Debunking the imagery of the “Irish slaves” meme

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Those that promote the myth of Irish perpetual hereditary chattel slavery in Colonial America and the Anglo-Caribbean use a variety of images entirely unrelated to indentured servitude to accompany their anti-history. I examined a selection of them.

This is part one of my seven-part series debunking the meme. See Part Two, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven. If you wish to support my work, you can make a donation here.

1. Sale of a Slave Girl in Rome by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1884)
The is the most common image that accompanies spurious “Iris: the Forgotten White Slaves” articles. It is cropped from a painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme. In this work, Gérôme imagined a scene in a Roman slave market from about two thousand years ago.
2. The "Redlegs" of Barbados
The “Irish slaves” meme has been embraced by racists and white nationalists. The meme below was shared by a Tea Party Leader in 2013. It accompanied her advice to African Americans to “move on” from slavery.

![Image of the meme](https://medium.com/@Limerick1914/the-imagery-of-the-irish-slaves-myth-dissected-143e70aa6e74#.dugyl3ycm)

**White Irish slaves were treated worse than any other race in the US**

**When is the last time you heard an Irishman bitching & moaning about how the world owes them a living?**

But this photograph is not from the U.S., nor does it depict “White Irish slaves.”

![Image of the photograph](https://medium.com/@Limerick1914/the-imagery-of-the-irish-slaves-myth-dissected-143e70aa6e74#.dugyl3ycm)

Historian Matthew C. Reilly has done extensive research on the “poor white” community of Barbados. This photo was taken in Barbados in 1908, and as Reilly has noted none of...
those pictured have Irish surnames and these families appear to have both African and European ancestry. Reilly writes

“Photograph locally known as “The ‘Redlegs’ of Barbados”. Pictured are fishermen residents of Bath in the parish of St. John taken in 1908. Photo courtesy of Mr. Richard Goddard.”

“The photograph is widely known amongst island history buffs as well as those interested in family genealogy. On several occasions I encountered individuals who had traced their ancestry to one of the impoverished men pictured in the 1908 portrait of the “Redleg” fishermen. Until my conversation with Fred Watson (Figure 7.2), however, I had never heard it referred to as a “family photograph”. Represented are members of the Watson, Goddard, King, and Haynes families, surnames popular amongst the “Redleg” population for several generations and still present in St. John today. Fred was able to identify several of his father’s and mother’s brothers that were pictured in the photograph including his mother’s brother Simeon Goddard found on the lower left and his father’s brother Joe Watson found in center of the back row. The revelation that the photograph depicts an extended matrilineal kinship network was made more significant by the realization that phenotypes indicate that this network involved Afro-Barbadian as well as “poor white” genealogies.”

3. Survivors of a Japanese POW camp during World War Two

Nick @nickmichaels12 · 14h
Irish slaves not make back homeland to describe ordeal. These lost slaves that time and biased history books forgot
4. Union Army soldier on his release from Andersonville Prison in May, 1865

Probably the most perverse co-option of all. Victims of the horror of the Confederate Andersonville prison appropriated by Neo-Confederates to support their racist meme. N.B. the Ferguson hashtag.
5. Child labourers on a Texan farm, 1913

This is another popular image. It is used here to promote an “Irish Slave Trade” movie idea. This photo of child labourers was taken in 1913 by the great Lewis Hine. The children were working on H.M. Lane’s farm near Bells, Texas. Their father (and uncle for some of the children) was working the plough nearby. This photo is sometimes used on Stormfront when discussing “white slaves.”
6. The East India Company logo

The ongoing “we were slaves too!” appropriation of the Atlantic Slave Trade led to this misfire. The East India Company logo tattooed as an “Irish slave” branding. I asked this tattooist about the relevance of the tattoo and he referred me to an inactive (and since deleted) Facebook page named “We Were Irish and Slaves”. This Facebook page was the source and inspiration for the tattoo design. The featured branding irons (first and second images) are from the Wilberforce Museum. The third image, the one that the tattoo is based on, is a stamp of the East India Company, not a branding iron. It goes without saying that indentured servants were not branded like slaves on their arrival in the colonies.
7. Former Enslaved Children in New Orleans, 1864
The comfort and ease at which some Irish and Irish-Americans appropriate the history of black chattel slavery is remarkable and disturbing. Guilty of the appropriation below is the “Ireland Long Held in Chains” Facebook page. They shared this photo of former “white” slave children in New Orleans and labelled it “Irish Slavery — Three Slaves”. This piece of anti-slavery propaganda during the American Civil War was aimed at a Northern white audience. These enslaved children were “the offspring of white fathers through two or three generations.” The fact that many slave owners in Louisiana were of Irish descent only makes this appropriation more reprehensible. In my review of Irish surnames and slave-ownership I found that 159 different Irish surnames were represented among slave owners in Louisiana in 1850. These included Brady, Burke, Carroll, Connolly, Collins, Cullen, Crowley, Darcy, Devane, Hickey, Hogan, Keane, Lynch, Mahoney, McCormack, and Murphy. You can read about the history of these photographs in Mary Niall Mitchell’s article in the New York Times.
8. Group portrait of child labourers in Port Royal, South Carolina (1911)

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.
This “white slavery” meme (which appropriates the Zong Massacre) uses one of Lewis Hine’s photographs. Its caption reads “Group portrait of young girls working as oyster shuckers at the canning company at Port Royal, SC, 1911. From left to right: Josie, six years old, Bertha, six years old, and Sophie, 10 years old.”

