A review of the numbers in the “Irish slaves” meme

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Nov 4, 2015 · 14 min read

I really hate that I have to address this part of the meme. The numbers game is a depressing one and every life is significant and of equal importance. Unfortunately the “Irish slaves” meme exaggerates and fabricates to such an egregious extent that a basic corrective is necessary.

This is part four of my series debunking/contextualising the meme. See Part One, Two, Three, Five, Six and Seven.

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“The Irish Slave Trade” Globalresearch.ca article claims that

“James II sold 30,000 Irish prisoners as slaves to the New World. His Proclamation of 1625 required Irish political prisoners be sent overseas and sold to English settlers in the West Indies.”

James II was not born until 1633. This Proclamation of 1625 which supposedly stated that “Irish political prisoners” were to be sold as servants to English colonists in the New World does not appear to exist. Charles I did issue A proclamation for settling the Plantation of Virginia (13 May 1625) but it does not mention anything about transportation or banishment. There is a much earlier proclamation by James I (17 September 1603) which was For the Due and Speedy Execution of the Statue against Rogues, Vagabonds, Idle, and Dissolute Persons. This renewed an older Elizabethan law that criminalised repeated vagabondage and “idleness” in 1597. The Privy Council named “New-found Land, the East and West Indies, France, Germanie, and the Low-Countries, or any of them” as the location for banishment. These ideological attempts to “correct” poverty (through subjugation and forced labour) partly explain the
disproportionately high level of forced transportations from Ireland to the American colonies in the wake of the Cromwellian war.

. . .

“From 1641 to 1652 [the] English [sold] 300,000 [Irish people] as slaves.”

To put this into context, the total migration from Ireland to the West Indies for the entire 17th century is estimated to have been around 50,000 people and the total migration from Ireland to British North America and the West Indies is estimated to have been circa 165,000 between 1630 and 1775. (See Bielenberg, The Irish Diaspora, p. 216)

If this is the case, where on earth is the meme getting the unequivocal and impossible 300,000 forced deportations from Ireland over a ten year period? This number being nearly double the estimated total migration from Ireland to the Americas over 145 years?

Cromwellian era forced deportations from Ireland to the British West Indies did not begin in earnest until May 1653 and the total number forcibly deported during the Cromwellian era is roughly estimated by scholars (Corish, Watson, Akenson, et al) to have been around 10-12,000 people. The paucity of records ensures that we will never know the exact number. Kerby Miller (Emigrants and Exiles, 143), Robin Blackburn (The Making of New World Slavery, 247) and Matthew C. Reilly (“Poor Whites” of Barbados, 6) estimate that “several thousand” were banished. These estimates are educated guesses based on contemporary population figures for the islands, allowing for a high mortality rate, pre-existing Irish populations and concurrent voluntary emigration.

The “300,000 Irish slaves” claim is a spectacular exaggeration. There is no scholarship or even logic behind this number. It appears that the meme has taken the guesstimate on the blurb on the back cover of White Cargo (by Jordan and Walsh) and applied it to the Cromwellian era forced transportations from Ireland. Keep in mind that this appropriated guesstimate refers to all the indentured servants and convicts who were transplanted to the British American colonies from Britain and Ireland over a 200 year period.

White Cargo is the forgotten story of the thousands of Britons who lived and died in bondage in Britain’s American colonies.
N.B. The *White Cargo* guess range actually swings from 100,000 to 300,000.

> “During the 1650s, over 100,000 Irish children between the ages of 10 and 14 were taken from their parents and sold as slaves in the West Indies, Virginia and New England.”

Another massively exaggerated claim which does harm to the historical record of the officially sanctioned transportations and illicit kidnapping that did occur. The most infamous case involved David Selleck, a prominent tobacco merchant from Boston, New England. On the 6 September 1653 a warrant was awarded to Selleck (after he had petitioned for it) to transport 400 Irish children into New England and Virginia. The transport ships were listed as the *Goodfellow* and the *Providence*. These children were presumably earmarked by the Puritans as either orphans or from destitute families who (thanks in no small part to the brutal military tactics of the invading force) had no means to provide for themselves, as on the 11 October 1653 Alderman Tichborne was ordered by the council to draft an *Act for transportation of poor Irish children to England and the plantations*. What occurred was very different to this initial plan. Profit appears to have been the primary motive; concealed in this instance beneath the veneer of
“public service.” The two ships were anchored in Kinsale and despite the initial warrant to transport children they instead sought out adolescents and adults.

