Africa: the British Province of Senegambia' in Paul E. Lovejoy and Susan Schwarz, *Slavery, Abolition, and the Transition to Colonialism in Sierra Leone* (Africa World Press, 2014), pp 109-126.

Figure 1
S.W. Fores, *The Balance of Justice*. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) © The Trustees of the British Museum. A cartoon of 1802 commenting that Wall's life as an officer was equal to 13 mutinous sailors, a comparison of the punishments dealt out for the Nore mutiny.



As Nini Rodgers has put it 'From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century the Irish could be found at every level of white society in the Caribbean.' We might also add, 'of any religious background' here. One such family at the end of the peak period were the Delaps of Donegal and Dublin, whose sugar estate in Antigua featured Irishmen at every level (Figure 2).¹⁶ The legacies of British Slave Ownership database at UCL shows us 400 individuals with connections to both Ireland and the slave economy in a snapshot of the 1830s. There are Irish enslavers in the French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and Danish imperial systems and we know much less than we should about these. Take for example the nexus of converted Catholics operating coffee plantations in Santiago de Cuba well into the 1840s, such as the Dubliner James J Wright. Known as 'Don Santiago' due to his prominence as a local magnate and enslaver in Cuba, Wright was born on Skinner's Row and lived in Dublin until the age of 14, before settling in Cuba via Ohio. Wright had converted to Catholicism, acquired significant coffee plantations, and was involved directly in the shipping of enslaved people on his vessels *Ana Maria* and *La Fanny*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Francis Delap was one of the largest planters on Antigua in the 1760s and the family retained land until 1823, when William Clark recorded their fields and boiler houses in a series of aquatints. Thomas Truxes, 'The Mayflower Letters, 1757-58' *Archivum Hibernicum* 70 (2017), pp 85-114.

¹⁷ Giselle Gonzalez Garcia, 'Caught between empires: Pre-Famine Irish Immigrants in Santiago de Cuba 1665-1847' (MA: Concordia, 2020), pp 87-89.

Figure 2
William Clark, "Slaves cutting the sugar cane" in *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua* (1823), plate IV. British Library, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.



We know, too, that Irish enslavers are prevalent across the American South.¹⁸ These ranged from small to medium sized operations such as that of Anthony Patrick Walsh, who enslaved 38 people in Louisiana, or his fellow Dubliner Edward Sparrow, born in Dublin in 1810, who had 392 enslaved people producing cotton on his estate as late as 1860. Sparrow accumulated a fortune of about \$1.2m, making him one of the richest people in the US at the time of his death.¹⁹ Sparrow's father, Samuel Sparrow, was an Anglican member of the United Irishmen and a rebel in 1798, his rebellion disgracing his own father (also William) who was then a prominent merchant in Dublin. And yet there no trace of this in Dublin's public history, our collective memory, in our institutions, or on our streets. Historians work in the present, even if they spend a lot of their time in the past. Now would be as good time a time as any for us to start thinking about Ireland's place in the global reconsideration of race and empire.

¹⁸ David T. Gleeson (ed.), *The Irish in the Atlantic world* (University of South Carolina Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Joe Regan, 'Irish immigrants in the Rural U.S. Slave South' (PhD, NUI Galway, 2015), p. 153, p. 317; Mary Anne Davidson and Hilary Murphy, 'Samuel Sparrow's repentance for his rebel role in 1798' *The Past: The Organ of the Ul Cinsealigh Historical Society*, 28 (2007), pp 78-86.

Memory, monuments and the public history of slavery globally

Summer 2020 and early 2021 has seen controversy after controversy raise its head in public history globally and the contested history of slavery has been at the centre of this phenomenon. We are enduring a fraught period in identity politics and monuments, street names, statues, and even government buildings have been the sites of a reorientation and renegotiation of power in public spaces. We can summarise some of the highlights in just a few now-famous images. Perhaps the most madcap struggle for symbolic political came in January 2020 at the US Capitol building in Washington DC (Figure 3).



Figure 3
2021 Storming of the
United States Capitol,
6 January 2021. Tyler Merbler
/ CC-BY-SA-2.0

Elsewhere the process was deeply considered and popularly legitimated. A great example of one such process was the careful removal of a statue of Horatio Nelson, dismantled and disposed of in a three-hours long state-sponsored ceremony in Bridgetown, Barbados in November 2020.²⁰ This was barely noted in the global media, especially compared to events closer to home. There was widespread coverage of a much less respectful and more spontaneous submerging of a statue of Edward Colston on 7 June 2020 in Bristol.²¹ This action was criticised by many and on various grounds, the most common of which was the loss of an artwork, as well as the contested legitimacy of the protestors, or the 'mob' as the UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel, termed them.²² But Colston's statue had long been reinterpreted, questioned, and contested in Bristol.

²⁰ 'Pan-Africanists ready to see Lord Nelson go' *Barbados Advocate*, 28 October 2020.

²¹ 'With Edward Colston Statue Gone, Bristol faces a reckoning' *The New York Times*, 14 June 2020; 'Who was Edward Colston and why was his statue toppled?' *The Guardian*, 7 June 2020.

²² Priti Patel speaks in Commons about Colston protest 'mob', *Bristol Live*, 8 June 2020.

The mention of the removal of a statue of Lord Nelson will come as no surprise to many Dubliners, their own statue of Nelson having been blown to smithereens in 1966 after several failed attempts. The Dubliner who confessed to the act – Liam Sutcliffe – argued later in life that Nelson was simply ‘the wrong man, in the wrong place at the wrong time.’ He was a ‘great hero’, but an English one, ‘not a great hero for Ireland.’²³ The removal of Nelson was, in fact, the culmination of a sustained programme of postcolonial erasure. For much of the early years of the Free State the Irish – and Dubliners in particular – were global leaders in the art of blowing up statues they didn’t want to see any more. From about the 1880s as political power in the city began to turn green, Dubliners enthusiastically renamed the streetscape, transforming the city into a more nationalist space one street at a time and in doing so thumbing their nose at the Unionist establishment by removing names like Harcourt, Westmoreland, Pitt, Rutland, Brunswick and Sackville.²⁴ This wave was mostly accomplished by 1933, and with it the bulk of imperial or British reference statuary had also fallen. The impulses behind this were complex, but it was clearly anti-British rather than anti-colonial in tone, and entirely explicable in the context of the Irish revolution and the attendant regime change. One of the attendant side effects, however, of this very effective monumental erasure, was that the visibility of Irish involvement in empire was diminished in Dublin as it was elsewhere in Ireland. Most of the monuments erected in Dublin no longer exist: works such as Grinling Gibbons’s statue of *William III* (1701), (Figure 5) or John van Nost’s *George II* (1758), for example.



