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**Ships, Sugar & Slavery:
Catholics, Provisioning and Eighteenth-Century Cork'**

Gillian O'Brien

By 1750 Cork had emerged as a significant city with a growing international market for its butter, beef and pork. The city made the most of the fact that its 'provision trade had the enormous advantage of being an indigenous industry drawing its product from the rich pasture lands of south Munster'.¹ David Dickson has persuasively argued that 'big business in Cork remained preponderantly Protestant' in the early decades of the eighteenth century. On a smaller scale there was a 'myriad of Catholic shop-keepers and factors in the suburbs, and many of these played a pivotal role in the provisions industry'.² As early as 1709 it is apparent that some feared that these Catholic traders might expand their reach and an attempt was made in the council to ban Catholics from carrying on any foreign trade in order to preserve 'the protestant interest and support of the trade of the cities and towns in protestant hands.'³ This came to nothing, indicating perhaps a lack of concern regarding Catholic involvement in foreign trade, or a tacit acceptance that in business religious affiliations could, at times, be overlooked. Twenty years later the pamphleteer 'Alexander the Coppersmith' complained that 'Protestant *indolence* and Popish *vigilance*' had combined to increase the wealth of Catholic merchants as they traded with the French. He feared that such trade would 'suck the marrow of this city' and that the benefit 'accruing to Popish dealers and tradesmen is destructive of the protestant interest in this city'.⁴

It is certainly true that a number of Catholic families and firms in Cork (and beyond) were making their fortunes through trade. In this they were aided, in part, because a considerable number of wealthy Church of Ireland families regarded landholding and management as the business of gentlemen, not trade. In the 1770s Arthur Young noted 'the contempt in which trade is held by those who call themselves gentlemen... I have remarked the houses of country gentlemen being full of brothers, cousins, etc idlers whose best

¹ Tom McCarthy, 'Cork Harbour Commissioners in the Nineteenth Century: Governance, Infrastructure and Revenue', Unpublished MPhil thesis, UCC, (2020), 6.

² David Dickson, *Old World Colony: Cork and South Munster 1630-1830*, (Cork University Press, 2005), 167.

³ Richard Caulfield (ed), *Council Book of the Corporation of the City of Cork, from 1609-1643 and from 1690-1800* 17 May 1709, (J. Billing and Son, Guildford, 1876), 335.

⁴ Alexander the Coppersmith, *Remarks upon the Religion, Trade, Government, Police, Customes, Manners and Maladys of the City of Corke*, (George Harrison, Cork, 1737), 99.

employment is to follow a hare or a fox; *why are they not brought up to trade or manufacture? TRADE?* (the answer has been) *THEY ARE GENTLEMEN*'.⁵ Such attitudes, in part explains, why Catholic merchants and traders thrived.

Thomas Chambers' 1750 engraving of Cork shows a thriving city (fig. 1). The Exchange building (the building with a cupola set back from the far side of the river and marked by the number 1), completed in 1710, reflected the growing wealth and confidence of the merchant city. The building was the commercial heart of the city in the eighteenth century where both the formal business of the Corporation and the daily negotiations of the merchants took place. It was surrounded by coffee houses where the less formal discussions around contracts and prices were carried out. There was also the Custom House (now the Crawford Art Gallery and seen in the middle of the engraving, on the far side of the River Lee with two boats moored near it and marked by the number 10), which was crucial to the trade facilitated by the port and the fine natural harbour just beyond Cork. Also evident in Chambers' engraving are houses owned by the merchants. These show considerable variety and are not the uniform, classically inspired red-brick terraces that make up many of London and Dublin's Georgian squares. Cork's buildings reflect its maritime tradition and were influenced by other port cities including Amsterdam, Bristol and Plymouth.⁶

Cork's wealth in the eighteenth century was largely dependent on the sea, not so much on what could be fished from it, but what could be traversed across it. Cork was, as the city likes to term itself now, a city on the rise and by the late-eighteenth century it was one of the major ports of the entire Atlantic economy and 'the most cosmopolitan port in Ireland'.⁷ In Chambers' engraving ships are visible on the Lee, giving a hint of the significance of maritime trade to and from the city. But it is only a hint. There is a greater sense of the importance of the port and harbour in Thomas Sautelle Roberts' painting of Cork at the end of the eighteenth century (fig. 2). Viewers can see beyond the city streets to the many boats lined up along the navigation wall. Beyond that the river makes its way to the deep water of Cork harbour where the larger ships docked at Passage West and Cobh. When Arthur Young visited Cork in the late 1770s he estimated that there were 70-80 ships registered there and almost all of these were

⁵ Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, vol II, (1892 ed, G. Bell and Sons) 247-8

⁶ James P. McCarthy (2011) Dutch Influence in the Urban Landscape of Cork City pre-1800: Fact or Myth?, *Dutch Crossing*, 35:1, 63-8; J. N. Brewer, *The Beauties of Ireland: being original delineations, topographical, historical, and biographical of each county*, (London, 1825), 353.