“...250 Irish women, above the age of 12 and under the age of 45, and also 300 men above the age of 12 and under the age of 50 years...”

The specific age restrictions indicates that Selleck (and his partner Mr. Leader) wanted a “cargo” which would fetch a good price for them in the colonies. The authorisation granted was essentially the legalised kidnapping of the poor (25 Oct 1653)
They were subsequently sold against their will as indentured servants off the Providence at Rappahannock, Virginia (for a cargo of tobacco) and off the Goodfellow at New England. Seven years later, some of the victims of these press gangs appeared before the Salem Quarterly Court in Massachusetts (27 June 1661). Samuel Symonds brought a complaint against his servants William Downing and Phillip Welch stating that they refused to work for him any longer. * Symonds had purchased Welsh and Downing from George Dell, then the Master of the Goodfellow, on 10 May 1654. The agreement between Dell and Symonds was for nine years of service. Welch and Downing were not party to (or consented to) these terms and they were under the impression that seven years was the standard term for English servants in Barbados. Symonds won the case and the court ordered Welch and Downing to work for nearly two more years before they could be free. Their testimonies along with other court depositions are invaluable evidence of the reprehensible methods used to fill some of these transport vessels.

**Phillip Welch and William Downing**

“We were brought out of or owne Country, contrary to our owne wills & minds, & sold here unto Mr Symonds, by ye master of the Ship, Mr Dill, but what Agreement was made betweene Mr Symonds & ye Said master, was neuer Acted by our Consent or knowledge, yet
notwithstanding we haue indeauored to do him ye best seruice wee Could these seuen Compleat yeerees.”

**John King**

“...Divers others were stollen in Ireland, by some of ye English soldiers, in ye night out of theyr beds & brought to Mr Dills ship, where the boate lay ready to receaue them, & in the way as they went, some others they tooke with them against their Consents, & brought them aboard ye said ship, where there were divers others of their Country men, weeping and Crying, because they were stollen from theyr frends..”

**John Downing**

“William Downing and Phillip Welch, with several of their countrymen, were taken up and stolen by the ship master or some one whom he hired. The Ship-master, George Dill, was fain to go away and leave his water and much of his provisions behind for fear the country would have taken them from him...[...]
he knew that he and three or four others of his townsmen were taken up by force; that he did not know the two parties in question, but they said in the ship that they were stolen and brought by force.”

Such methods of kidnapping eventually attracted the attention of the Council who enacted a range of measures to inspect ships before they departed from Irish ports. One report (6 July 1655) warned the Commissioners that

“...under the colour of some later orders from this Board for transporting rogues and vagrants to Barbados, several Irish and others are surreptitiously apprehended and forcibly put on board a ship in this harbour of Dublin, bound for that island, who are not comprehended as vagrants or idlers.”

Cromwell’s policy of transportation of vagrants from Ireland was abandoned on 4 March 1657. It was abolished because it was being abused to such an extent by merchants and
their agents. It is also interesting that these kidnappers did not discriminate between Irish or English victims. The cancellation order reads as follows

“...having received many complaints of the abuse of some orders granted to several persons to carry away idle and vagabond persons to the West Indies, who... employ persons to delude and deceive poor people by false pretences, either by getting them aboard the ships or in other by-places into their power, and forcing them away, the person so employed having so much a-piece for they so delude, and for the money’s sake have enticed and forced women from their husbands and children from their parents, who maintained them at school, and that they have not only dealt so with the Irish but also with the English [the Council now] do think fit and order that all Orders, granted to any person whatsoever (being now in force) to take up and carry idle and vagabond persons as aforesaid, be henceforth made null and void.”