Here is the original photograph.
This unbelievably ahistorical meme also suggests that in seventeenth Ireland “it was was no more [a] sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute.” This quote is not from the seventeenth century but the fourteenth, which makes it a full 300 years out of context. The original quote was made in 1317 in the Remonstrance of the Irish Chiefs to Pope John XXII. According to Diarmuid Scully (University College Cork) the Remonstrance described Domhnall, its author, as the ‘King of Ulster and by hereditary right the true heir to the whole of Ireland’ who “claims the support of the Irish élite and people, calls for papal backing against English rule and offers the kingship of Ireland to Edward Bruce of Scotland.” It wished to revoke the Laudabiliter. The Remonstrance accuses “the monks of the Cistercian order of Granard, in Ardagh diocese, so too the monks of Inch, of the same order, in Down diocese, shamelessly fulfil in deed what they proclaim in word. For, bearing arms publicly, they attack the Irish and slay them, and nevertheless they celebrate their masses.” This is to illustrate to the papal powers that some of the Christian orders in Ireland were murderous, heretical and did not warrant the Pope’s backing. This was a propagandic retort to Gerald of Wales’ infamous assertion that the English lay claim to Ireland as the Irish were not truly civilised or Christian. The Remonstrance inverts these slanderous justifications for the Cambro-Norman conquest of Ireland. William Petty alluded to this brutal 14th century colonial reality in the Political Anatomy of Ireland (1672)

“The English in Ireland before Henry the VII’s time, lived in Ireland as the Europeans do in America, or as several Nations do now upon the same Continent; so as an Englishman was not punishable for killing an Irish-man, and they were governed by different Laws; the Irish by the Brehon-Law, and the English there by the Laws of England…[then] English in Ireland, growing poor and discontented, degenerate into Irish; & vice versa; Irish, growing into Wealth and Favour, reconcile to the English.”

THE REMONSTRANCE OF IRISH PRINCES, 1317
Published in Features, Issue 6 (November/December 2013), Medieval History (pre-1500), Volume 21 The English crown first...

www.historyireland.com
9. The HMS Owen Glendower, an anti-slave trade frigate

*Irish Central* decided to use a painting of the HMS Glendower to accompany their article about “forgotten white slaves”. It states that this ship was used to bring “human cargo to South American[sic] and the Indies.” This article repeats the absurd claim that an “Irish slave trade” ended in 1839. But the HMS Glendower was not a slave ship. In fact it was used from 1821 to 1824 to suppress the slave trade.
10. The Putumayo Atrocities, 1900s-1910s
The Ancient Order of Hibernians in Florida (State Board) appropriated an image of heavily chained Putumayo Indians, implying that they are “Irish slaves”.

11. Timucua men cultivating a field and Timucua women planting corn or beans (Florida, c. 1560)
This image of the Timucua people planting their fields appears on some “Irish slaves” and “white slaves” blogs. The Neo-Confederate Save Your Heritage website frames it as “white slaves” working in South Carolina.
Florida Indians planting seeds of beans or maize, c. 1560 by Theodor de Bry, (1528–1598) Engraver: Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, (1533?-1588)

Indentured servants -- slaves -- working the plantations in South Carolina

This is historical fact
This is the Heritage of America
This is not taught in schools
Shame -- Shame -- Shame!
12. An illustration of Elizabeth Brownrigg, a torturer and murderer who was executed in England in 1767.

This “Irish slaves” meme uses an illustration of the infamous Elizabeth Brownrigg taken from *The New Newgate Calendar*, a sensationalist periodical which was published in England in the 1860s. The text of the meme is ridiculous; the values are apparently an invention, and it almost goes without saying that slaves were generally more expensive than servants because they were slaves. Lifetime ownership vs. 4–7 years indentures and slave-owners also claimed their children as their property. Although rare, in times of shortage (when labour demand/wages were high in Britain and thus migration unattractive) white servants’ contracts could be more expensive than slaves. It was a crime to murder a servant, but whipping was allowed as long as it was “moderate correction.” The claim that “African slaves were treated much better in Colonial America” is racist propaganda.
African slaves were very expensive (50 Sterling). Irish slaves were cheap (no more than 5 Sterling) and most often were either kidnapped from Ireland, or forcibly removed. They could be worked to death, whipped or branded without it being a crime. Many times they were beat to death and while the death of an Irish slave was a monetary setback, it was far cheaper than the death of an expensive African. African slaves were treated much better in Colonial America.

Here is the original image.
13. ‘Mulatto’ slave being whipped in an anti-slavery novel

This illustration is appropriated from the 19th century anti-slavery novel *The White Slave; or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* by Richard Hildreth. The protagonist being whipped is a ‘mulatto’ slave. His mother was enslaved and his father the enslaver.