⁷ Cullen, *Economic History of Ireland*, 85.

trading with the West Indies.⁸ Roberts' painting makes it clear that the city had access to a large natural harbour with huge anchorage capacity for trade ships, but it's also clear that much of the maritime trade took place out of sight of the city. As Finola O'Kane has observed 'the city itself has no view of the open sea, and its inherent maritime identity is sensed rather than seen' and this may, in part, explain why Cork's dependence on maritime trade and the city's links with the slave trade has often been overlooked.⁹

A sense of the hustle and bustle in the port and on the quays can be gleaned from the cartouche on the Grand Jury Map of the County of Cork (fig. 3). Barrels, boxes and parcels are being loaded on to the ships visible in the background. Merchants negotiate a contract over a barrel, while a prosperous-looking man converses with two others. Around them men carry provisions, two of them using a shoulder pole to hoist their barrel towards the ships. Piecing together Cork's mercantile and provisions trade is challenging for, as James O'Shea has pointed out, 'little original source material on mercantile activities in Cork survives from the eighteenth century'.¹⁰ From the 1650s beef, butter and related products including hides, skins and tallow formed an important part of the Atlantic trade.¹¹ Such was the importance of Irish salt-beef to the French colonies that Jean-Charles de Baas, governor-general of the French Antilles, reacting to a temporary ban on trading in Irish beef in 1672, wrote, 'I am daily tormented with trying to explain...that if the prohibition on beef continues, it is certain that the Islands couldn't be struck by a worse catastrophe, because if slaves are lacking in beef, colonists will be lacking in slaves'.¹² In the mid-1770s imports to Jamaica from Ireland were estimated to amount to: 19,921 barrels of beef, 4,308 barrels of pork, 15,876 firkins of butter and 21,300 barrels of herrings.¹³ The vast majority of these would have left Ireland from Cork. By the late eighteenth-century Bryan Edwards in his *History of the British Colonies in the West*

⁸ Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland, 1776-1779*, (London, 1887), 81 Dickson notes that in 1776 there were 75 vessels registered in Cork trading with West Indies. David Dickson, 'Setting out the terrain: Ireland and the Caribbean in the Eighteenth Century', in O'Kane, O'Neill (eds), 23

⁹ Finola O'Kane, *From the flat of Cork city to its harbour and height*, *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, xxii, (2019), 11. There are exceptions to this most notably the work of David Dickson including *Old World Colony* and *The First Irish Cities: An Eighteenth-Century Transformation*, (Yale University Press, 2021); Thomas Truxes, *Irish-American Trade, 1660-1763*, (Cambridge, 1988); Bertie Mandelblatt, 'A Transatlantic Commodity: Irish Salt Beef in the French Atlantic World' *History Workshop Journal*, 63, (2007), 18-47. R.C. Nash, 'Irish Atlantic Trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 42, 3 (1985), 329-356; Bernadette McCarthy, 'Some Cork Connections with the Atlantic Slave Trade, c. 1650-c. 1850', *Clonakilty Historical Journal*, 3 (2021), 121-144.

¹⁰ James O'Shea (ed.), *The Letterbook of Richard Hare Merchant of Cork 1771-1772*, (Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2013), xii.

¹¹ Mandelblatt, 'Irish Salt Beef', 26.

¹² Quoted in Mandelblatt, 'Irish Salt Beef', 19.

¹³ Long, *History of Jamaica*, vol. 1, 501

Indies offered advice to those considering establishing a sugar plantation and highlighted the importance of obtaining provisions from Ireland. Edwards estimated that a plantation of 600 acres with 250 enslaved people would need to purchase substantial provisions from Ireland including: ‘80 barrels of herring or salted cod, 6 barrels of salted beef, 2 barrels of salted pork, 4 firkins of salted butter, 2 boxes of soap, 2 boxes of candles, 2 hogshead of salt, 6 barrels of flour, 6 kegs of pease [and] 3 jugs of groats’.¹⁴

The provisioning trade in Cork brought with it many opportunities and the booming economy attracted people to the city. The population of Cork grew from 17,600 in 1706 to 41,000 in 1752 and 57,000 by 1796.¹⁵ By the mid-eighteenth century Cork was at ‘the peak of its commercial prosperity’.¹⁶ One observer commented that in the 1760s: ‘tis amazing the quantity of beef that is killed [in Cork] from Michaelmas [29 September] to Christmas...at this time a stranger would imagine it was the slaughter-house of Ireland’.¹⁷ Writing from Cork in 1778 Thomas Campbell observed, ‘This is a city, large and extensive, beyond my expectations. I had been taught to think worse of it, in all respects, than it deserved... Here is the busy bustle of prosperous trade and all its concomitant blessings; here is a most magnificent temple, erected to plenty, in the midst of a marsh... Cork deals almost exclusively in exporting the necessaries of life, beef, pork, butter, tallow etc.’¹⁸ Many of these ‘necessaries of life’, particularly the salt-beef, were consumed on ships taking enslaved people from Africa to the West Indies. The provisions that were destined for the West Indies enabled planters to reduce the amount of land required to generate food for immediate consumption and to focus instead on commercial crops such as sugar.¹⁹ In the early-nineteenth century William Clark completed ten drawings of the process of sugar making in the West Indies, from the planting to the cutting, boiling and cooling of the sugar. His final drawing is of the hogsheads of sugar being carted to the coast and put on ships destined for ports such as Cork (fig.4). Clark’s illustrations provide a very sanitised and serene view of what was a difficult and dangerous process carried out by enslaved people.

