MAVERICKS OR MISFITS? IRISH RAILROAD
WORKERS IN CUBA—1835-1844

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Abstract

Archival records of Irish migration to Cuba describe a colony of "irlandeses" contracted in New York in 1835 to work for the Cuban Railway Commission. Contract labourers from Ireland and the Canary Islands were forced into a brutal work regime under Spanish military rule where any attempt to abscond was treated as desertion punishable by prison or execution. I argue that social formations and forms of struggle in the creation of a landless proletariat lay the ground in generating the conduct of subaltern resistance in this encounter between 'a roving proletariat' and intersecting British and Iberian systems of colonial labour. Counter modern social formations imported and adapted to the 'new world' are further analysed drawing on postcolonial theories which frame mobile transitory labour as an intrinsic, if recalcitrant, element in the history of capitalist expansion.

KEY WORDS: Irish contract labour, Emigration studies, 19th century, relationship with the Canary Islands, capitalist expansion.

Resumen

Los registros archivísticos de la emigración irlandesa a Cuba describen una colonia de *irlandeses* contratados en Nueva York para trabajar para la Comisión del ferrocarril cubano. Los trabajadores contratados de Irlanda y de las Islas Canarias sufrieron unas condiciones de trabajo brutales bajo las reglas militares españolas en las que cualquier tentativa de absentismo era tratada como una deserción y castigada con prisión o ejecución. Sostengo aquí que las formaciones sociales y las formas de lucha en la creación de un proletariado sin tierra sentaron las bases y generaron las conductas de resistencia subalterna en este encuentro entre "un proletariado ambulante," integrando los sistemas británico e ibérico de trabajo colonial. Contra-formaciones modernas sociales importadas y adaptadas al "nuevo mundo" se analizan ulteriormente desde la óptica de las teorías postcoloniales que trazan la mano de obra transitoria y temporal como un elemento intrínseco de la historia de la expansión capitalista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: contratos de trabajo para irlandeses, estudios sobre la emigración, siglo XIX, relación con las Islas Canarias, expansión capitalista.

Cuban and Spanish scholars make brief reference to a "colony" of Irish workers contracted in New York, in 1835, to work in Cuba on the construction of the first stretch of railroad in Latin America. The Irish and other bonded labourers, particularly Canary Islanders, were forced into a brutal work regime under Spanish military rule where any attempt to abscond was treated as desertion punishable by prison or execution. Submitted to conditions similar to slavery, rebellion and protest by the Irish railroad workers led to their rejection by the authorities within months of their arrival. This essay examines the "recalcitrant potential" of the Irish Diaspora as demonstrated by the reaction of Irish railroad workers to the coercive practices of contract labour under Spanish colonialism. The alliances they made with bonded labourers from the Canary Islanders and African slaves working on the railroad resulted in some of the first strikes recorded on the island. Less than ten years later, Irish immigrants were accused of conspiring with people of colour in the 1844 Escalera slave uprising.

Cuban accounts of "los irlandeses" in the early part of the nineteenth century suggest a divergence from the disassociation with enslaved black workers, based on racial privilege, which took place in North and South America and other parts of the Caribbean. The protests and strikes were far from being merely spasmodic and violent upsurges: I argue that social formations and forms of struggle which emerged from the creation of a landless proletariat underlay the generation of subaltern resistance by Irish migrants in the intersecting British and Iberian systems of colonial labour. Within the broader question of the extent of resonances between Irish oppositional discourse and other non-European subaltern discourse, I will also explore the context in which Irish immigrants were implicated in the transnational movement against slavery and colonial rule in Cuba. My inquiry looks less at distinctive cultural responses to oppressive regimes of slavery and colonisation and concentrates more on the forms of survival, which migrant labourers adopted and adapted to the structural oppressions inherent in the systems of colonial labour they encountered.