**DR. CRAIG CONSIDINE**
14. Breaker boys working in Ewen Breaker of Pennsylvania Coal Co. (1911)

This is the newest version of the racist meme. It appeared online during Black History Month 2016 and has been shared 102,000 times so far. The photo does not depict “Irish slaves” but breaker boys working in Ewen Breaker of Pennsylvania Coal Co., South Pittston, Pennsylvania. The original photograph was taken by Lewis Hine in January 1911. Hine was the principle investigative photographer for National Child Labor Committee (NCLC).
15. A black man being whipped in Delaware (1920s)

This image is used by Neo-Nazis on this website to depict “Irish slaves”
Somehow it has made it from here into the mainstream.

An Irish slave whipped before a crowd, 1800s

But this image is clearly not an “Irish slave” in the 1800s. It was taken in Delaware in the 1920s and it shows an unnamed black man, fastened to a whipping post, being tortured.
16. A promotional photograph for a performance of Dion Boucicault’s play “The Octoroon” in London (c. 1862)

Here is a link to the original photograph. This satirical image was intended to challenge the audience by reversing racial stereotypes and it was used to promote the play during its run at the Adelphi theatre in London. Dion Boucicault is one of Ireland’s most famous playwrights and The Octoroon was his anti-slavery production based on Thomas Mayne Reid’s novel The Quadroon.
17. A stock photograph of a "crying black man" and a photo of Kevin Cunningham.
This exceptionally racist meme features a stock photograph and a photograph of Kevin Cunningham, an Irish-American who became famous after he started an online petition on change.org calling for the prosecution of George Zimmerman, the man who shot Trayvon Martin.

18. English Women being imported and sold to Planters in Colonial Virginia (1620s)

This meme of the “selling of Irish women” appears on multiple “Irish slaves” websites (inc. the Ancient Order of Hibernians) and across social media.
This image is actually taken from *Barnes’ popular history of the United States of America*.
The ratio of women to men was very low in the colony and so for the benefit of the colonial project, as Edmund S. Morgan describes it, a shipment was arranged by Virginia Company members “of a hundred willing maids, to be sold to the planters who could afford to buy a wife.” (American Slavery, American Freedom, p.95) So the image does not depict Irish women being sold into slavery. It depicts English women being sold into marriage. The planter was paying for the transport costs.

For more information about the role and limited rights of women in Colonial Virginia see Julie Richter’s overview.

19. Edwardian Servants, Byfield, Northamptonshire (c. 1920)

Some of these websites take the term ‘indentured servants’ literally...They turned this image of two maids photographed in a house in Byfield, Northamptonshire, sometime between 1896 and 1920....
...and made it into an awful “white slavery” meme.

from the Irish Slave Trade, Ancient Order of Hibernians (Florida)
20. Two women setting seed potatoes in Co. Antrim (1890s)

This is not an image of “Irish slaves” or indentured servants but of two women in Glenshesk, Co. Antrim planting potatoes. The photograph was taken by Robert J. Welch for the Congested Districts Boards in the late 1890s.

“They came as slaves and indentured servants; vast human cargo transported on tall British ships bound for the colonies in the American Colonies. They were shipped by the hundreds of thousands and included men, women, and even the youngest of children.” These were the Irish.
The “Irish slaves” meme is also used to deny the existence of white privilege. It is often accompanied by an image of the Damm family taken by the photographer Mary Ellen Mark in Los Angeles in 1987.

21. The Damm family, Los Angeles, 1987

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22. Italian Miners in Belgium (c. 1900)

This photograph was recently published on the far-right “Against Globalist Agenda” Facebook page and appended with the title “Irish slaves imported to America”
But this photo actually depicts miners in Belgium in the early 20th century.

23. A photograph of the Cliffs of Moher

![Image of the Cliffs of Moher with text:](image)

Excuse me, but the first slave owner in America was a black man. In the 1600s England brought thousands of Irish to America and sold them as slaves.

This meme uses a wistful photograph of the Cliffs of Moher. Here is the uncropped original.
24. An advert for two runaway Irish servants

Uncle Sam's Misguided Children

Thursday at 15:13 · 🌟
"Make a toast to all the Irish Slaves who died making America great."

"It says indented servants?"
“Shut up.”

25. An image from a Human Trafficking website and a photograph of President Obama’s visit to Moneygall, Ireland
This meme was created by conservative artist JP Hawkins in 2013.  
https://twitter.com/jphawkins2009/status/615982442361413632  
The caption reads “Obama visits Ireland, but fails to point out that the Irish were 1st slaves! Why?” The background image is a stock image taken from the Shutter Stock website and is tagged ‘Domestic Violence’.

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26. A photo of the Irish actor Cillian Murphy

I know what you are thinking. I have no idea either.

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27. A photo of red-haired Dutch girls on a beach in the
This ‘Irish slaves’ meme was created and published on Facebook by the self-published author and conspiracy theorist Michael John Melton. This photo however does not show ‘Irish slaves’ nor Irish children at all. It was taken on a beach in the Netherlands by Igor Borisov and all of the children are Dutch.

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