Figure 5
Statue of King William III,
Dixon Slides Collection.
Courtesy of Dublin City
Library and Archive

²³ Diarmaid Fleming, ‘The man who blew up Nelson’ *BBC News*, 12 March 2016.

²⁴ On the destruction of these monuments see Yvonne Whelan, *Reinventing modern Dublin: Streetscape, iconography and the politics of identity* (Dublin, 2003); Paula Murphy, *Nineteenth-Century Irish Sculpture: Native Genius Reaffirmed* (New Haven, CT, 2010), pp 225–46; Guy Beiner, ‘When Monuments Fall: The Significance of Decommemorating’ *Eire-Ireland*, 56/1 (2021), pp 33–61.

John Hughes's Statue of Queen Victoria (1908) was the last royal statue commissioned in Ireland taken down in 1948 and eventually sent to Sydney in 1986, though John Foley's statue of her consort, Prince Albert, lingers in the grounds of Leinster House.²⁵ Of the prominent royal or military landmarks in Dublin only the Fusilier's Arch in St Stephen's Green and Wellington's gigantic obelisk in Phoenix Park remain very prominent – proof that if you want a statue to last you just need to make one so enormous that it is more or less impossible to blow it up.

The result is that as you walk around Dublin today it is very hard to imagine that it was an imperial city from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. The false sense engendered by this postcolonial erasure is one of non-complicity in the British Empire, or any of the other European empires. Statues, monuments, and buildings project power: social and political. They tell us who we are, or who we were. They reflect our sense of selves, and they also act as a warning. Indeed the Latin root of the word monument, *monere*, usually thought of as a 'reminder' can also mean 'a warning'. In most cases the statues and monuments that fell in the global 2020 wave were ones that were long contested: they represented an anachronistic and unrepresentative power structure that was being questioned from below. Most statues are somewhat invisible to the inhabitants of any given city. That is the natural lifecycle of a monument – to become an unremarkable reminder of a part of accepted history: only noticed when they are threatened with removal. We have near-invisible statues on our national thoroughfare today. Most Dubliners will know who Charles Stewart Parnell and Daniel O'Connell are at either end, and of course Big Jim Larkin in the middle, but statues of Sir John Gray and Fr Theobald Mathew have declined in resonance and their presence on Ireland's main boulevard now seems anachronistic. It turns out that the credit one gets for establishing an effective water supply, or for preaching temperance to Irish people, had a shorter lifespan than was once supposed. It is only when the politics of the city changes, or the demographic of its inhabitants is altered, that the invisible becomes visible again.

The effect of the global reconfiguration of statues and public space has been minimal in Ireland and I would argue that this is mostly because the work of erasure was so complete. In 2020 there had been a very public controversy in Ireland over whether or not to commemorate men who served in the Dublin Metropolitan Police and Royal Irish Constabulary and then a brief and very polite scuffle surrounding four mid-Victorian statues outside the Shelbourne Hotel (Figure 6).²⁶

These orientalist statues were – we now know – catalogue-ordered for the new hotel at the time of its opening and were not direct representations of enslaved people.²⁷

²⁵ Micheál Ó Riain, 'Queen Victoria and her Reign at Leinster House' *Dublin Historical Record* 52/1 (1999), pp 75-86.

²⁶ Kevin O'Neill, 'Taoiseach told 'not to go down any dark alleys' in lead up to cancelled RIC commemoration' *Irish Examiner*, 23 March 2020.

Part of what made that controversy so interesting was that it showed very clearly that there is an absence of physical markers or anchors in the city of Dublin that represent Ireland's relationship to transatlantic slave economy from which it benefited. Visibility, and its corollary, invisibility, is one of the key pillars of public history as a discipline and it is this 'invisibility' of Irish complicity in empire that should give us pause for thought.²⁸ Statues, monuments, street names, and public spaces are all to some degree a reflection of what Delores Hayden calls the 'power of place'.²⁹ To be able to control the narrative of the ground we walk on, and the space we inhabit, is an indication of power and orthodoxy, of what the powerful believe that the rest of us should honour.

In her recent work Ana Lucia Araujo argues that the memory of transatlantic slavery is to some degree a product of decolonisation in African and Caribbean societies, combined with a changing political and demographic picture in societies that either provided the setting and demand for this inhuman activity – like the USA – or are responsible for its creation and acceleration, such as Britain, France, and Spain.³⁰ Ireland and Dublin provides an interesting node in this network, because, I am arguing, it is our own postcolonial process of removing landmarks in the service of domestic political reorientation that obscures an active role in the slave economy. The decolonising impulse in Free State Ireland saw the erasure of many of the landmarks that might prompt reflection. I don't decry this, I merely point it out, and when this absence of markers is combined with a very well-established Irish story of national emergence following centuries of victimhood then the other side of our colonial past is rendered less visible.



Figure 6
Shelbourne Hotel.
Courtesy of Dublin City
Library and Archive.

²⁷ Eoghan Moloney, 'Shelbourne Hotel statues to be restored to plinths' *Irish Independent*, 24 September 2020.

²⁸ For more on visibility in Irish public history see Maeve Casserly and Ciaran O'Neill, 'Public history, invisibility, and women in the Republic of Ireland' *The Public Historian* 39/2 (2017), pp 10-30.

²⁹ Delores Hayden, *The power of place: Urban landscapes as public history* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

³⁰ Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the age of memory: Engaging the past* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

Did Dubliners own, trade, or profit from enslaved people?