ABOLITIONISTS IN CUBA

In October 1844, several Irish newspapers reported on a devastating hurricane which hit Cuba on Oct 5th. [...]"the city [of Havana] presented more the appearance of a town that had just been bombarded and sacked than the proud noble city of Havannah [...]there was nothing but heaps of ruins[...]every street being like a river[...]."[1] Old people could not remember another hurricane like it. In the city of Matanzas in Western Cuba many people mark this day as the patron saint day of Plácido, the free mulatto poet put to death in June of the same year for his part as a leader in the largest conspiracy by people of colour in Cuba's history. They saw the devastation wrought by the hurricane in Matanzas as divine retribu-

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[1] *The Nation* (Saturday, November 16th 1844).

tion for the crimes committed by the Spanish colonial authorities against the slave population (Paquette). *The Nation* goes on to describe the damage to ships in the harbour, left "high and dry" at the fish market on the wharf, but "Her Majesty's ship *Romney* escaped injury." This British hulk had been anchored in the harbour at Havana since 1837, to house liberated African slaves ("emancipados*)* until they were transferred to a nearby British colony (Murray, "Richard"). Dr. Richard Robert Madden, an Irish doctor, appointed by the British Colonial Office as Superintendent of Liberated Africans to Cuba defended the positioning of the vessel as a solution for a temporary depot for freed Africans. Manned by a West Indian regiment of uniformed black soldiers bearing arms, the *Romney* was perceived by the colonial elite in Cuba as a reminder of the spectre of the Haitian revolution and a fearful symbol of abolitionism which served to inflame anti-British sentiment. The emancipation of the slave population in 1833 in neighbouring West Indies sent further waves of panic throughout Cuba. As a measure to protect against the corrupting influence of emancipation or the seductions of "the spirit of liberty," General Tacón in 1837, banned any free blacks from foreign territories entering Cuba (1980). Fear of contagion and fear of abolitionists led to a deep mistrust of the free black population, comprising between fifteen and twenty percent of the overall population.[2] There was a strong belief in Cuba that the British government and its agents were fomenting a foreign abolitionist conspiracy on the island (Murray, "British"). In this climate of fear and hysteria, foreigners and especially British subjects were suspected of being abolitionists (Murray, *Odious*). General Tacón unsuccessfully sought Madden's removal on the grounds that he "is a dangerous man" whose only purpose is to "disseminate seditious ideas directly or indirectly."[3] His presence in Cuba until 1839 was viewed with the greatest suspicion and interpreted as evidence of a British abolitionist conspiracy. The Anglo-Spanish slave trade treaty of 1835, provided for the transfer of slaves freed from illegal slave ships to British colonies, to be overseen by Madden. His dedication to the humanitarian cause of abolition and a "hatred of oppression in whatever clime or on whatever race it might be exercised" was evident from his efforts to change public opinion against slavery in Cuba (see Thomas Madden). During his time as a Special Magistrate in Jamaica in 1834, he viewed the apprenticeship system as slavery which had changed in name only, so long as corporal punishment continued as a means of enforcement of compulsory labour. Madden, however does not comment on the plight of the Irish or other European labourers working on the Cuban railroad, otherwise he might not have been so scathing of all his countrymen and women in his book *The Island of Cuba* "The

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    [2] This small but significant number of free blacks, predominantly urban dwellers, formed an emerging class of *creolised* artisans and dominated the skilled trades in the port cities of Matanzas and Havana. They owned property which included slaves and formed companies of militia. They formed *cabildos* which provided for the Afro-Cuban population a reservoir of African culture and the resources of benevolent aid in times of difficulty for people of colour both slave and free.
    [3] Tacón to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 4, reservado, 31 Agosto. 1836 (Pérez de la Riva 252-255).

Irish alas! I have invariably found, who are employed in any shape, are advocates for slavery in all its horrors" (Richard Madden 165).

SLAVERY, FREE LABOUR
AND "BLANQUEAMIENTO"

