How the African victims of the Zong Massacre were replaced with “Irish slaves”

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"The Slave Ship" or “Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon Coming On” by Turner (1840)

This is part two of my series debunking the “Irish slaves” meme. See Part One, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven.
The strained juxtaposition of the Irish experience of involuntary indentured servitude in Barbados in the mid-17th century with the entire history of the transatlantic slave trade has led to a festival of disinformation. The most offensive aspect of this trend is the appropriation of African suffering to embellish the narrative. Recent iterations of these spurious “Irish slaves” blogs now claim that 132 Irish people were purposefully “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.”

This unmistakably refers to the murder of between 132 to 142 African people by the crew of the slave ship Zong in late November 1781. The appropriation of this crime serves to bolster the claim made at the end of these “Irish slaves” articles that “slavery is not about race.” It is true, there are many types of slavery and this is exactly why the co-option fails. The transatlantic slave trade was sustained and justified by anti-black racism.

Enter John Lee, the solicitor general who defended the owners of the Zong. He argued that the murdered Africans were not people, but property.

“What is this claim that human people have been thrown overboard? This is a case of chattels or goods. Blacks are goods and property; it is madness to accuse these well-serving honourable men of murder. They acted out of necessity and in the most appropriate manner for the cause. The late Captain Collingwood acted in the interest of his ship to protect the safety of his crew. To question the judgement of an experienced well-travelled captain held in the highest regard is one of folly, especially when talking of slaves. The case is the same as if wood had been thrown overboard.”

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Was this lie manufactured or is this a case of distortion? How did so many people read this and not recognise it as referring to one of the most famous legal cases involving the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade?

To answer the first question, we need to track how this aspect of the myth developed.
This distortion of history is rooted in the political attempt to hyper-inflate Irish victimhood and to obscure Irish participation in the transatlantic slave trade and racial oppression of African Americans. The initial juxtaposition of the Zong Massacre with Irish oppression can be traced back to James Mullin’s polemical article *Out of Africa — Out of Ireland*. Mullin, who was the Chair of the New Jersey-based *Irish Famine Curriculum Committee*, published this article about 15 years ago and it was carried on various websites. He did not replace the African victims of the Zong massacre with “Irish slaves”, nor did he intend for this to happen, but his constant interweaving of two different histories sparked this journey to complete co-option. If you read the following trail of sources you will see how confusion was encouraged until finally (and perversely) we find *Black History Month Ireland* promoting the “Irish slaves” version of the Zong Massacre.

**August 2002**

> In *Slavery and the Slave Trade*, James Walvin writes: “In 1781 the British slave ship Zong, unexpectedly delayed at sea and in danger of running short of supplies, simply dumped 132 slaves overboard in order to save the healthier slaves and on the understanding that such an action would be covered by the ship’s insurance (not the case had the wretched slaves merely died).”

**June 2003**

> There were horrendous abuses by the slavers, both to Africans and Irish. The records show that the British ship Zong was delayed by storms, and as their food was running low, they decided to dump 132 slaves overboard to drown so the crew would have plenty to eat. If the slaves died due to “accident”, the loss was covered by insurance, but not if they starved to death. Another British ship, the Hercules averaged a 37% death rate on passages. The Atlas II landed with 65 of the 181 slaves found dead in their chains. But that is another story.

**April 2008**

> Caomhánach: Origin & Early history of the Kavanagh clan — Irish slaves in the Caribbean
England continued to ship tens of thousands of Irish slaves for more than a century. Records state that, after the 1798 Irish Rebellion, thousands of Irish slaves were sold to both America and Australia. There were horrible abuses of both African and Irish captives. One British ship even dumped 1,302 slaves into the Atlantic Ocean so that the crew would have plenty of food to eat.

There is little question that the Irish experienced the horrors of slavery as much (if not more in the 17th Century) as the Africans did. There is, also, very little question that those brown, tanned faces you

Globalresearch.ca — The Irish Slave Trade

31 December 2013

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.

Radio2Hot.com — The Irish Slaves

25 November 2014

In the 1650’s More than 100,000 children between the ages of 10 to 14 were ripped from their parents and sold as slaves into the West Indies, Virginia, and Barbados. 1,302 slaves were dumped overboard into the Atlantic Ocean so that the Ship’s company would have enough food to eat.

Once reaching the New World they were manacled, beaten, and whipped on a regular basis. But these slaves weren’t from Africa, these forgotten souls were from Ireland.

Infowars — Irish man demands reparations for slavery!

22 May 2015

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This distortion of Irish history damages our actual history of oppression. There is no need to exaggerate what our ancestors endured. As Henry Parnell put it, “you may trace Ireland through the statute-book of England, as a wounded man in a crowd is tracked by his blood.” This refusal to differentiate between indentured servitude and racialised perpetual hereditary chattel slavery via the transatlantic slave trade, only feeds white supremacist myths.

The second question I posed can be answered quite simply. That so many failed to recognise this appropriation of the Zong massacre speaks volumes about the critical mass of wilful ignorance surrounding the history of the transatlantic slave trade.

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See Part One, Part Three, Part Four, Part Five and Part Six