I hope to use the public history of slavery as a way to problematize the scholarship on the Irish in empire, a growing field that has really blossomed since the mid 1990s. Since then we have seen the extraordinary growth in work on the Irish in India, a widespread recalibration of Irish migration and diaspora studies to include the imperial elements of the great migration from Ireland.³¹ Only very recently has Irish history begun to query the empire 'at home' in the Catherine Hall sense of the term, and the field has yet to begin the work of thinking about indigenous receptions and reactions to Irish colonisers as Alan Lester and Zoe Laidlaw have recently advocated.³² Arguably the best way to combat this misinformation would be to focus on the figure of the Irish planter or enslaver, and to increase the visibility of this type of figure in Irish historiography. Planters and enslavers make difficult research subjects. They are, after all, a group of men given to excess on all fronts: once memorably described by Maria Skinner Nugent, wife of the (Irish) Governor of Jamaica, corrupt men who 'ate like cormorants and drank like porpoises.'³³ Another way to think about the effect of the slave economy on Dublin would be to think about subsidiary industries like banking, sugar-baking, and the linen industry.

Ireland produced a lot of linen, and it made the linen merchants very wealthy. By 1796, 56% of all Irish exports were either linen, hemp, or flax. In practice we know that the large majority of linen produced for export, went to England, though a fair proportion of that will have ended up in the West Indies. And some of it went directly there, and we know that because Irish merchants had a niche, and that niche was the production of low quality cheap cloth, exactly the sort of material used to clothe the enslaved population of the Americas.³⁴ If linen was the great success story of eighteenth-century Irish industry, and there really are not many, then we need to add the corrective that some of that produce helped fuel the slave economy, and then apply that logic to sectors with ties to the slave economy such as sugar refinement and banking.

Irish banking was a provincial affair in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth. Most lines of credit that supported transatlantic trade were extended from London,

³¹ For the present state of the field of modern Ireland and Empire see Jill C. Bender, 'Ireland and Empire' *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (Oxford, 2016), pp 343-60; Barry Crosbie, 'Ireland and the empire in the nineteenth century' in James M. Kelly (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Vol. 3, 1730-1880* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 617-636.

³² See in particular a useful summary of the literature in Zoë Laidlaw and Alan Lester (eds), *Indigenous communities and settler colonialism: Land holding, loss and survival in an interconnected world* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp 1-23; Miranda Johnson, *The Land is our History: Indigeneity, law, and the settler state* (Oxford, 2016).

³³ Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal: Jamaica One Hundred Years Ago: Reprinted from a Journal Kept by Maria, Lady Nugent, from 1801 to 1815*, Issued for Private Circulation in 1839.

³⁴ Andy Bielenberg, *Ireland and the Industrial Revolution: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Irish Industry* (London, 2009), pp 9-20.

leading many major Irish trading families to effectively base their operations there through informal but extraordinarily complex Irish networks in the city.³⁵ The first real attempt at a large scale modern Irish bank came in 1783 with the creation of the Bank of Ireland, several of whose early directors were prominent merchants in the city who had direct or indirect connections to transatlantic trade. These directors included the La Touche family as well as the Maquay family, for whom a bridge is named in the Docklands of Dublin, and who had extensive connections to plantations in Trinidad.

Catholics were locked out of directorship until the admission of the wine merchant Stephen Grehan in 1830, but local credit was available from the between 40 and 60 banks operating from 1780 to the collapse of the 1820s, albeit in a climate of frequent bank failure and high levels of instability in the sector.³⁶ Other banks tended to be fleeting and precarious affairs, with the notable exception of the La Touche dynasty of bankers – Huguenots who cornered the local high-value market from about 1725 by becoming bankers not only to their own community in Dublin, but also a high proportion of the gentry. With houses at Harristown, Bellevue, and Marlay, the La Touche property portfolio is one of the most extensive to have connections to Irish slave-ownership. The family was compensated for their extensive Jamaican estates in the 1830s, and despite several family members spending much of their life in Jamaica this connection was almost never remarked upon in the various glowing accounts of their private banking past. That silence remains to this date, with none of the entries relating to the family in the 2009 Dictionary of Irish Biography making that slave-ownership visible. Their name remains highly visible in Dublin today in the form of the La Touche House at the International Financial Service Centre in Dublin 1, recently purchased for €84.3m in 2020.³⁷

Banking was a discrete business, but the refinement of sugar was anything but. All too little is known of Dublin's sugar-bakers. Dorothy Cashman's recent article sheds light on the confectioners who sold refined sugar products at the point of consumption, and there is a clear connection – noted by Gilbert – to some local fortunes buttressed by the refining of imported sugar in eighteenth-century Dublin. Finola O'Kane has noted that there are two competing Sugar House Lanes in the mid-eighteenth century, one off Hawkins Street near the quays and another in the

³⁵ For more on these networks see Craig Bailey, *Irish London: Middle Class Migration in the Global Eighteenth Century* (Liverpool, 2013), pp 157-188; John Bergin 'Irish Catholics and their networks in eighteenth-century London' *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 39/1 (2015), pp 66-102.

³⁶ Seán Kenny and John D. Turner, 'Wildcat bankers or political failure? The Irish financial pantomime, 1797-1826' *European Review of Economic History* 24, no. 3 (2020), pp 522-577.

³⁷ Ronan Quinlan, 'Against all odds: The Top 10 commercial property deals of 2020' *The Irish Times*, 16 December 2020.