The Nenagh Guardian, June 1844, reported on Cuba's largest anti-slavery conspiracy, known as The Escalera. Quoting from a letter in the Observer, the writer is shocked not by "the butchery in cold blood of seven-hundred or eight-hundred Negroes but on account of the great loss sustained by the proprietors, each slave costing between 400 and 500 dollars," with no compensation from the state. This mercenary, but telling, statement accurately sums up the attitude of the slave-holding elite and the colonial authorities in the early nineteenth-century. After the Haitian Revolution of 1791, Cuba became the world's largest producer of sugar and one of the most important economic centres in the crumbling Spanish Empire. The voracious demand for labour was filled by a hugely profitable Cuban trade in contraband slaves, which lasted well into the nineteenth century. Despite Britain's efforts to end the slave trade, it actually increased in Cuba. Between 1790 and 1820, some 325,000 slaves were imported and as sugar production increased during the 1830s, over 17,000 enslaved Africans a year, were landed at Cuban ports (Bergad). African-born slaves were in the majority in the sugar and coffee plantations of Western Cuba; where the black population was close to double that of whites. Massive expansion of sugar production transformed Cuba into a black-majority island for the first time in its history with 418,000 whites, 153,000 free people of colour and 436,500 slaves. At this time, Cuba had a higher proportion than all the other so-called sugar-islands of free blacks living in cities and practicing trades, which, if united with slaves would make up sixty percent of the island's population (Benítez Rojo). Just as the "ever-faithful" Spanish colony reached its zenith in the Atlantic economy, the undertow of its dissolution was beginning to rise to the surface. Black insurgency was becoming organised and anti-colonial sentiment in Cuba was gathering force. The Spanish crown manipulated the deep racial fears of a black republic amongst the anti-colonial Creole elite, by turning a blind eye to the thriving illegal slave trade, as part of a veiled policy of maintaining a plantation economy based on slave labour. Consequently, Creole slave-holding elites who wanted political independence from Spain began to see slavery and the slave trade as an obstacle to that liberty. Tensions arose between those who saw abolition as the solution and others determined to hold on to their slaves and their prosperity built on slavery, who preferred the idea of the "blanqueamiento" or Europeanisation of Cuba. Cuban colonial society, with its white minority elite and black majority subjects, was moving from a discourse of planter/slave to one which reflected a conflict of race. Some of the earliest discursive formulations of Cuban national identity sought to contain racial anxieties in a troubled colonial context. Antonio Saco, the "apostle" of Cuban nationalism, argued that miscegenation was the only viable means of ensuring that the emerging Cuban nation would become lighter and whiter over

time. Those prepared to consider independence from Spain expressed their desire for a Cuban nation "formed by the white race" (Ferrer, *Insurgent*).

In the search for alternatives to the slave trade, they conceived of "free labour" as a form of indenture, but more crucially, as a means of "mestisaje" to whiten the labouring classes. Slaves would be replaced by white Catholic immigrants from the Canary Islands, Galicia and even Ireland. Irish and other railroad workers of European origin became the vanguard of white immigrant wage labour within the context of Hispano-Cuban "colonisation" policies designed to "whiten" Cuba's majority black population.

WORKER UNREST

High mortality rates among the railroad workers due to the appalling work conditions of sixteen hour days, hunger and accommodation in temporary huts quickly led to desperation. During the first few months of the contract, two outbreaks of cholera caused fear and unrest on the line. Financial misdealing left contractors in debt to the company; they frequently fled the line, leaving their workers with no rations or pay.[4] Within weeks of their arrival, unable to support their families and faced with starvation, the workers downed tools. In April 1836, Miguel Pedroso, a local landowner, made a complaint to the authorities accusing the trackmen, black and white, of robbing food from his property. He made special mention of the Irish who stole his pigs by crippling them before killing them with large sticks. When he looked for compensation for damage to his property by trackmen, the company by way of apology used a familiar trope which described the Irish laboring poor as hardened trouble-makers, well known for their pilfering and drinking habits.[5] In the first five months since construction started with two thousand men, according to the railway commission, this was the first breach of security against any landowner, to whom the company was indebted and most concerned to protect.[6] The labourers, whose complaints went unheard, developed alternative protective networks to provide food for themselves and their families and quite likely averted starvation by trading pork in their encampments. This audacious attempt by hired labour to address breaches of their contracts by un-official routes may well have been inspired by notions of "customary rights" to property which contested, even if temporarily, capitalist property relations in the introduction of new technology to Cuba (see Featherstone).[7]

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[4] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) Box 8-535. Report on Erasmus Denison, an overseer with an Irish crew, who fled the railroad works without paying his workers.
[5] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) Box 8/521.
[6] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) Box 8/521.
[7] Coal-heavers on the London docks regarded coal-sweepings as a customary right to left-over coals.

