

Africans in eighteenth-century Ireland

About noon on Sunday 19 October 1777 there was a stir of attention in one corner of St Stephen's Green in Dublin. As the *Freeman's Journal* reported,

A female black and child . . . was so closely pressed by the multitude of people crowding round, and staring at her, that being much affrighted, in vain she endeavoured to retire, the child was so terrified as to burst into tears, and notwithstanding such evident signs of fear, it was with the utmost difficulty a few reasonable persons could extricate her from the crowd and get her safe out of the walks.¹

It is easy to visualise the scene: the intimidating presence of the Sunday crowd building up around the pair, the frightened mother, the weeping child clinging to her. The story is told sympathetically; it is a minor incident but, one might think, revealing. It seems, on the face of it, to show that a single black woman and her child were a rare sight in eighteenth-century Dublin. But then the next sentence in the newspaper report turns that assumption on its head:

Had she in any manner differed from others of her colour and country so common to meet with, it might have been some apology, to gratify curiosity; that not being the case, it reflects both scandal and ignorance on the company, and the more so, as the time and the place considered, much better behaviour might be expected.

In the writer's view, what was wrong was not simply the rudeness of the Dubliners in letting their curiosity get the better of them, and the distress this caused, but the fact that it was out of all proportion to the object that provoked it. There was not the excuse that black people like this particular mother and child were a novelty. On the contrary, they were 'common to meet with'.

The implications of this surprising claim form the subject-matter of the present article. It is only within the last thirty years or so that the history of black people in Europe has been studied in a sustained and systematic way, and coverage has been uneven. Historians have concentrated on the presence of black Africans and Asians in England.² In comparison, the presence of black people in Scotland and Ireland has been neglected, although Paul

¹*Freeman's Journal*, 23–25 Oct. 1777.

²For a general overview see H. W. Debrunner, *Presence and prestige: Africans in Europe* (Basel, 1979). Works dealing with particular countries are S. T. McCloy, *The negro in France* (Lexington, Ky., 1961), and A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A social history of black slaves and freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge, 1982). The extensive literature on black people in England is summarised in ch. 1 of Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the black past: blacks in Britain, 1780–1830* (London, 1996), which also contains a bibliography.

Edwards has drawn attention to the presence of a number of Africans, men and women, at the court of the Scottish king James IV in the early years of the sixteenth century, and more recent research has identified traces of a continuous 'black presence' in Scotland down to the present day.³ In Ireland, however, the study of 'black history' — or of black people as a topic within Irish history — remains more or less untouched; there may therefore be value in publishing the results of a preliminary survey of the materials available.

I

It is very difficult to form any realistic estimate of the numbers of black people in Ireland at any point in the eighteenth century. Unlike France, where the government carried out a census of the black population in 1777–8,⁴ there are no official figures; nor was there in Ireland an active and interested West Indian lobby, which is the source of the contemporary estimates we have of the black population in England at this time.⁵ The report of the black mother and child in St Stephen's Green quoted above is the only contemporary source of which the present writer is aware to make any general comment on the numbers of black people in Ireland, and one is inclined to suspect that the report intended to refer to Dublin specifically, and not to the country at large. But that there were significant numbers of black people living in Ireland in the eighteenth century is clear from the casual references to 'blackamoors', 'negro blacks', or simply 'blacks', encountered in contemporary Irish newspapers, parish registers and other documentary sources.⁶ An exhaustive study of these sources has still to be carried out, but within the period 1750–99 the present writer has identified about 160 separate references to black people in Ireland. These references are usually to single individuals, but some refer to more than one person.

³Paul Edwards, *The early African presence in the British Isles* (Edinburgh, 1990) (inaugural lecture at the University of Edinburgh, published as an Occasional Paper by the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh); June Evans, 'Africans/Caribbeans in Scotland: a socio-geographic study' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1996).

⁴Reports were compiled of the numbers of black people in the different regions of France, but complete figures were not computed: see McCloy, *Negro in France*, pp 51–2.

⁵Contemporary estimates of the black population in eighteenth-century England are discussed in Myers, *Reconstructing the black past*, ch. 2. Myers provides her own estimates, based on court and parish records. She puts the figure for London as being between 5,000 and 10,000 and suggests another 10,000 for the rest of England as a whole.

⁶There is need for caution here. Terms like 'black man' and 'black fellow' were often used in Ireland, particularly in the early eighteenth century, to denote dark hair or complexion. Thus James Carleton, who deserted Rook's regiment of foot on 28 July 1709, described as 'a middle sized black Man, long thin coal black Hair, of a very pale countenance, an Inniskillenman' (*Dublin Gazette*, 2–6 Aug. 1709), is clearly not to be counted as an African.