Liberties by Crane Lane.³⁸ A considerable portion of those sugar refineries were run by Catholics – up to a third of the industry was Catholic-owned by the 1780s when changes in legislation threatened its future. Quaker, Huguenot, and Anglican families were all involved in sugar baking.³⁹ Huguenot families such as the Maignons and the Seguins seemed to have clustered near Townsend Street and Lazar Hill, quite close to the bay and thus ideally located for an import-dependent business. Particularly active in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century it may be that these families were importing sugar via the elaborate networks their families had built in ports like Nantes prior to the purging and exile of their communities in the 1690s.⁴⁰

Several of the biggest figures in the sugar trade were prominent members of the Catholic Committee, and no one denomination seems to have cornered the sugar market: a sign that people of all faiths were prone to a sweet tooth. It also suggests that profits derived from a subsidiary colonial industry were very probably funnelled into nationalist political activism. A defensive 1778 notice in Saunders's News Letter listed 24 refiners or bakers in Dublin, including some who had been in the business for several generations such as the Nairac, Maziere, and Sweetman families. The most famous of these was the Byrne family, whose figurehead, Edward Byrne, was allegedly paying the highest tax bill in Ireland in the 1790s and whose will was proven for more than £69,000 on his death in 1804. This fortune derived from sugar baking and distilling.⁴¹ Byrne's main commercial site was in the now-forgotten neighbourhood of Mullinahack, near Christchurch Cathedral, but his property portfolio was extensive and his political and financial influence was considerable.

It is clear that sugar clustered in the Liberties. The Maquays had a premises on Thomas Street, and Thomas Nowlan's sugar refinery was based in Francis Street, and the Sweetman family had property in this area also.⁴² Even quite small players in this industry can turn out to have left physical legacies in the city. For example take one such sugar merchant, Robert Hyndman, merchant and enslaver, of Antigua, whose house at 4 Belvedere Place still stands on the grand approach into the city from the green Northern suburbs. His son, John Elliott Hyndman was an alderman of the city and had a house on Wellington Road in Ballsbridge. The Hyndmans bought one of their Antiguan estates from Patrick Kirwan, whose family had long

³⁸ Finola O'Kane, 'Dublin's Sugar Landscapes in the Eighteenth Century; Some French Parallels and Connections?' (unpublished, 2021), pp 1-2.

³⁹ P.M. Rambaut, 'The participation of Huguenot settlers in Dublin's sugar bakeries in the 18th century' *Huguenot Society Proceedings*, 25/5 (1993).

⁴⁰ Marie Léoutre, 'Huguenot property in Ireland' *Huguenot Society Journal*, 30/3 (2015), pp 346-57.

⁴¹ C.J. Woods, 'Edward Byrne 1740-1804' *DIB*.

⁴² Bryan Mawer, 'Sugar Bakers: From Sweat to Sweetness Database', <http://www.mawer.clara.net/> Accessed 11/08/2021.

had ties to the sugar plantations.⁴³ These physical traces of slave-ownership prompt many questions for a Dubliner. In what follows, I will attempt a snapshot of what lands and houses in the greater Dublin area might have benefitted from repatriated money. To do this I am going to limit my search to North Dublin, in order to better test a theory already advanced for the South Dublin suburbs by Finola O’Kane. This work has begun to show us that there are direct connections between the Caribbean and the sequence of houses built across suburbs like Booterstown, Blackrock, and down to Dalkey in the south bay in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Most recently it has been revealed that UCD itself is built on the grounds of three prestigious estates in Donnybrook that all have connections to various Caribbean plantations.⁴⁴ The name of the campus, ‘Belfield’, is almost certainly taken from the Jamaican sugar plantation of the Digges Le Touche family on whose land UCD’s students tread daily. This reciprocal relationship between Dublin’s finest villa belt and the sugar plantations of the Caribbean has all sorts of implications, and it is worth testing the theory north of the Liffey to see if this pattern maintains.

⁴³ Vere Langford Oliver, ‘Pedigree of Kirwan’ *History of Antigua*, Vol II, p. 129, quoted in LBS.

⁴⁴ Finola O’Kane and Ellen Rowley (eds), *Making Belfield: Space and Place at UCD* (Dublin, 2020).

North Dublin Slave Villas

In the eighteenth century Drumcondra was a slightly scruffy assemblage of big houses and featured the kind of haphazard development that can be expected from an ancient artery road north of the capital city. It was a place of taverns, and pleasure grounds.⁴⁵ It was a little wild, but it was also, it turns out, a place with plenty of connections to the slave trade. John Taylor's Map of 1816 notes most major houses in the general area stretching from Clontarf across Whitehall, Glasnevin, Drumcondra, and Finglas.⁴⁶

Let's take for example the Thorndale estate near present-day Whitehall – a mansion and farm owned by Joseph Wilson, late of Philadelphia and founder of Joseph Wilson and Son, general merchants. Thorndale was the main Irish residence of this trader, along with a house on Lower Ormond quay in the city (Figure 7).



Figure 7
10 Ormond Quay,
Mooney Collection (1976).
Courtesy of Dublin City
Library and Archive.

According to his will he also held considerable land in Armagh. Joseph was a personal friend of President George Washington and his sons became major slave-owners en route to becoming easily one of the richest families in Dublin by the mid-nineteenth century. Joseph Wilson was an associate of William Patterson in Philadelphia in the early 1770s, and was recalled by him as one of the first 'twenty persons who associated & took up arms in defence of American rights in the City of Philadelphia' that winter.⁴⁷ This early fraternal bond likely helped Wilson build a property portfolio across Philadelphia and the southern slave states in common with many of his fellow revolutionaries. An initial partnership with James Lecky in the mid 1770s saw Wilson trade between Annapolis and Dublin.

⁴⁵ Arthur Garrett, *From Age to Age: A History of the Parish of Drumcondra*, (Dublin, 1971); M.J. Tutty, 'Drumcondra' *Dublin Historical Record*, 15/3 (1959), pp 86-96.

⁴⁶ Taylor's map of the environs of Dublin extending 10 to 14 miles from the castle by actual survey on a scale of 2 inches to one mile (Dublin, 1816).

⁴⁷ William Patterson to James Madison, 18 April 1815, Madison Papers, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/03-09-02-0194>.

Wilson's 1809 will noted that his wife did not want to reside at Thorndale after his death, and so he bequeathed it to his eldest son, Thomas Wilson, who lived there until at least the late 1820s when the house was bought by David Henry Sherrard and the Wilson family took up residence in 6 Mountjoy Square East. It was Thomas who would later be compensated for the loss of 451 enslaved people in 1833, a transaction that brought the family more than £23,000: an extraordinary sum of money. Joseph also made provision for 10 Lower Ormond Quay to be bequeathed to Thomas, a Cassells-designed house (1765) that had originally been let to David LaTouche.⁴⁸ The family's extensive estates in Armagh were in Lisadian, Loughgilly, and remained in family possession until about 1935 and totalled about 4,049 acres in 1878.