...
Sigh. Where did the other 248,000 go?
This exaggerated figure of around 52,000 has lineage. It can be traced back to Sean O'Callaghan’s *To Hell or Barbados*. O'Callaghan incorrectly attributes this number to Aubrey Gwynn. But he either misread Gwynn or has deliberately mislead the reader because Gwynn took a *guess* at 16,000 sent to the West Indies and his total estimate of 50,000 includes the 34,000 that left Ireland for the continent. Despite this basic error the figure of 50,000 has remained on the blurb of this book since its publication over fifteen years ago.

“Another 30,000 Irish men and women were also transported and sold to the highest bidder.”

A random 30,000 people fabricated to make it seem like the authors know what they are talking about?

“In 1656, Cromwell ordered that 2000 Irish children be taken to Jamaica and sold as slaves to English settlers.”

The only vaguely accurate statement in the entire article. It was 1655 and it was Henry Cromwell (then Major General of the Parliamentarian army in Ireland) who made the suggestion, not his father Oliver. It also did not seek to convert children and adolescents into chattel slaves but to use them in the conquest and planting of Jamaica as apprentices, bond servants, and wives. It was seriously discussed by Cromwell and Secretary Thurloe over a prolonged period. The plan was for 1000 boys and 1000 girls, aged between 12 and 14, to be sent to Jamaica from Kinsale and Galway. Cromwell admitted to Secretary Thurloe that force would have to be used capture the 1000 girls, but that it was “for their own good.” In the absence of any further evidence, however, historians are certain that this scheme did not proceed. Karst de Jong, a PhD candidate at Queen’s University Belfast, argues this case convincingly in his MA thesis on the Irish in Jamaica.

“Did you know that more Irish slaves were sold in the 17th century than black slaves?”
This line is from another iteration of the “Irish slaves” meme that was posted on YourNewsWire.com by Royce Christyn. This fake news site frequently pushes hoaxes, conspiracy theories and ‘New World Order’ fabulism. This same claim is also repeated in a popular blog post on the liberal DailyKos site.

The estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Irish indentured servants is not greater than the total estimated number of enslaved Africans sold in the European colonies in the 17th century. The Slave Voyages Database estimates that over 1.8 million Africans were enslaved by Europeans in the same time period. See the table below for the breakdown.
“By 1637 a census showed that 69% of the total population of Montserrat were Irish slaves.”

I've looked into this strange ahistorical statement and I think I've located the root of the distortion. In 1995 Robert E. West published an article in the newsletter of the Political Education Committee (PEC) of the American Ireland Education Foundation. West’s article, citing the historian Richard S. Dunn, states that

“…as early as 1637, on Montserrat the Irish heavily outnumbered the English colonists, and 69 percent of Montserrat’s white inhabitants were Irish.”

This is an accurate, evidence-based statement. So what goes wrong? Jump forward to 2003 and James F. Cavanaugh’s blog post entitled Irish slaves in the Caribbean. Mr. Cavanaugh (a “Clann Chief Herald”) fundamentally altered the sentence above. See if you can spot what’s changed..

“All of the other rehashed “Irish slaves” blogs appear to have pulled this particular piece of absurd disinformation from Cavanaugh’s distortion.
Labour Uncut repeating the same ahistorical claims that “Irish slaves made up two thirds of the island’s population” along with the “300,000” absurdity (2014)

There are so many publications and online articles that use hyper-inflated numbers with regards to “Irish slaves” that it would take weeks to list and analyse them all. They are all unified in one way; they do not cite any primary sources to support their claims. I’ll trace one prominent iteration as an example of how this disinformation has been perpetuated through the years. You may be surprised at the source.

From James Connolly to Neo-Nazis

The most influential work pushing the “white slaves” narrative among white supremacists and Neo-Nazis is They Were White and They Were Slaves by Michael A. Hoffman II (1991) Hoffman is a Holocaust denier and professional conspiracy theorist who has described the Holocaust as “a religious cult masquerading as history” and a “means for Judaizing the West.” Chapter titles in his work on “white slavery” are “White Losses in the Middle Passage higher than that of Blacks” and “White Slaves treated Worse than Blacks.” Hoffman claims that chattel slaves were treated better than the poor whites in the South. He asks the reader to consider “the Southern whites, sick and destitute, watching their children dying while enduring the spectacle of negroes from the jungles of Africa healthy and well-fed...” It is no surprise that this work appears in the reading lists of Nazis, Neo-Confederates, white nationalists and various other racist groups across the globe.