¹⁴ Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, (John Stockdale, London) vol II, 2nd ed. 1794, 254-5

¹⁵ Patrick O’Flanagan, ‘The ‘Cork Region’: Cork and Co. Cork c. 1600-1900’ in B Brunt and F. Hourihan (eds), *Perspectives on Cork*, Geographical Society of Ireland, 10, (1998), 4.

¹⁶ Louis M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660* (2nd ed, London, 1987), 85

¹⁷ [J.Bush], *A letter from a gentleman in Dublin to his friend at Dover in Kent, giving a general view of the manner, customs, dispositions etc of the inhabitants of Ireland, 1764*, (J. Potts, Dublin, 1769), 52.

¹⁸ [Thomas Campbell], *A Philosophical survey of the south of Ireland in a series of letters to John Watkinson*, 1778, Letter XX 174-7.

¹⁹ Nini Rodgers, ‘Ireland and the Black Atlantic in the Eighteenth Century’, *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxii, (Nov. 2000), 176; Luke Kirwan, ‘Cork’s International Trade during the first Industrial Revolution’, (UCC PhD, 2015), 43; Mandleblatt, ‘Irish Salt Beef’, 26.

The salt beef that reached the Caribbean from Cork was not always well-received, though it was rarely rejected. J.G. Stedman noted that in the 1770s he had ‘frequently had occasion to mention our provisions, viz salt beef, pork...for our allowance, which were dealt out regularly every five or six days; the two former having perhaps made the tour of the world, after leaving Ireland, and were even so green, so slimy, so stinking, and sometimes so full of worms, that at other times they would not have remained upon my stomach’.²⁰ Edward Long recalled rotten, putrid salted beef from Ireland being served up at a festival in Jamaica and that the butter, imported from Cork ‘is sometimes so rancid that repeated washings will not sweeten it’.²¹

II

The Catholic merchants and traders who thrived in Cork often did so because they were closely connected to the Catholic families who had established trading bases in European ports in seventeenth century. Many of those families had close Cork ties including the MacCarthys in Bordeaux, the Coppingers in La Rochelle and Bordeaux, the Goolds [sometimes Goulds] in Ostend, the Galweys [sometimes Galways] in Nantes and Ostend, and the Moylans in Lisbon, Cadiz and L’Orient.²² Cork was such a significant port that by the early-nineteenth century France, Spain and Portugal had consular representation in the city.²³ There were also close connections between merchants in Cork and ports such as Bristol and Liverpool where men such as the slave-ship owners and merchants Thomas Leyland and Kerry-born David Tuohy had close connections and business dealings with many Cork businesses.²⁴

²⁰ J.G. Stedman, *Narrative of a five years' expedition, against the revolted negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the wild coast of South America, from the year 1772, to 1777*. (J. Johnson & J. Edwards, London, 1796), 272. Stedman’s book was published in 1796 by Joseph Johnson a radical London publisher who is perhaps most famous for publishing work by Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Malthus and Thomas Paine. The book contained graphic illustrations of abuse by William Blake. Stedman does not denounce slavery in his book, but he does provide brutal and graphic descriptions of violence and torture carried out by the Dutch against the enslaved and formerly enslaved and it became an important text used by abolitionists. However, neither Stedman, nor his editor William Thomson were opposed to slavery. Indeed Thomson had written proslavery tracts. Interestingly among the more than 200 subscribers to the book are Nano Nagle’s brothers – David and Joseph Nagle. It is possible that the Nagle’s subscription may have had less to do with their interest in the book and more to do with the fact that they were likely to have known Stedman as they were all, by that time, closely associated with the area around Tiverton in Devon.

²¹ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica or General Survey of the Antient and Modern State*, Vol II, (T. Lowndes, London, 1774), 34

²² L.M. Cullen, ‘The Smuggling Trade in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 1968/9, 67 (1968//9), 149-175; Dickson, *Old World Colony*,

²³ Kirwan, ‘Cork’s International Trade’, 79. Dickson, *Old World Colony*, 153.

²⁴ See for example Letterbook of Thomas Leyland, 1786-1788, 387/MD/59; Correspondence with David Tuohy, 1779-1788, 380/TUO/1, /2, .Liverpool Public Record Office, British Archives online.

A huge percentage of the goods exported from and imported into Cork was heavily bound up with the slave trade but until relatively recently there was little discussion of Irish involvement directly or indirectly with this trade. However, in recent years increasing numbers of scholars led by Nini Rodgers, have been exploring Ireland's relationship with both the slave trade and the ownership and running of plantations where the labour was supplied by enslaved people.²⁵

Cork was replete with connections to slavery, either directly or indirectly, through family links in Europe and the Caribbean. It is not perhaps too much of an exaggeration to suggest that in the late-eighteenth century the descendants of Irish families in France were fast establishing a “monopoly on colonial culture”²⁶ As Kate Hodgson has noted ‘transcolonial stories of [Irish or Franco-Irish] families...could have emerged from anywhere in the Caribbean archipelago, from Monserrat to Cuba’.²⁷ Cork connections to slavery did not just come in the form of provisioning the plantations and the slave-ships, but a number of families with close business and familial ties to Cork were also plantation owners in the West Indies including the Meades, the Trants, the Galweys, the Goolds, the Tuites and the MacCarthys, all Catholic families.²⁸ On occasion there were clear indicators of direct connections to slavery apparent in Cork such as the notice placed by Thomas and Ignatius Trant in the *Cork Journal* in 1762. There they announced: ‘To be sold...a black negro boy aged about fourteen, remarkably free from vice, a very handy willing servant. Apply Ignatius or Thomas Trant in Mallow Lane where the boy can be seen.’²⁹