The Wilsons had sugar estates in Trinidad prior to compensation. In an excellent example of how money from the slave economy can gradually be made respectable, the Wilson family went from strength to strength in the nineteenth century after the trade was abolished. They are now more commonly associated with two properties in the south of the city. The first belonged to Joseph's brother, Robert Wilson: Thorndale House in Temple Road in Dartry, now one of the most expensive houses in Ireland, last valued at €5.4m in 2019. In 1883 Thom's identifies Robert as a barrister, but in fact he had spent much of his life handling the plantations in Trinidad post-compensation, where he met and married his wife in the 1850s. His only son, Herbert Wilson, was also a barrister in Dublin, living at 12 Hatch Street in 1923, and it was generally noted in his 1927 obituaries that he was born in Trinidad – though not why he was born there. Robert's grandson Cyril Wilson became familiar to many Dubliners in the 1950s under the pseudonym J. Ashton Freeman – a wildlife broadcaster on Irish radio and in the Dublin press.⁵⁰ Thomas's only sister, Sarah, married the Dublin general merchant, Henry Higginbotham, and died at her house in Lota, Bray, in 1861. Higginbotham – who mostly traded in tea – was bankrupted by 'panic' of 1825, losing an estimated £100,000 overnight. It was noted that he was an agent to the Belfast Commercial Bank, and had married 'a lady of a very large fortune' with whom he had 'lived in the first style of elegance.' Their son, George, was later Chief Justice in Victoria 1886-92.⁵¹

The other house associated with the Wilson family is Westbury House in Stillorgan, bought in 1837 from Edmund O'Beirne by the eldest son, Thomas Wilson, in Dublin,

⁴⁸ Lecky and Wilson, Merchants, are based at 10 Lower Ormond Quay in the mid 1780s, and thereafter Joseph Wilson, Merchant, through the 1790s. See *Saunders's Newsletter*, 29 March 1785; *Saunders's Newsletter*, 2 February 1789.

⁴⁹ Charles Allen Munn, *Three Types of Washington Portraits* (1908), pp 37-40; U.H. Hussey De Burgh, *The Landowners of Ireland* (Hodges, Foster, and Figgis, 1878), p. 479; *Northern Whig*, 25 January 1935.

⁵⁰ 'Herbert Wilson' *Thom's Irish Who's Who* (Dublin, 1923), p. 262; 'J. Ashton Freeman,' *Mooney Goes Wild*, RTE Archives, 19 November 2017.

⁵¹ Edward E. Morris, *A Memoir of George Higginbotham* (London, 1895), pp 1-6. For Sarah Wilson's death see 'Deaths', *Derry Journal*, 27 March 1861. For Higginbotham's ruin see *The Examiner*, 1 January 1826; *The Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 5 January 1826.

just after the compensation claims were paid out.⁵² Westbury House and Clonmore House (also a Wilson property) are both now owned by St Raphaela's Convent, run by the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who took over the site from the Daughters of Charity in 1971. The Daughters of Charity had operated an orphanage at Westbury since the 1930s and at that time the total site amounted to 93 prime south Dublin acres. The history of the site offered by the Handmaids notes only the Pilkington and Delvin families as prior owners of Westbury, and makes no mention of the Wilson family.⁵³ Thomas died in 1857 with a reported £450,000 fortune to his name, and had been a director and at one point, governor of the Bank of Ireland.⁵⁴ Thomas had consolidated the importance gained by his father in Dublin commerce, and then

improved on it somewhat. One obituarist listed the connections. He was a director of the National Insurance Company, a shipowner, a West India planter, a member of the Ballast Board, a vice president of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and a director of the Belfast Junction Railway Co. A 'dozen such men as Thomas Wilson,' they declared, 'would do as much to raise the commercial importance of a port than ten times the number of ordinary traders.'⁵⁵

Thomas was paid out on five Trinidadian estates in 1836 and directly after that he bought the rebuilt 1760 Pilkington House, Westbury.⁵⁶ By the time of his death in 1857 he was living



Figure 8
Plaque to Thomas Wilson,
Unitarian Church, St
Stephens Green. Image
courtesy of David Caron.

⁵² <https://www.youwho.ie/wilsont.html>; <http://www.dippam.ac.uk/ied/records/27227>

⁵³ 'History of St Raphaela's National School' <http://straphaelasns.ie/history-ethos/> Accessed September 2021.

⁵⁴ Enda MacMahon, *A Most Respectful Meeting of Merchants: Dublin Chamber of Commerce, a History* (Dublin, 2014).

⁵⁵ 'Thomas Wilson' *Freeman's Journal*, 7 October 1857.

⁵⁶ <https://www.youwho.ie/obeirne.html>

⁵⁷ David Caron, 'An address on A E Child's Wilson Memorial Window (Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love, and Work) given to the congregation of Dublin's Unitarian Church on the occasion of the centenary of its dedication' 3 June 2018. Many thanks to Dr Caron for making this text available to me.

at 15 Upper Temple Street, now the site of the Children's Hospital. The family later invested about £2,300 on a site in St Stephen's Green where today you will find the lovely little Unitarian church. Inside that church you will find the family commemorated in a sublime stained glass window designed by AE Child in 1918 and erected in the Unitarian church in St Stephens Green (Figures 8 and 9).⁵⁷



Figure 9
Wilson Memorial Window.
Image courtesy of
Josef Vrtiel.

⁵⁷ David Caron, 'An address on A E Child's Wilson Memorial Window (Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love, and Work) given to the congregation of Dublin's Unitarian Church on the occasion of the centenary of its dedication' 3 June 2018. Many thanks to Dr Caron for making this text available to me.