As early as December 16th 1835, striking workers were threatened by the chief engineer with the full force of a military government:

> Todos aquellos que no estén satisfechos con los términos de sus contratas y deseen separarse del servicio del Gobierno, quedan en plena libertad para hacerse que hayan liquidado el importe de sus gastos relativos al pasaje, manutención y alojamiento [...] que les hayan hecho; pero con la expresa condición de que salgan de la isla en termino preciso de tres días [...] Pasados los tres días todo hombre exonerado y despedido de la obra como ha dicho será tratado con todo el rigor de las leyes del país relativo a los vagos [...] Pues por mucho que los ingenieros deseen los servicios de los trabajadores importados del norte, bajo ningún pretexto permitirán que sigan trabajos dados habitualmente a la bebida, insubordinados en su conducta, y desatentos con sobrestantes; ni tampoco se les tolerará el que vuelvan a pedir más salario o sea de los trabajos sin licencia. Si hay hombres disgustados con sus contratas que quieren volver a los Estados Unidos de donde salieron tan poco tiempo hay que hacer lo de su propias cuentas.[8]

The practice of resistance by the railroad workers in Cuba resembled that of Irish canal workers in the United States in equally unfavorable conditions. When employers fell behind in paying wages and workers became indebted to food sellers and grog shops, they downed tools and rioted, "not driven by any sense of ethnic or class grievance" but because their very existence depended on it (Way, "Labour's" 1-2; see also Way, *Common*). Harsh military force in Cuba meant that protesters ended up in prison only to find themselves returned to the railroad work gang in debt-bondage. They were fined twenty-four pesos (two months' earnings) and had to pay the costs of their apprehension. The earnings of those who survived were absorbed in repayments for their passage from New York, contractor's expenses, monthly medical fees and debts incurred as penalties. Having failed to negotiate any improvements in their conditions, many Irish deserted. The American Consul dealt with many desperate pleas from the New York recruits, imprisoned and charged with vagrancy: "Not only men but entire families embracing women and children appear to have been attracted hither by offers of employment on the rail-road [...]." The Consul berated the Royal Development Board for allowing this "class of person" to desert:

> Ya se han presentado a este consulado cierto número de infelices trabajadores, americanos, irlandeses y alemanes [...] si a las personas que tienen la dirección de las obras del camino de hierro se las permite abandonar y desamparar siempre que les convenga a esta clase de hombres, muchos trabajos tendrán que pasar, y muchos serán los que parecerán: se cubrirá el país o le llenaran los cárceles de jornaleros que no habrán incurrido en otra falta, sino de haberse confiado ciegamente de

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[8] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) 130-6390, Diciembre 1835. Alfred Kruger to el Departamento de camino de hierro.

personas que los han atraído a esta isla con promesas de empleo, sin informarles de las circunstancias en que se hallarían situados en ella.[9]

The Canary Islanders, who also found their conditions unacceptable, rioted armed with knives and sticks. They deserted in huge numbers; as Spanish speakers and with some semblance of family and social networks, they had the risky possibility of escape (Zanetti and García). Notices published in the daily newspapers offered rewards for slaves who had run away from the railroad works; other notices warned that it was strictly forbidden to help or give refuge to the deserters: "[...] pues hay órdenes y penas muy severas para toda persona que ocultare o empleare cualquiera de los peones o artesanos traído de los Estados Unidos para el servicio del gobierno en la construcción del camino de hierro."[10]

Five months later, the Royal Development Board ruefully lamented the doomed upshot of their colonization plans, as the lack of promise shown by the recalcitrant Irish comes to light:

> Los trabajadores contratados para el camino de hierro por el Señor Cónsul de EU en Nueva York encontraron a su llegado a este puerto la esmeradas acogidas que la calidad de extranjeros y la utilidad de los servicios que prometían, nos hicieron ofrecerles en desempeño del deber más importantes de nuestra comisión. Los considerábamos como el primer ensayo del aumento de población blanca, y como los fundadores del sistema de comunicaciones que exclusivamente depender el engrandecimiento de las islas. Aunque es que con mano franca y excediendo siempre a la contratos, se proveyó a su necesidades de alojamientos, manutención, aumento de salario asistencia curación en sus enfermedades; pero la intemperancia increíble de la mayor parte de esos desgraciados y la falta de obreros de la misma destreza con que reemplazarlos hubieron de animarlos a prestar un servicio flojo e imperfecto y a veces en masa a cumplir sus deberes cometiendo excesos de tal naturaleza. [...] Que hubieran justificado a la Junta de Fomento y al Gobierno si los hubiera despedido de la obra desde el principio haciéndolos marchar al lugar de su procedencia. [...] Los que abandonaran la obra, y sin licencia salen a vagar por los campos o los pueblos, son detenidos por la policía y puesto inmediatamente por el gobierno a disposición de la comisión que los dirige otra vez a sus destinos [...] muchos de estos hombres están expuestos a sufrir trabajos y a perecer; mas esto no será efecto del trato que reciben ni del país que habitan; en cualquier otro adonde llevan su intemperancia correrán los mismos riesgos sin hallar igual recompensa de su industria.[11]