William Camden in the edition of *Britannia* published in 1607 described Cork as ‘a pretty town of merchandise’ where the inhabitants ‘make marriages one with another among themselves, whereby all the citizen are linked together in some degree or other of kindred and

²⁵ Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery 1612-1685* (2007); Mark S. Quintanilla (ed.), *An Irishman's Life on the Caribbean Island of St Vincent, 1787-10. The Letter Book of Attorney General Michael Keane*; Jonathan Wright, Finola O’Kane, *Irish-Jamaican Plantation*, Karst de Jong, *The Irish in Jamaica during the long eighteenth century*, (PhD Queen’s University Belfast, 2017), Jennifer A. McLaren, ‘Irish lives in the British Caribbean: Engaging with Empire in the Revolutionary Era’, (Phd, Macquarie University, 2018)

²⁶ Kate Hodgson, ‘Franco-Irish Saint-Domingue, Family Networks, Trans-Colonial Diasporas’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 63, 3-4 (2018), 435.

²⁷ Hodgson, ‘Franco-Irish Saint-Domingue’, 436.

²⁸ Mark McCarthy, ‘The forging of an Atlantic port city: socio-economic and physical transformations in Cork, 1660-1700’, *Urban History*, 28, 1, (2001), 33-4; Truxes, *Irish American Trade*, 92; S.M. ‘The Trant Family’, *Kerry Archaeological Magazine*, 2, 12, (1914), 239; *Kerry Archaeological Magazine*, 3, 13 (1914), 38; Henry Blackall, ‘The Galweys of Munster’, *Journal of the Cork Archaeological and Historical Society*, 74, 219, (1969), 80; Vere Langford Oliver, *History of the Island of Antigua*, ii, (London, 1896), 3.

²⁹ Quoted in John Hayes, ‘The Trants: an enterprising Catholic family in eighteenth-century Cork’, *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 86, (1981), 21. In the early 1780s members of the Trant family attended a ball dressed ‘as a negro boy and girl’. Quoted in Hayes, ‘The Trants’, 24.

affinity'.³⁰ And this was still true of the Catholic merchant class of the eighteenth century though these marriages were now spread across the world from Cork to La Rochelle, Nantes and Lisbon to Monserrat, St Croix and Barbados in the Caribbean.³¹

Ties to family and friendships were strong as evidenced by correspondence, trade and marriage connections. There were also links to religious institutions and a number of wealthy Catholic mercantile families were associated with the two convents established in Cork in the 1770s. In 1771 the first Ursuline Convent in Ireland was founded and this was followed in 1775 by the first Presentation Convent.³² The convents were built on adjoining plots in Cork's South Parish, along the south bank of the River Lee just beyond the core of the medieval city. Nano Nagle, who came from a wealthy and well-connected Catholic family, was the founder of both convents.³³ The three biggest Catholic exporters of provisions in the mid-eighteenth century were the Moylan, Goold and Shea families and all three had ties to these convents.³⁴ Nano Nagle was connected through marriage to the Goold family and she had strong links to the Moylans through her relationship with Francis Moylan who was heavily involved in the foundation of both convents in his role both as parish priest of South Parish and later as Bishop of Cork. The Moylan family's wealth came through trade in salt-beef from Cork and via their bases in France and Portugal alongside their business ties to Thomas Leyland in Liverpool.³⁵ Two of Francis Moylan's sisters joined the Ursuline Convent in the 1770s and 1780s.³⁶ Another Catholic merchant family with close ties to the convent were the Coppingers. Elizabeth Coppinger was one of the first Ursuline sisters in Ireland and two of her cousins later joined the order.³⁷

Daughters of the Goold, Shea and Trant families were among the first boarders at the Ursuline school when it opened in 1772. The school rapidly developed a strong reputation,

³⁰ William Camden, *Britannia, or, A chorographical description of Great Britain and Ireland, together with the adjacent islands*, 1607. Translated by Philémon Holland, 78.

³¹ Dickson, *Cities*, 63-4.

³² The Presentation sisters were originally called the 'Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart'. Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 101.

³³ Jessie Castle and Gillian O'Brien, "'I am building a house': Nano Nagle's Georgian Convents", *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, 19, (2017), 54-75.

³⁴ Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 129-30.

³⁵ Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865*, 129; See for example 387/MD/59 Leyland Letterbook where there are 28 letters to John and Richard Moylan over the course of two years. Also correspondence with, among others James Barry, Gerard Galway and Ann O'Shea. T.J. Walsh, 'Francis Moylan', *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, (1950), 99.