This is the process by which one can clean up a legacy as a family of enslavers. The ‘Wilson Window,’ as it is known, is considered one of the finest works completed by Child, whose work at An Túr Gloine was feted during what was the peak of Irish stained glass. The window by Child was in fact the third and final stained glass installed in honour of the Wilsons, the previous two had been destroyed by fire. The first window was mooted in 1864, commissioned in Tours, and installed c.1886. This was destroyed in 1892, replaced by a similar window in 1893, only for that to be destroyed by a fire (unrelated to the Easter Rising) in 1916. This opened up the opportunity for a local commission, and it fell to An Túr Gloine, a company well known for their revivalist art.⁵⁸ The central themes of Child’s window are Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love, and Work. The theme of ‘Discovery’ is especially ironic, given the context of Wilson’s fortune, and features a depiction of Christopher Columbus. The themes of ‘Love’ and ‘Work’ combine in a rose window (Figure 10) and are almost unbearable, given the context of the donation. It features a man and woman reaping the harvest with an indistinct third person in the background. It is tempting, of course, to read an intentional wink from the artist in these references. The congregation at the Unitarian Church were unaware of the Wilson’s connection to the slave trade until relatively recently. Indeed, the history of a contemporary member of the Unitarian congregation, the abolitionist James Haughton, is much better known. Haughton must have sat in the same pews as Wilson, and was a trustee of the ‘new’ church funded by the Wilsons. It seems very likely that he would have known the origin of the Wilson wealth.⁵⁹



Figure 10
Wilson Memorial
Window (detail).
Image courtesy of
Josef Vrtiel.

⁵⁸ David Caron, ‘An Túr Gloine and Michael Healy 1873 –1941’ (PhD, University of Dublin, 1991).

⁵⁹ Lois Kapila, ‘A Dublin Church Reflects on How It Benefited from Slavery’ *Dublin Inquirer*, 17 March 2021. The point about Haughton was made by Rory Delaney in his sermon delivered on the centenary of the Wilson Window, ‘Selective Memories’, *Oscailt* (July, 2018).

In 1859 Wilson's position as a director of the Bank of Ireland passed directly to his son Joseph without critical comment in the press, and indeed it passed down the line for several generations. This Joseph lived at Clonmore House, Stillorgan until his death in 1898.⁶⁰ Joseph's son-in-law, Frederick Coddington Pilkington was also a director. This illustrated not only the enduring influence of the Wilson family in Dublin, but also the extent to which the directorship was oligarchical and connected to Atlantic trade long after the abolition of slavery. In fact two new directors were selected in 1859, Robert Wilson and John P Hardy of Hardy, Brothers, & Co – another West India merchant, who had – the *Freeman's Journal* noted – recently served in the traditional anteroom to the bank, the Ballast Board.⁶¹ At Stillorgan the Wilsons were neighbours to a major Catholic enslaver, Valentine O'Connor, who owned Oakley Lodge in Stillorgan as well as a house on Dominick Street in the city.⁶² O'Connor was a well-connected Catholic figure in Dublin, and a United Irishman and member of the Catholic Committee. He owned a majority share in the Mount William Estate at St Vincent, having taken it over in trust following the financial failure of a relative, Bryan Blake. His family married into another with elaborate and intricate connections to slavery, the Sweetman brewing family, who once owned a large industrial site on which the Unionist Guinness family built the Iveagh Markets.

The junior partner in Joseph Wilson and Sons, was Henry Daniel Brooke, the owner of Coolock House in Dublin.⁶³ This was sold to him in 1828 by Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, who had inherited the property in controversial circumstances and whose order came back into possession of the property in the twentieth century.⁶⁴ It would be interesting to trace how many similar properties with connections to slavery ended up in Catholic institutional hands. The time of crossover, 1830s to 1850s, as the compensation claims came in and many Caribbean owners had cashed out, correlates with a major period of Catholic institutional expansion. Henry Daniel Brooke did not invest his money in Ireland for long. He left for the Isle of Man, where he died in 1847. Much of his fortune ended up in Cheshire and Birkenhead via his wife and sons. His wife, Lucinda, died in 1860 at Clifton Park, a purpose-built villa estate in Birkenhead that attracted many of the wealthier merchants of Liverpool.⁶⁵ His sons, one named after Joseph Wilson, became merchants in Liverpool.

⁶⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 29 September 1898.

⁶¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 4 April 1859.

⁶² *Tuam Herald*, 27 August 1927.

⁶³ 'At Kirkmallow, Isle of Man, Henry Daniel Brooke Esq., late of Coolock house Dublin' died 1847. <http://www.dublinhistoricmaps.ie/maps/1800-1849/index.html>

⁶⁴ For a discussion of this in Mary C. Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (Dublin, 2012), pp 72-3.

⁶⁵ *Liverpool Mail*, 1 December 1860; *The Pilot*, 16 April 1847.

Donnycarney House – now Clontarf Golf Club – is associated with the failed stockbroker and West Indies planter Abel Labertouche, who lived there in the 1830s before his financial failure in 1846. Labertouche had two estates in Trinidad.⁶⁶ Labertouche was secretary to the Marine Insurance Company of Ireland, one of three Dublin-based insurance companies that specialised in indemnities for trade, and counted among its customers prominent linen merchants, bankers, and the wealthier general merchants.⁶⁷ The others were the Royal Exchange Insurance Company of Ireland and the Commercial Insurance Company. All three clustered in Dame Street, which had by the late eighteenth century become the commercial centre of Dublin. Alongside the banks, these companies provided the financial architecture that accommodated the merchant families that enslaved people in far away plantations.

Sometimes the sugar and linen interests in the city were hand in glove. This is certainly the case with the nexus of families around Leland Crosthwaite, George Maquay, and the Adair family of Laois and Dublin. Crosthwaites had a base in Lucan for linen manufacture but had also long been associated with sugar importation and baking, as were the Maquay brothers George and John Leland Maquay, both of whom were, like Crosthwaite, directors of the Bank of Ireland and trustees of Nelson's column. Their cousins, the Adairs, had large sugar plantations in Trinidad. These families had a full range of addresses in Lucan, Chapelizod, Fleet Street, Fitzwilliam Square, and were founder members of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce.⁶⁸

These cases raise all sorts of questions. How much do we know about the transatlantic investments of this generation of suburban magnates? How many of them were aldermen, or otherwise politically prominent? How many were centrally involved in the Bank of Ireland, or connected to one of the many Irish banks that failed? How many of them were founders of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce or its adjacent club: the Ouzel Galley Society? To what extent does money earned in the American colonies or British West Indies filter back to infrastructural projects like the Grand Canal Company, or indeed the railways that begin to appear in the 1830s just after compensation? What does any of this change about our understanding of the place of Dublin in a global economy shaped by Atlantic trade and the slave economy?