Reminiscent of an earlier migration of transient labour to North America in 1767, the governor of Newfoundland observed that a great number of seasonal migrants from Ireland and England did not have the means to go home at the end

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[9] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) 130-6378, 17th Mayo 1836, US Consul, Nicholas Trist to General Miguel Tacón.

[10] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) 130-6383.

[11] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) 130-6378, 14th March 1836.

of the season, because "some idle dispossessed men desert from their masters' service before the end of the voyages for which they engage to serve and betake themselves to a loose, idle vagabond life" (Featherstone 392).

Desertion is one of "the key spatial practices" of subaltern resistance widely used by diverse groups of mobile labourers, sailors, soldiers and slaves. The practice of desertion is a "refusal and search for liberation" as argued by Hardt and Negri. Divorced from the means of subsistence, the exercise of mobility generated subaltern power by reconfiguring power relations in different categories of labour whether slave or free. Legal constraints to freedom persisted and workers were "answerable with their bodies for breaching labour agreements" (Drescher 81). Violation of a "voluntary" labour agreement was still punishable by imprisonment and physical coercion in both England and the United States up until the end of the nineteenth century.

SLAVE UNREST AND THE ESCALERA CONSPIRACY

News of the harsh treatment of Irish immigrants in Cuba did not appear in the Irish newspapers of the time. However, concern for emigrants "inveigled under insidious promises" to go to nearby Jamaica received considerable coverage right across the nations' newspapers. In a tone disparaging of native Jamaicans, the *Freeman's Journal,* December 1840, warns against the "suicidal act" of indenture to Irish emigrants who are tempted into slavery and a "pestilential" climate. Unlike the anti-slavery stance of the *Freeman's Journal*, reports of the Escalera slave revolt in 1844 emanating from London and Madrid maintained an imperialist posture, and avoided news of contact and solidarity at the margins of the Black and Green Atlantic worlds. The appointment of the infamous Spanish General Leopoldo O'Donnell, remembered for his brutal repression of slaves in Cuba, is reported in the *Tuam Herald* in August 1843, which carried an announcement of the appointment of the new Governor of Cuba. O'Donnell's arrival coincided with the uncovering of a far-reaching insurrectionary movement by the black population. Known as the Year of the Lash, 1844, in Cuban history is synonymous with O'Donnell and the bloody crackdown which he instigated during a year of martial law. Thousands of confessions were extracted by torture and death threats from those accused. Historians are divided over the existence of such a vast conspiracy, and some believe the colonial authorities fabricated it as a pretext to justify a more brutal repression of the slave population (see Paquette; Sarracino). Most scholars, however, agree on the extent of the violent repression and state-brutality against slaves and free people of colour. Robert L. Paquette's compelling analysis of what he describes as "one of the most controversial episodes in Cuba's colonial history" (4) concludes that while there is still much uncertainty surrounding the conspiracy, it did exist, but more as a convergence of several overlapping conspiracies against colonial rule and slavery by distinct groups of slaves, free people of colour and dissident whites. Control by the colonial authorities and the slave-holding elite was weakening. There were several large revolts throughout 1843, culminating in November in the biggest revolt ever recorded in which hundreds of slaves perished. In the sugar producing district

of Matanzas alone, official figures show that almost a thousand slaves and twice as many free people of colour were killed, imprisoned or deported. Many Creole whites and free people of colour escaped torture and death by fleeing. Foreigners of British, Irish, German and North American origin implicated in the conspiracy were imprisoned. Of the twelve white British subjects who worked as machine operators and engineers on sugar plantations, four of those imprisoned were of Irish origin. Hundreds of black British subjects, who after emancipation in Bahamas and Jamaica were kidnapped and enslaved again in Cuba, were all summarily deported (Curry-Machado).