He also quotes a number of works about the Irish who were deported by the Cromwellian regime in the wake of the brutal military conquest of our island, but his
sources are (as is usual with his work) either secondary sources or primary sources taken out of context. On page 27 in a section entitled “Irish slaves” (which is just above a section entitled “Protestant slaves”) he includes the following quotation.

“[During the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland] over a hundred thousand men, women and children were seized by the English troops and shipped to the West Indies, where they were sold into slavery...”

As I’ve noted above, 100,000 is simply an impossibility, so just who and what is Hoffman quoting? He is citing George Novack’s article “Slavery in Colonial America” that appeared in America’s Revolutionary Heritage: Marxist essays, a collection of writings that Novack edited and published in New York (1976). This appears to have been a republication of a volume that first appeared in 1966. Novack was a Marxist theoretician and not a professional historian. Thus we have to ask, just where is he getting this figure of 100,000 from? Remarkably his source is the famous Irish Republican revolutionary and socialist James Connolly. Novack cites Connolly’s The Re-Conquest of Ireland (1915) wherein Connolly claimed that “over 100,000 men, women and children were transported to the West Indies, there to be sold into slavery.” Again, no primary sources are listed. Now we have to ask, where was Connolly getting this figure from? Connolly claims that this figure originates in the writings of William Petty. Connolly writes

“Sir William Petty, ancestor of the Lansdowne family and a greedy and unscrupulous land-thief, declared that in some Irish accounts the number so sold into slavery was estimated at one hundred thousand.”

I’ve read Petty’s Political Economy of Ireland (1672) and I cannot find any reference to this estimate. Petty made his own estimates of those that were deported or banished
from Ireland and we can very roughly deduce from his totals that he thought a remainder of circa 10,000 were transported by the Cromwellian regime to the West Indies and the other American colonies. John P. Prendergast, who Connolly also quotes, makes a lower estimate. In his *Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland* (1865, p. 92) he guessed that 6,400 Irish people, mainly civilians and the poor, were shipped to the colonies over the space of four years before the order was (as alluded to above) revoked due to abuses by merchants who were illegally kidnapping Irish and English people ineligible for transportation. Even though he got the year wrong (it was revoked in 1657 not 1655) and does not provide any sources to justify the number of 6,400, if we compare it to the significant Irish servant population in the Anglo-Caribbean at this time it does seem to be a realistic estimation.

Why then does Connolly attribute the figure of 100,000 to William Petty? The answer is straightforward. James Connolly did not read Petty. He is relying on a secondary source that quotes from Petty but reaches conclusions not within Petty’s work. Even though he does not cite it, it is very likely that Connolly is getting these inexplicable numbers (and references to Petty) from Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet’s *Ireland Under English Rule* (1903)

Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet (1828–1919) was a grandson of the political exile Thomas Addis Emmet (1764–1827) who was a member of the United Irishmen and elder brother of Robert Emmet, the Irish patriot who was executed by the British after he led a botched revolutionary uprising in Dublin in 1803. Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet died in New York in 1919 but per his request was buried in Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin. His grave marker was sculpted by Padraig Pearse’s brother and father. Emmet’s claim (on p. 101) is unreferenced, claims that 100,000 only applies to “young children” who were abducted. I can only conclude that this figure came from the imagination of the author, or, possibly, another martyrology that I have yet to read.
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Notes


But if you check the primary source you’ll find there is no reference to “Irish slaves” in the records and files of Essex County. Donoghue apparently pulled this reference from a Gilder Lehman webpage and this anachronistic title was evidently added by someone at the *Gerry Tobin Irish Language School* (Babylon, New York) which is the organisation credited with submitting the entry to the Gilder Lehman archives.