⁶⁶ See *Bradshaw's Railway Gazette* Vol 2, p 891; Colin Thom, *Bervie and Beyond: The Thom Family History* (2013), p. 59; 'Bankrupts' *Freeman's Journal*, 29 November 1845.

⁶⁷ For a list of its subscribers in 1815 see *Wilson's Dublin Directory* (1815).

⁶⁸ <https://www.manfamily.org/about/other-families/crosthwait-family/>

Nini Rodgers noted that Dublin was the lesser of the three biggest Irish ports connected to transatlantic slave economy. But if there are this many connections in Dublin, how many of them will we find in the hinterlands of the other port cities? The work done by Stefanie Barczewski on Irish estates that were bought by planters shows that Ireland is generally underrepresented compared to Scotland and even Wales. Ireland represents about 5% of a database she compiled that charted estate purchases from imperial wealth derived in various ways. But to search for a country estate purchased by successful Irish planters would be to miss their desired trajectory entirely. The bulk of successful slave-owners converted their Caribbean cash to bankable London assets, close to the centre of credit in the empire. This ensured they remained close to parliament, and close to the political elite they intended to lobby. Thus when we find one of these people, they might not read as Irish at all. We need to be more imaginative about how we trace these Irish enslavers because they were deliberately elusive and benefited from the amoral liminality afforded them by being Irish. The main benefit of this was that they could turn their presumed disloyalty to good use. Irish planters and slave-owners could operate between the lines of the French, British and particularly Dutch empire. Their Irishness allowed them to speak to many imperial agendas. Thus the Catholic Irish merchants of Nantes could work freely in St Domingue or Martinique. So too could pseudo-Catholic enslavers like John Black work the ceded islands of the late eighteenth century for the British, and when the slave trade was abolished, other Irish planters could continue to profit from the sale of humans in Cuba, as the work of Margaret Brehony and Giselle Gonzalez Garcia has shown us.⁶⁹ In the Greater Spanish Caribbean of Louisiana we will find many Irish enslavers. In the Dutch colonies we find the Irish, just like we find them wherever we see the French. Orla Power's work shows us Irish enslavers like the Tuite family, operating in the Danish possessions.⁷⁰ The issue is broader than the British empire, and Irish historians and citizens will need to reconfigure their limited lens before we can really begin to gauge the magnitude of the effect of the Atlantic trade. As Sylvie Kleinman has noted, 'we may not have many statues to topple, but there is much history to be written.'⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jonathan Jeffrey Wright, *An Ulster Slave Owner in the Revolutionary Atlantic: The Life and Letters of John Black* (Dublin, 2019); Margaret Brehony, 'Irish Migration to Cuba, 1835-1845: Empire, Ethnicity, Slavery and 'Free' Labour' (PhD: NUI Galway, 2012); Giselle Gonzalez Garcia, 'Caught between empires' (2020).

⁷⁰ Orla Power, 'Irish planters, Atlantic merchants: the development of St. Croix, Danish West Indies, 1750-1766' (PhD: NUI Galway, 2011).

⁷¹ Sylvie Kleinman, 'Ireland and the £20 million swindle' *History Ireland* (May-June, 2021), pp 26-29 at p. 29.

Conclusion

Most people are not aware of the role played by Irish merchants, sojourners, and traders in the economy of enslavement. This historiographical gap translates into public historical significance, and all sorts of silences result. What lies behind these silences are narratives that do not sit easily within the Irish social and historical imaginary. This unease can be traced even in our contemporary political discourse, and they impact the manner in which we present ourselves to the world, and the way in which we 'use' our history in public. There was a palpable sense of relief when Joe Biden was sworn in as 46th president of the United States following a tumultuous four years of Donald Trump. Our Taoiseach, Micheal Martin, tweeted an image (Figure 10) of a John Behan sculpture in his office at Leinster House in response to Biden's election. The sculpture is one of a series completed by Behan, redolent of famine migration and coffin ships. As the tweet from An Taoiseach indicates, the ancestors of Biden were part of that key narrative of exile and loss in Irish memory: a meta-narrative of the Irish-American relationship and a core aspect of Irish public histories. It is a comfortable narrative and one that fits reasonably well to the Biden story, though it is of course, not the only narrative in his ancestry. It ticks the boxes of the famine Irish story. One of exile and loss, but pride in what was achieved by Irish migrants in challenging circumstances. It is a narrative that bolsters, too, the Irish-American story of refuge and eventual merit based upward social mobility. Biden's Irish connections are mostly clustered on the Cooley peninsula and in Ballina. It does not seem at all unlikely that there will soon be a Joe Biden street in Ballina to match the John F Kennedy Memorial Park in New Ross, or the Barack Obama plaza on the M7.

In 2009, early in the Obama administration, it was revealed by the genealogist Megan Smolenyak - to muted reaction - that Michelle Obama may too have had an Irish ancestor.⁷² This ancestor is usually named as Dolphus Shields, grandson of Arthur Shields, an Irish enslaver based in Virginia and Georgia in the mid-eighteenth century, and son of Henry Shields - owner of the future first lady's great-great-great grandmother, Melvinia. In other words, Michelle Obama descends from an Irish enslaver. This is not a fact that has gained traction in Ireland. There was no national conversation about it when the Obamas came to Ireland, and no Taoiseach has ever tweeted about it. But it didn't go away, in part because Michelle Obama herself has been quite persistent in referencing it. In her bestselling memoir *Becoming* (2018), she wrote of this ancestor again. This book has sold more copies in the past two years than almost any other, exceeding 10 million copies by March 2019.⁷³ Her speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2016 is famous for the phrase 'When they go low

⁷² Rachel L. Swarns and Jodi Kantor, 'In first lady's roots, a complex path from slavery' *New York Times* 8 (2009).