During a large uprising in 1843, Daniel Goulding, an Irish railroad superintendant on the Júcaro-Cardenas line, was arrested, accused of helping the slaves working on the railroad, to join an uprising, which broke out on the Alcancía sugar estate in Bemba (now Jovellanos).[12] Maurice Hogan, a coffee plantation owner and Patrick O'Rourke, a machinist on a sugar plantation, were implicated in the conspiracy on the evidence of slaves on the estates. Both were arrested in Cardenas, near Matanzas, accused of procuring ammunition to assist a slave insurrection. Patrick O'Rourke, while working as a superintendant on the railroad in June 1837, was charged and fined for allowing his crew of slaves to play their drums at night; he quickly deserted the railroad with the slaves.[13] Daniel Downing, an Irish engineer from Waterford, was imprisoned on the grounds that he was overheard, by two witnesses working on the same estate talking to another "inglés" about killing Spaniards.[14] Downing's own testimony complains of his ill-treatment at the hands of the authorities and asserts his innocence based on his ignorance of the Spanish language, "I can't speak scarcely a word of Spanish except sufficient to get along with the operation of Cain grinding with the Mayoral and Negroes and surely [...] the Negroes could not understand us."[15] Patrick O'Rourke's case never went to trial as he was released only days before he died as a result of ill-treatment and 100 days in stocks.[16] As late as 1851, the British Consul in a dispatch to Lord Palmerston, looked for compensation for "Her Majesty's Subjects who were subjected to great and most unjust and unmerited sufferings during the Government of General O'Donnell [...] when they were falsely accused of combining with, aiding and abetting the Negroes in conspiring for the purposes of insurrection." The Foreign Office decided to "let the matter drop."[17]

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[12] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Commission Militar (CM), 29-5; also see Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Junta de Fomento (JF) 130-6390, Passenger list for Brigantine 'Havre' to Havana, 1st November 1835, the first shipment of Irish railroad workers including Daniel Goulding as supervisor.

[13] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC) Junta de Fomento (JF) 8-572.

[14] Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Asuntos Politicos (AP) 140-22, and CM Legajo 50.

[15] The National Archives (NA), Foreign Office (FO) 72/664; Statement by Daniel Downing to British Consul.

[16] NA, FO 97/382.

[17] Joseph Crawford to Lord Palmerston, NA, FO 72/793.

During the Escalera trials, Irish workers earlier known as "irlandeses" were classed as "British," an identity described as "at best ambiguous" by Curry-Machado but more likely synonymous with what it meant to be "white" and "foreign" in Cuba at that time (Curry-Machado, "Running"). Foreign engineers on sugar plantations were in demand and most were from the British Isles; as prescribed by the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, "every mill, every steamship, every locomotive on the railway has to have beside it an intelligent foreigner who directs and inspects the machine."[18] Migrant workers' claims to "Britishness," even in cases of possible antipathy to British identity, were reserved for times of crisis when in need of protection or assistance. During the Escalera trials, they were denied this claim, as residency laws held that any foreigner resident in Cuba for more than five years came under Spanish jurisdiction; therefore, they were denied the right to protection or diplomatic assistance. At this time when the transatlantic-abolitionist movement was at its peak, Anglophobia became widespread, particularly among the colonial elite who viewed "every idea contrary to slavery [as] seditious and the word abolitionist the greatest crime" (Paquette 143). Paquette suggests "to be British was to be subversive" and cites the case of Patrick Doherty, a "British" train driver (from the Inishowen peninsula in Donegal) on the Güines line, who was involved in a train crash and spent two years in jail awaiting trial accused of sabotage. David Turnbull, the British consul at the time, protested Doherty's innocence and advocated passionately for a fair trial and his eventual release.[19]