For example, when the 29th Regiment (Boscawen's) moved into barracks in Dublin in 1757, it was noted as a distinguishing feature that its regimental drummers (a group of half a dozen or more) were all black men.⁷ Another report, from 1791, speaks of the arrival in Dublin of a 'coach-full of sable Africans with attendants of the same complexion', which presumably refers to a party of between six and ten.⁸ It seems unlikely, moreover, that any but a small proportion of the black population in Ireland would have been conspicuous enough, even if only as runaway servants or victims of crime, to be recorded in the newspapers of the day; so that the figure of 160 references, over 100 of which are references from newspapers and memoirs, is actually quite large. The proportion likely to have been selected in this way could hardly have been more than 1 in 10; a figure less than 1 in 20 seems, if anything, more probable. If the former, we would be talking about a total slightly in excess of 1,000 black people for Ireland as a whole, with the more likely possibility being that there were several (say between 2,000 and 3,000), admittedly over a period of fifty years rather than at any one time. This is a tiny figure in relation to the population of the island as a whole, but it is as large as the recorded numbers of black people in France, which had a population four times that of Ireland;⁹ and within Europe it is likely to have been exceeded only in England and perhaps in Spain or Portugal.

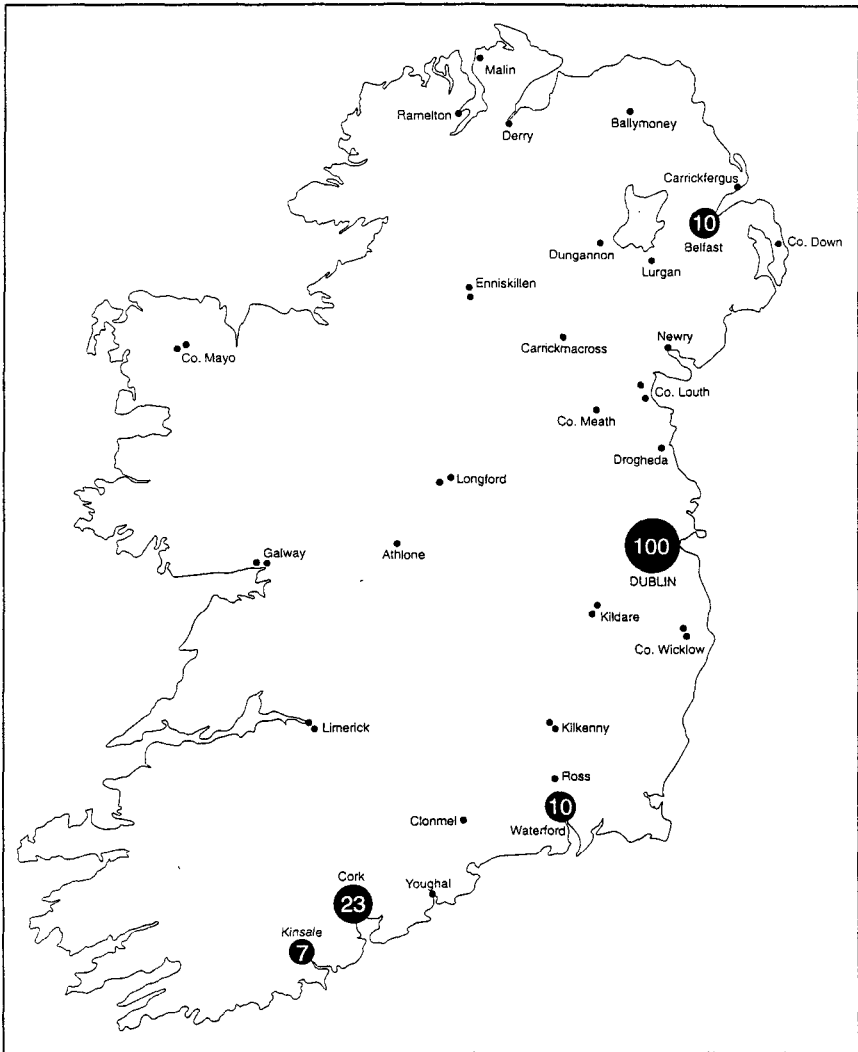
Some sense of the distribution of these black people within Ireland can be gathered from the map. A single dot represents a particular reference to a black person in eighteenth-century sources; larger circles represent clusters of such references. As can be seen, there were few parts of Ireland in which black people were not present: from Malin Head to Kinsale, and from Galway to Dublin. In fact the map does not reveal the full geographical extent of the black presence in eighteenth-century Ireland, since each dot represents an individual and his or her primary location, rather than each place that individual may have visited. Olaudah Equiano, the black author and anti-slavery campaigner, toured all over Ireland in the eight months he spent there in 1792–3,¹⁰ and Rachael Baptist, the singer whose career will be discussed at some length below, was also widely travelled. Predictably, per-

⁷*Pue's Occurrences*, 7–11 June 1757.