⁷³ Mark Sweney, 'Michelle Obama's memoir sells more than 10m copies,' *The Guardian*, 26 March 2019.

we go high' but she also remarked in that same speech that 'I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves'. Some of those slaves belonged to the Kilkenny born architect of the White House, James Hoban. Many people in Ireland can tell you that Hoban based the White House on the Viceregal lodge in the Dublin's Phoenix Park, but how many can tell you he was an enslaver? Why are many Irish people more receptive to the fact that Joe Biden's ancestry includes famine-era migrants than the fact that Michelle Obama descends from Melvinia, whose owner and enslaver was an Irish man?

Dublin's relationship to slavery maps onto these silences precisely. As a modern historian I would argue that the history of Irish colonial victimhood is as legitimate as it is well-developed. It is why we would rather remember Frederick Douglass giving abolition speeches in Dublin than the part Irish people played in creating the economic and social conditions that necessitated his activism. It is why – despite being surrounded in Dublin by suburban villas and country houses, many of which benefitted from the plantation economy or from the demand created by it – we are so incurious about their deeper histories.

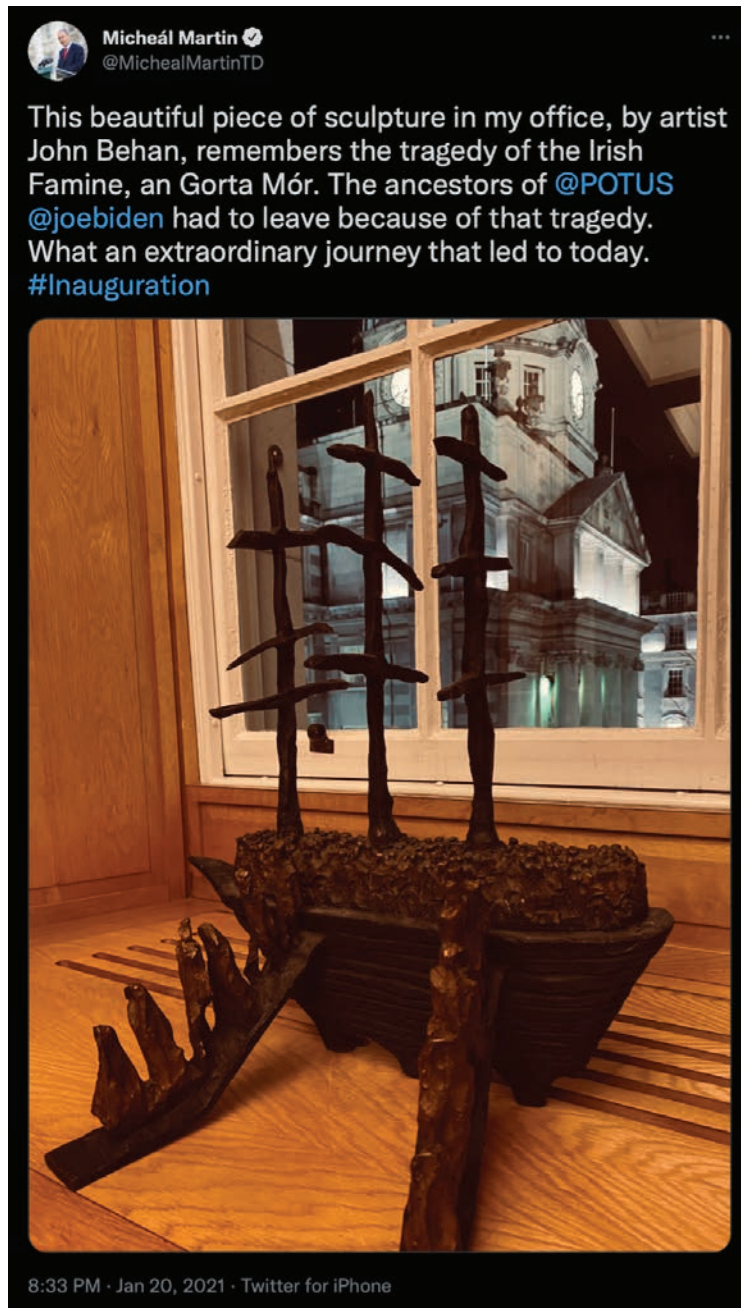


Figure 11
Micheál Martin
(@MichealMartinTD) Twitter,
20 January 2021. [https://
twitter.com/michealmartind/
status/1351991286551736324](https://twitter.com/michealmartind/status/1351991286551736324)

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JOHN THOMAS GILBERT was born in Dublin on 23 January 1829, and died there on 23 May 1898. Author of the influential three volume *A history of the city of Dublin*, published in 1854-59, he was a firm advocate of documenting the history of his native city using primary sources. His work on manuscripts relating to the city alerted him to the need for the preservation of Irish public records, many of which were in a neglected and vulnerable condition. He commenced a campaign which eventually led to the setting up of the Public Record Office in the Four Courts.

He calendared the records of Dublin Corporation, which date from the twelfth century, and began the series of printed volumes *Calendar of ancient records of Dublin*. As an inspector for the Historical Manuscripts Commission, he examined the holdings in many of Ireland's great houses and municipal councils. He prepared for the press and supervised the printing of *Facsimiles of the national manuscripts of Ireland and Historic and municipal documents of Ireland A.D. 1172-1320*, the latter was published as a volume in the Master of the Rolls series.

His very valuable library of books and manuscripts relating to Dublin and Ireland was purchased by the then Dublin Corporation after his death and forms the nucleus of the special collections of Dublin City Libraries.

To mark the centenary of John T. Gilbert's death in 1998, Dublin City Council established an annual commemorative lecture series. The aim of the series is to celebrate the life and work of Gilbert, and the history of Dublin, the city whose past he wished to uncover and promote.

Cover image: John Rocque's map of Dublin, 1756 from Dublin City Library and Archive.

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