³⁶ UCB 04292, Deeds of Settlement. One of Moylan's entered in 1771 and became M Aloysius on her profession in 1774, UCB 03799 Annals 1771, 1774 while the second entered in 1781 and became Sr John Evangelist, UCB 03799 Annals 1781, 1783

³⁷ T.J. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters*, (Monasterevin, 1980), 62-3.

attracting many of the daughters of Cork's wealthy merchants, provisioners and planters.³⁸ Boarders also came from much further afield: Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar and Nova Scotia, Guadeloupe and Trinidad.³⁹ The practice of sending daughters back to Ireland for their education continued well into the nineteenth century. Adelina Shine travelled from St Vincent to Cork in the 1840s to be educated at the Ursuline school where (according to her son) she 'received an excellent literary education in English and French, both of which she spoke perfectly, and acquired a solid foundation in the tenets of the Catholic Church'.⁴⁰

The convent records show just how interconnected the Catholic merchant class was. But they also provide an insight into the use of some of the goods imported from the Caribbean by many of those merchants from the Caribbean. Many of the goods that came by boat to Cork from the continent or the Caribbean were consumed at dining tables and inns across the country but evidence is hard to come by. Maureen Wall, writing in the late 1950s, observed that those investigating the extent of Catholic involvement in trade in eighteenth-century Ireland must 'try to piece together such scraps of information as are available'.⁴¹ Sixty-five years later her words hold true, for Catholic merchants and traders left behind few detailed account books and don't appear in lists of corporation officers, of freemen or of guild members for they were ineligible for membership. The 'scraps of information' are dotted across archives, in newspapers, letters, and ledgers. A wealth of information with regard to the purchase of food, drink and services are to be found in the account books for Ursuline and Presentation Convents and the Franciscan Friary in Cork.⁴² These are invaluable records which highlight 'the fact that Cork was a port town, engaged in extensive cross-channel and international trade [which] meant that an array of produce was available to the consuming public, at least to those sections of society with purchasing power'.⁴³

The convent and friary account books records show consumption of many imported produce including wine, oranges, and grapes from Europe.⁴⁴ They also show goods coming

³⁸ UCB 03798, Notes about the Ursuline Foundation at Cork; Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 85. The Miss Shea may have been a daughter of Henry Shea, merchant on Merchant's Quay or John Shea Merchant of Sand Quay (Lucas, 1787) [Also possibly Michael Shea – see Ellen Shea]

³⁹ UCB 001498 Account of Entrance Money, Miss Belin, Miss Lynch, Miss O'Brien, 1792, 1814, 1815.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Jonathan Jeffrey Wright (ed.), *An Ulster Slave Holder in the Revolutionary Atlantic. The Life and Letters of John Black*, (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2019), 154n.

⁴¹ Maureen Wall, 'The Rise of a Catholic Middle Class in Eighteenth Century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, (Sept, 1958), 11, 42, 91.

⁴² UCB 01498, Account book; UCB 00673 Monthly Accounts; PSCP Account book; Liam Kennedy, Clare Murphy (eds), *The account books of the Franciscan House, Broad Lane, Cork, 1764-1921*, (Irish Manuscripts Commission, Dublin, 2012).

⁴³ Kennedy, Murphy, 'Introduction' in *The account books of the Franciscan House*, xiv.

⁴⁴ UCB01498, Account book; UCB 00673 Monthly Accounts; PSCA Account book.

from further afield, most notably sugar, chocolate, coffee and rum which, for the most part, were imported from the West Indies.⁴⁵ Sugar was regularly purchased – the accounts for the Ursuline sisters in the 1790s indicate that it was being bought every month, while the annual accounts for the Presentation sisters and the Franciscan Friars list considerable quantities of sugar purchased every year.⁴⁶ Chocolate and fruit were rare treats and produced when the Sisters had ‘company’ or for a special occasion such as the Feast of St Charles Borromeo on 4 November.⁴⁷ Borromeo was the patron saint of Ursuline Schools and his feast day was marked with luxury items including, sugar, coffee, chocolate, cakes, apples, pears and oranges.⁴⁸ Rum was purchased by both convents and the friary several times a year – in one instance the Franciscans indicated that they had bought it ‘for the workmen’.⁴⁹ It is very likely that the rum originated in the West Indies, for in the 1760s a Cork merchant indicated the city’s strong preference for West Indian rum over both brandy and rum from New England: ‘If ever thou or thy friends shou’d [sic] ship any here...let it be of superior strength to the general run of New England Rum, which is too weak and ill flavour’d [sic] for this Market’.⁵⁰

With the increasing importation of sugar there was a growth in sugar refineries in Ireland, primarily focused on port cities such as Dublin and Cork where the sugar was landed.⁵¹ A sugar refinery, the Red Abbey Sugar House, opened in the former Augustinian Abbey on Mary Street in the early-eighteenth century and by the end of the century it was owned by Sir David and George Perrier.⁵² The refinery was just across the street from both the Ursuline and Presentation convents. By the early nineteenth century the Presentation Sisters were spending more on tea, coffee and sugar than they were on meat, though they certainly weren’t buying their sugar from the Red Abbey Sugar House then as, in December 1799, a huge fire at the refinery had almost engulfed the two neighbouring convents.⁵³ The Ursuline convent was saved, the Ursuline annalist noted, by ‘the shield of providence that warded off the danger and

⁴⁵ UCB01498, Account book; UCB 00673 Monthly Accounts; PSCA Account book.; *Account Book of the Franciscan House*.