⁸*Dublin Journal*, 4–6 Oct. 1791.

⁹According to McCloy, who studied the 1777–8 totals and other official records, a figure not much above a thousand seems the likely upper limit for the number of black people in France at any time in the eighteenth century (McCloy, *Negro in France*, p. 52). A more recent study of black people under the *ancien régime* gives the estimate made by the French Committee of Legislation in 1782, of between 4,000 and 5,000 as the 'highest acceptable figure', but without meeting the arguments that led McCloy to reject this as fantastic (Sue Peabody, *There are no slaves in France': the political culture of race and slavery in the ancien régime* (Oxford, 1996), p. 4).

¹⁰*Interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano* (6th ed., London, 1793), pp 358–9. Equiano figures prominently in Paul Edwards and James Walvin (eds), *Black personalities in the era of the slave trader* (London, 1983), and in S. J. Braidwood, *Black poor and white philanthropists: London's blacks and the foundation of the Sierra Leone settlement, 1786–1791* (Liverpool, 1994). For the background to Equiano's visit to Ireland see Nini Rodgers, 'Equiano in Belfast: a study of the anti-slavery ethos in a northern town' in *Slavery and Abolition*, xviii (1997), pp 73–89.



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haps, there is evidence of a large concentration of black people in Dublin, in particular, and to a much lesser extent in the ports of Belfast, Cork, Kinsale and Waterford. This probably reflects the eighteenth-century reality, but it may also be affected by the fact that the principal sources of information used were newspapers; and it is only for Dublin, Cork and Belfast that a representative sample of contemporary newspapers has survived. Dublin, in particular, almost certainly had, after London, a larger number of black residents than any other city in these islands — perhaps, again with the exception of London, the largest black population of any eighteenth-century European city.

The great majority of these black people of whom there is any record were male. Only 20 of the 188 references which have thus far been traced for the eighteenth century as a whole are to black women. This may reflect an actual imbalance between the sexes in the black population. On the other hand, much of the information about black people comes from newspaper advertisements about runaways, who, if servants, tended to be young males, and, if sailors, were male without exception; or from news reports of crimes and street accidents, which again, for the most part, were more likely to involve males than females; so the explanation for the apparent imbalance may lie within the sources. Parish registers, which might be expected to give a more accurate picture of the black population (but which have only been sampled),¹¹ record 8 females and 64 males: a less dramatic, but still clear, bias in favour of black males. Such an imbalance between the sexes would, of course, have had implications for the long-term survival of a distinct black community in Ireland.

In contrast to London, where already by the early eighteenth century black residents had begun to form their own social networks and came together for major family and community occasions such as weddings and funerals,¹² there is no evidence that black people in Ireland, even in Dublin, where their numbers were comparatively large, established networks of their own or tended to live in particular parts of the city, or had special places to which they resorted for entertainment (such as the 'black hops' where black people congregated in London).¹³ It would be surprising if black people, whose colour would inevitably have made them stand out from the general population, had not felt a measure of group identity, helped one another and enjoyed one another's company. But the small numbers involved may have prevented this happening on a scale which impinged on public attention and would have left some indication in the records.

II

What was the status of Africans in Ireland, and how were they regarded? Inevitably attitudes towards them were influenced by the fact that the great majority of them were domestic servants and a significant number were

¹¹The parish registers examined systematically for the presence of black people were those for the following Church of Ireland parishes in Dublin city: Christ Church, St Anne's, St Audoen's, St Catherine's, St John's, St Luke's, St Mark's, St Michan's, St Nicholas Within, St Nicholas Without, St Patrick's, St Paul's, St Kevin's, St Thomas's and St Werburgh's. Some of the surviving registers for parishes in Belfast, Cork, Kinsale and Waterford were also inspected.

¹²Peter Fryer, *Staying power: the history of black people in Britain* (London, 1984), pp 69–70, quotes a description of a wedding involving black families from the *St James's Evening Post*, 19–22 Mar. 1726. A Dublin newspaper (*Dublin Journal*, 21–25 Feb. 1726[7]) similarly reprinted a description of the funeral of a black woman, with many black mourners, at St Bride's church, Fleet Street, London, in February 1727.