The trajectory of transnational migration generated shifting and fluid identities within the changing socio-political worlds of different regions of the Atlantic; identities such as Irish, "British," White, Spanish, or Abolitionist invariably produced different tensions at different times within the social order of Cuba. At the height of Anglo-Spanish imperial tensions they were no longer identified as "irlandeses," with the promise of inscribing white dominance, they were "British" and accused by the authorities of conspiring with slaves against the white population; they were now seen as a threat to Spanish colonial rule. From the perspective of black insurgents, they were viewed as British and therefore allies in the struggle to overthrow slavery. That they instigated insurgency in Cuba is discounted by Jonathon Curry-Machado, who suggests that they may have been catalysts in a crucial juncture of continuing resistance to slavery throughout the nineteenth century. The evidence is inconclusive as to their participation in the conspiracy; however, the records attest to their position as foreign white labour within the labour practices of the sugar and coffee plantations and the construction of the railroad. Therefore they were in very close proximity to the underground network of insurrection. The fate of O'Rourke, who earlier demonstrated an empathy with his slave crew, was not dissimilar to that of hundreds of slaves who perished in the Escalera. The question of

18 Sociedad Económica (1819-1844), *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica*. Habana: Sociedad de Amigos del País (qtd Curry-Machado).
19 NA, FO 72/585, Turnbull to Captain General Tacón, May 1841.

their cooperation with the slave insurgency remains ambiguous, as does their role in the British abolitionist cause.

The transatlantic and imperial dimensions of the Escalera conspiracy have received much scrutiny; particularly the role played by British abolitionists. Raising the question of "alternative ideologies of resistance among slaves," Ada Ferrer notes the absence of focus on the principal participants of this insurgency and the influence of African or Afro-Cuban ideologies of resistance (Ferrer, "Review"). Rather than concentrate on the "meta-narrative of imperial intrigue" Aisha Finch proposes to "re-centre" African slaves and their descendents who built a radical resistance movement based on the political culture of rural Cuban slaves stemming from plantation life and political traditions from the African continent. The ongoing response by Cuban slaves to a system of domination and repression by colonial authorities and slave owners was to "test the limits of the institution of slavery in a wide variety of ways," they "resisted domination in its countless forms by negotiating, by reproducing their cultures, by openly revolting, by running away to the forests and mountains, and by taking their own lives" (Barcia Paz (2)). Like Finch, Barcia Paz's approach to the study of slave resistance in Cuba, based on the records of the Escalera trials, posits that the cultural background of African-born slaves is "integral to story of their resistance" (2). Notwithstanding the problems of linguistic interpretation and the problematic nature of evidence gained through a process of interrogation, both authors have used these "exceptional" documents to extraordinary effect in providing a less-veiled analysis of the "internal world" of the rebels. In order to re-define transatlantic movements for freedom and emancipation, Finch argues, "that any history of anti-slavery struggle is incomplete without black-political struggles and oppositional cultures at it centre" (4). In a similar vein, the question of Irish subaltern solidarity and resistance in Cuba may be illuminated by considering the continuities between oppositional culture in early nineteenth-century Ireland and its circulation within the Atlantic networks of resistance.

CIRCUM-ATLANTIC RESISTANCE

By locating migrants in what Paul Gilroy terms the "mobile Atlantic" and therefore outside the confines of the nation state, Linebaugh and Rediker argue that without studying the common ground and the points of contact between workers "black and white, Irish and English, slave and free," a vital world of cooperation, contact, overlap and exchange is obscured (Linebaugh and Rediker). In their analysis of multi-ethnic struggles during the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, they focus on the transnational "continuities and connections" which, they argue, inform popular working-class struggles. They locate the subversive experience of the mobile Irish in the "Hidden Ireland" of The Whiteboys and other secret societies. The struggle to survive the harsh conditions of colonial labour generated a culture of multi-ethnic co-operation in what Rediker describes as "dialectic of discipline and resistance" in the Atlantic system of labour and capital. The conditions they encountered at the imperial centres of Britain and the United States differed in many

crucial respects from and between conditions in the Iberian and British Caribbean. Kevin Kenny, while looking at nineteenth century labour protest, suggests that the Irish responded to unfavourable circumstances in two distinct ways, depending on the national conditions. In circumstances of hostility to Irish immigrant labour on the construction of public works the United States and Britain, Kenny identifies a "subterranean pattern of Irish collective violence featuring faction fights (gangs based on local or county origin) and secret societies such as The Ribbonmen and The Molly Maguires" (Kenny, *Making* 153). Where hostility lessened the older forms of violent protest adapted from the Irish countryside, forms of protest changed to trade-union participation. (see Kenny, *Making*).