⁴⁶ The first record of sugar in the Franciscan account book is 1769 while both the Ursuline and Presentation account books record sugar in their account books from the year of their establishment. UCB01498, Account book; UCB 00673 Monthly Accounts; SPC Account book.; *Account Book of the Franciscan House*, 1769, 15.

⁴⁷ UCB 01498, Manuscript notebook, Accounts, 1792

⁴⁸ UCB 01498, Manuscript notebook, Accounts, November 1789

⁴⁹ *Account Book of the Franciscan House*, 1771, 18.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Truxes, *Irish-American Trade*, 216.

⁵¹ Dorothy Cashman, ‘Sugar Bakers and Confectioners in Georgian Ireland’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 41, (2018), 78; Caitriona Devery, ‘Bittersweet Beet: A History of Irish Sugar’, *Feast*, <https://feastjournal.co.uk/article/bittersweet-beet-a-history-of-irish-sugar>; Cullen *An Economic History*, 92.

⁵² *Hibernian Chronicle*, 9 December 1799.

⁵³ PSCA Account book, 1816.

the glorious Protectress of this Monastery'. The annalist was unsurprised that disaster had befallen the sugar refinery for it was ill-fated as the business had been 'raised on consecrated ground'.⁵⁴

III

The Catholic children of Irish families who owned plantations in the West Indies often sent their children to Catholic schools across Europe for their education. With the establishment of the Ursuline school in Cork increasing numbers of girls with Cork connections came to the city. But it wasn't all one-way traffic. In 1770 Nano Nagle sent boys from her schools in Cork to the West Indies. Their passage was paid for by 'some charitable gentlemen who put themselves to great expense'. Nagle wrote to Eleanor Fitzsimons observing that 'All my children, are brought up to be fond of instructing, as I think it lies in the power of the poor to be of [more] service that way than the rich. These children promise me they will take great pains with the little blacks to instruct them'.⁵⁵ Given the links between the Catholic merchant families that stretched from Cork to France to the West Indies the boys could have travelled to a number of places. It is possible that they were sent to Monserrat, an island closely associated with Ireland from the early-seventeenth century and where there were Cork connections through families such as the Galways and Goolds.⁵⁶

It seems most likely that the boys were sent from Cork to St Croix which is now part of the Virgin Islands under US control but was in 1770 under Danish control.⁵⁷ The Tuite family had arrived in the West Indies from Westmeath in the 1690s. The family maintained close ties with Ireland and in the early 1700s Robert Tuite was one of the few Irish planters who owned ships which he used to import provisions from Cork in exchange for sugar, tobacco and indigo.⁵⁸ By 1760 his son Nicholas was well established in St Croix where he owned seven plantations and had an interest in fourteen others.⁵⁹ Largely as a result of his efforts St Croix had begun to generate profits for the Danish king and in July 1754 Tuite applied formally for freedom of religion in St Croix. He claimed that religious freedom would bring new Catholic

⁵⁴ UCB 03799, Annals, December 1799.

⁵⁵ Nano Nagle to Eleanor Fitzsimons [1770] IE PBVM NN/1/1/3, https://doi.org/10.7925/drs1.ucdlib_153350

⁵⁶ Truxes, *Irish American Trade*, 92

⁵⁷ After 'discovery' by Columbus St Croix formed part of the Spanish empire but from 1630 the island was occupied by the Dutch, English, Spanish and from 1650 the French. Danish West India Company bought St Croix from the French in 1733 (1754 the crown took control) and held them until the USA bought it in 1916-17. Hugh Fenning, 'The Mission to St. Croix in the West Indies: 1750-1769', *Archivum Hibernicum*, vol 25, (1962), 75.

⁵⁸ Truxes, *Irish American Trade*, 101.

⁵⁹ Nini Rodgers, 'The Irish in the Caribbean 1641-1837: An Overview', in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America*, 148

settlers that he was certain ‘would comport themselves as zealous and loyal subjects of His majesty’.⁷⁹ The king granted religious freedom in September 1754 and by 1758 there were 250 white Catholics on St Croix, many of them Irish.⁶⁰

Tuite donated a site for a Catholic church on the island and sought Irish clergymen for the island. Several Irish Dominicans arrived in 1759.⁶¹ They did not find the Catholics on the island zealous when it came to their religion, but they began with enthusiasm. Hyacinth Kennedy, one of the first Dominicans to arrive, reported that

there are of our countrymen here about twelve who have plantation estates, but in the town there are also many of our country, some merchants, traders, and captains of vessels who come here, and are about 100 lads of our country overseers on plantations...The blacks or negroes of Mr Tuite’s I have instructed and baptized 150.⁶²

Such enthusiasm rapidly faded: ‘All I could do was among poor black slaves who groped in dark ignorance. I done [sic] what I could. They were my flock, and at this moment I would lay down my life for them if it would conduce to their salvation of their souls. But alas, work, make rum and sugar, is the theme. As for the white people of our communion here or of our country, their zeal or devotion is nothing. It is languid if not dead; and they who were good Christians in Europe are reprobates here’.⁶³ The Dominicans wanted small chapels built in the countryside for the convenience of poor inhabitants, but also so that they no longer had to say mass in ‘chambers hung with naked Venus’s and sea-nymphs bathing in chrystal [sic] springs’.⁶⁴ However, it proved almost impossible to encourage more priests to move to St Croix and it seems plausible that spreading Catholicism in the countryside might very well have been a job for those young Cork boys.

Nicholas Tuite had strong links to Cork. His mother lived there before her death in 1758 and he remained close to relatives in the city, leaving several of them allowances in his will.⁶⁵ There were also trade ties as the largest cargoes of provisions sent to St Croix originated in Cork.⁶⁶ Tuite was actively concerned with increasing the Catholic mission in St Croix and increasing the number of Irish there and it is very likely that the Nagle and Tuite families knew each other. A clear connection between the sisters and the Tuite family emerged in the early-

⁶⁰ Fenning, ‘The Mission to St. Croix’, 76

⁶¹ Fanning, ‘The Mission to St. Croix’ 76

⁶² Hyacinth Kennedy O.P. [of LORRAH CO. TIPP] to Charles O’Kelly O.P. at the Minerva, Rome, 23 April 1760 in Fenning, ‘The Mission to St. Croix’, 84-5.

⁶³ Kennedy to O’Kelly at the Minerva Rome, 20 August 1760, in Fenning, ‘The Mission to St Croix’, 92.

⁶⁴ Thomas E. Devenish O.P. to O’Kelly, 30 April 1765 in Fenning, ‘The Mission to St. Croix’, 116

⁶⁵ Will of Nicholas Tuite, 27 Nov. 1772, NA PROB 11/983/95.

⁶⁶ Orla Power, ‘Irish Planters, Atlantic Merchants; the development of St. Croix, Danish West Indies, 1750-1766, (Galway University, Phd, 2011), 127

nineteenth century when Elizabeth Tuite, daughter of Nicholas, became a boarder at the Ursuline convent. Elizabeth Tuite had a gilded youth, and as a ‘petted young lady...been tended by slaves’ but she did not re-embrace a life of privilege when she left school. Instead, she ‘gave up all that the world could bestow and enrolled herself among the daughters of Nano Nagle’.⁶⁷ In 1824, as Sr Aloysius, she made her profession in the Presentation convent in Doneraile, Co. Cork and in 1853 she became one of the founders of the convent in Mitchelstown, Co. Cork.⁶⁸

IV

Connections between wealthy Irish families often straddled the seas, bound by trade, by marriage, by religion. Given the importance of trade to Cork in the eighteenth century, it would have been virtually impossible for anyone of means not to have had direct or indirect ties to the slave trade. It is disappointing that there has been greater public awareness of the fictitious stories of the Irish as slaves, than there has been of the Irish as either slave owners or traders whether through the sale of good such as salt-beef, butter and tallow or the purchase of cotton, rum and sugar.⁶⁹

It's not just those in the Big Houses, the lords and ladies with their landed estates, that grew rich on the suffering of others. Many others, Catholics, Quakers, Huguenots, Presbyterians and members of the Church of Ireland, also thrived as a result of slavery.⁷⁰ Millions more enjoyed the rum, the sugar, the cotton they purchased, presumably with little thought about how it had reached their tables or wardrobes. But by the late 1780s it would have been virtually impossible for Cork's merchants, traders (and indeed nuns) to be unaware of the growing anti-slavery discourse.⁷¹ Cooper Penrose, a quaker, attempted unsuccessfully to raise an anti-slavery petition through the Cork Committee of Merchants in 1789.⁷² More significantly William Wilberforce's first parliamentary bill aimed at abolishing the slave trade was defeated in 1791, but the conversations, articles, pamphlets and speeches about the trade did not go

⁶⁷ William Hutch, *Nano Nagle: Her life, her labours and their fruits*, (Dublin: McGlashan and Gill, 1875), 415-6; Power, ‘Irish Planters, Atlantic Merchants’, 87. Hutch claimed her father had been a governor of a West-Indian island which is not accurate. In 1760 Nicholas Tuite was ‘founder of the colony of St Croix’ following an audience with King Frederick V in Copenhagen.

⁶⁸ PSCA Don 1/1, Doneraile Annals, 1821, 1824.

⁶⁹ See for example the work by Liam Hogan including ‘Were the Irish “the first slaves in America”?’ (2020), <https://limerick1914.medium.com/factcheck-were-the-irish-the-first-slaves-in-america-e0df2f6a6e73>; ‘Irish in the Anglo-Caribbean: servants or slaves?’, *History Ireland*, (2016), 24; Gillian O’Brien, *The Darkness Echoing: Exploring Ireland's Places of Famine, Death and Rebellion* (London: Doubleday, 2020), 184-8.

⁷⁰ For example the Browne family of Westport House, Co. Mayo, the LaTouches of Marlay House, Dublin made much of their money as a result of the slave trade.

⁷¹ See for example *Hibernian Chronicle*, 24 Jan. 1788; 2 Jan 1792; *Freeman's Journal*, 4 Jan. 1785.