Deteriorating socio-economic conditions in early nineteenth-century Ireland pushed increasing numbers of labourers and small holders to become involved in collective protest. The passing of The Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, and a growing politicisation of the Irish labour movement saw the formation of the first nationwide trade union in 1832, demonstrating a growing will for collective organisation. One of the main objectives of the agrarian combinations was to protect tenants from rising rents and evictions. Inspired by notions of "moral economy," assaults by gangs on bailiffs, middlemen and magistrates all formed part of a wider strategy of violent resistance. The protocol of violence as argued by James Donnelly, Jr. was founded on a value system based on economic rights of local tenants and farmers and the consequent resistance they met from the legal and political system of the time (Donnelly). Irish historian, John Cunningham's recent analysis of popular urban mobilisations in the form of "food-riots" in Limerick, Ennis and Galway in the decades before the Great Famine argues that E.P. Thompson's concept of the "moral economy" has limited application to the Irish context (Cunningham). He suggests that the notion of "moral economy" does not fit easily with the "agrarian underground" precisely because "their appeal was not to established legality (even if they borrowed some of its ritual), so their objectives were not normally achievable through "bargaining by riot," but rather through terrorizing those who had transgressed their code" (131). Cunningham distinguishes between "market-regulating crowds" and "rural militancy" in terms of their modus operandi and their social base. The activities of "price-regulating crowds" and the observance of some sort of "protocol of riot" which engaged in "limited exemplary violence," according to Cunningham, had a considerable impact on the moral-economic protest of the period. One such protest involved labourers on the Shannon Navigation Works demanding a pay rise. On Monday 1 June 1840, a few hundred protestors marching through the streets of Limerick swelled to three or four thousand, men, women and children who were protesting the rising prices of grain and potatoes.

Kerby Miller attributes most early migration to the New World as "part of a general pattern of resistance by Presbyterians and Catholics to a model of economic development" imposed by an "alien" class. The traditional worldview of farmers at this time resisted its "proletarianizing and pauperizing consequences" (Miller 57). Miller argues that the failure of "illegal combinations" such as trade unions and agrarian secret societies to halt the detrimental "progress" of an alien economic

model prompted surges of emigration which "meant that emigration was at bottom involuntary exile" (62).

In Cuba, the coexistence of free with slave labour, as Cuban historian Julio le Riverand argues, served to harden working conditions for so-called free labourers (Le Riverand). Irish and Canary islands wage-workers as well as convicts and freed slaves involved in the construction of the Cuban railroad, were imprisoned for violations. In the face of intense militarisation in Cuba and harsh political repression, Joan Casanovas posits that the shared socio-economic conditions resulting in co-operation between free and unfree labour "helped urban labourers of different social ranks to build a shared identity and acknowledge their common interests as the basis for developing collective action" (Casanovas 251). The evidence strongly suggests that Irish emigrants from the pre-famine era were seasoned agrarian and labour protestors with experience of collective action which they brought to bear on their encounter with industrial capitalism in Britain, the United States and Cuba. According to postcolonial theory, the apparent unwillingness of a mobile transitory workforce, at the cutting edge of new technologies, to adapt to capitalist discipline arises from counter-modern social formations imported and adapted to the new world and which, as David Lloyd puts it: "is an intrinsic, if recalcitrant, element in the history of capitalism" (Lloyd 123). The Irish railroad workers' experience of articulating grievances, formed within a detrimental system of socio-economic development in pre-famine Ireland, must, I suggest, be seen to have a bearing on their protest and the hidden transcript of resistance to exploitation, which they brought with them to Cuba. Undoubtedly there was "overlap" between labourers from Europe and Africa in terms of their common exploitation, but the extent of co-operation between them within the social and political order of colonial Cuba needs closer scrutiny. This research has raised the question of the influence of the cultural origins of Irish oppositional ideologies on labour relations conditioned as they were within the context of colonial Cuba. Research by different scholars has demonstrated that African oppositional culture is integral to the struggle against slavery: however, greater attention to the convergence of African, Irish and Canary Island oppositional ideologies at this "point of contact" in the Spanish-Caribbean is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of co-operation within networks of resistance in different regions of the Atlantic world—in this case, colonial Cuba.

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