⁷² Richard S. Harrison, ‘Irish Quaker Perspectives on the Anti-Slavery Movement’, *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, 56, (1991), 107.

away. As public debate swirled around the slave trade ‘S.K.’ wrote a pamphlet which was published in Cork. Entitled ‘A short but particular and impartial account of the treatment of slaves in the island of Antigua’, it drew on his own experience of living in the West Indies for eight years.⁷³ ‘S.K.’ argued for the continuation of slavery if some small improvements to circumstances of the enslaved were made. He argued that ‘a very few regulations will make the condition of the slaves much more desirable, than that of the generality of our peasantry’ and he claimed that thousands of Irishmen (including some from Cork) had witnessed the arrival of ships bearing enslaved people to ports in the West Indies and watched as those on board ‘almost without intermission sing, dance and otherwise amuse themselves...with as much unconcern and gaiety as if they were celebrating a festival’.⁷⁴ He was keen to portray the slave owners as largely benign, while at the same time detailing appalling treatment of the enslaved, providing accounts of whipping, the use of iron collars and imprisonment.⁷⁵

Frederick Douglass’ visit to Cork in 1845 has received considerable attention but over half a century earlier in 1791, another formerly enslaved man and leading abolitionist, Olaudah Equiano, spent eight months in Ireland talking about the horrors of slavery. Equiano travelled around the country, including a visit to Cork, where he promoted his memoir and anti-slavery book, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano*.⁷⁶ 1,900 copies of Equiano’s book were sold during his time in Ireland – a feat which rendered it a bestseller – and he recalled that during his visit he was ‘exceedingly well treated by persons of all ranks’.⁷⁷ William Fox’s influential anti-slavery pamphlet, published in London in 1791, had an Irish edition by 1792. Fox outlined the case for ‘abstaining from West-India sugar and rum’ arguing that anyone who bought or consumed them was complicit in the slave trade: ‘If we, as individuals concerned in the Slave Trade (either by procuring the slaves, compelling them to labour, or using the produce) imagine that our share in the transaction is so minute that it cannot perceptibly increase the injury; let us recollect that though numbers partaking of a crime may diminish the shame, they cannot diminish its turpitude’.⁷⁸ He agreed with Benjamin Franklin that all sugar

⁷³ ‘S.K.’, ‘A Short but Particular and Impartial Account of the Treatment of Slaves in the Island of Antigua’, (Cork, 1789), It was dedicated ‘to the nobility and gentry and the liberal minded in general of the county and city of Cork’

⁷⁴ ‘S.K.’, ‘A Short but Particular and Impartial Account’, vii, 9-10.

⁷⁵ ‘S.K.’, ‘A Short but Particular and Impartial Account’, 50-8.

⁷⁶ Hart, Africans in eighteenth-century Ireland, *Irish Historical Studies*, 21

⁷⁷ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of Oloudah Equiano*, (9th ed, London, 1794), 359; Vincent Caretta, *Equiano: the African. Biography of a Self-Made Man*, (University of Georgia Press, 2005), 301.

⁷⁸ [William Fox] ‘An Address to the People of Great Britain (Respectfully offered to the People of Ireland) on the Propriety of Abstaining from West-India Sugar and Rum’, (London, printed at Limerick, A. Watson and Co., 1792), 9. There were at least two Irish editions published – one in Limerick and one in Cork. Maire

cubes should be treated as not merely spotted with blood but ‘dyed scarlet’.⁷⁹ There was, he argued, no excuse for anyone to continue to support slavery ‘if ignorance and inattention may be pleaded as our excuse hitherto, yet that can be the case no longer...Its dreadful wickedness has been fully proved’.⁸⁰

Business records, advertisements, account books, pamphlets, buildings and maps all attest to Cork’s growth and prosperity in the eighteenth century and by the end of the century there was no denying how much of that wealth had been generated. An anti-slavery pamphlet published in Cork in 1792 predicted that ‘future ages’ would be horrified by learning ‘that the most enlightened nations of Europe have sacrificed millions of their fellow creatures, at a monstrous expense of men and money, simply to improve the modes of intoxication.... At best it is to procure an indulgence for debauched palates, that countries have been desolated, the dearest ties of love and tenderness broken though, and the agonising victims borne to other lands’.⁸¹ Whether it was through the sale of commodities such as salt-beef or the purchase of goods such as sugar there was, and is, no way to deny the complicity of all those involved in the business of slavery, through consciously or unconsciously aiding, abetting and benefitting from slavery.

Kennedy, ‘Loyal Cork Citizens: the Edwards family, booksellers (1770-1833), (August 2021), <https://mairekennedybooks.wordpress.com/>

⁷⁹ [Fox], ‘Propriety of Abstaining from West-India Sugar and Rum’ 5; Benjamin Franklin to Captain Osborne, 5 April 1775’, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2, (Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, London, 1806), 196.

⁸⁰ [Fox], ‘Propriety of Abstaining from West-India Sugar and Rum’ 14.

⁸¹ [Anon] ‘An essay on the slave trade, enumerating its horrors and shewing the vice of encouraging it by the consumption of West-India Productions’, (Anthony Edwards, Cork 1792), 6.

Figures:

Fig. 1 Thomas Chambers, Cork, 1750



Fig 2. Thomas Sautelle Roberts, *City of Cork* (1799), [Samuel Aiken, hand colouring]



Fig. 3. Cartouche from *Grand Jury Map of the County of Cork*, 1811



Fig 4. William Clark, *Ten Views of the Island of Antigua* (London, 1832) No. X: Carting and Putting Sugar-Hogsheads on Board.