¹³Fryer, *Staying power*, p. 69.

slaves. This was an age when, among the middle classes, a certain social cachet was conveyed by the possession of a black (that is to say African or East Indian) footman or housemaid. The *Dublin Journal* in 1783 criticised what it called this 'preposterous Predilection for Exotics', which led employers to prefer 'sooty-bottomed foreigners' to 'fair complexioned' Irish servants, even though the latter might be 'ever so eligibly recommended for Decency, Temperance, and Expertness as a Servant', and complained, no doubt with exaggeration, that native Irish servants could not find jobs.¹⁴ That a number of these black servants were in effect slaves cannot be in doubt. They are so described in newspaper advertisements for runaways, and even, in a few cases, in advertisements offering them for sale:

A Negro Boy and Slave, called Bazill, the property of William Nicholson, Esq., has been missing since Thursday evening last . . .¹⁵

A black Servant Maid has eloped from her Mistress on Thursday the 11th Inst. . . . We hope no Person will employ her as she is the Slave and Property of Mrs Heyliger.¹⁶

Run away from the service of Mrs Fullerton of Carrickfergus, on Sunday last, a negro slave boy . . .¹⁷

To be sold for account of D.F. a Black Negro Boy aged about 14 years, remarkably free from vice and a very handy willing servant.¹⁸

A Neat beautiful black Negro Girl, just brought from Carolina, aged 11 or 12 years, who understands and speaks good English, very fit to wait on a lady, to be disposed of . . .¹⁹

There is no disguising the existence of slavery in Ireland at this time, nor that it was restricted, in practice, to black people from Africa and the East Indies. However, the situation of these slaves in a society such as eighteenth-century Ireland, where slaves were in a very small minority, was quite different from that in societies, such as the Caribbean islands or South Carolina, where slavery was the mainspring of social organisation.²⁰ There are three differences worth noting: the boundaries between slave and non-slave in Ireland were not sharply defined; a much greater range of occupations was open to black people than was normally the case in slave societies; and, not least, sexual relations between white and black were comparatively relaxed.

Let us look at each of these in turn. When one reads in contemporary Irish newspapers, among advertisements offering, for example, properties for rent and patent medicines for sale, offers of rewards for the capture of run-

¹⁴*Dublin Journal*, 26–28 Aug. 1783.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 10–14 Aug. 1756.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 13–16 Mar. 1762.

¹⁷*Belfast News-Letter*, 14 Sept. 1762.

¹⁸*Cork Journal*, 15 Mar. 1762.

¹⁹*Dublin Mercury*, 11–13 Aug. 1768.

²⁰For this distinction between a slave-owning and a slave society see P. D. Morgan, 'British encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600–1780' in Bernard Bailyn and P. D. Morgan (eds), *Strangers within the realm: cultural margins of the first British empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), pp 163–4.

away black slaves, it would be a mistake to think of these in terms made familiar to us by *Uncle Tom's cabin* or *Huckleberry Finn*. One must not imagine search-parties and packs of baying bloodhounds. Absconding African slaves in Ireland at this time were only one of a number of dependent groups who were pursued through the medium of advertisements in newspapers. Others included indentured servants, undischarged servants in general, apprentices, deserting soldiers and sailors, runaway wives and children. Notices concerning people in each of these categories appeared regularly in the press. Slaves, whether African or East Indian, were not singled out by the fact of being advertised as runaways in newspapers. Moreover, such notices were principally aimed at potential employers, who were threatened with prosecution if they took on runaways. Absconding from a master or mistress was not in itself a criminal offence; the only effective sanction an employer could invoke was the threat of future unemployment. Hence the tendency of these advertisements to link the running away with something else which *was* a crime, such as theft — even if, from the details given in the advertisement, it is clear that the person concerned was only guilty of going off in the clothes he or she happened to be wearing at the time, which, of course, belonged to the employer.

The case of Peter Kent, an East Indian servant, illustrates these points very well. He ran away from his master, Captain Andrew Armstrong of Castle Armstrong in King's County, in November 1769.²¹ Armstrong duly placed an announcement in the press, describing Kent as his property, accusing him of having stolen various articles of clothing, and offering a reward to anyone who would have him imprisoned or returned to his master. Kent, in the meantime, had found employment with one Owen Coffee, an attorney from Clonkeen in County Westmeath. Armstrong discovered his whereabouts and brought a civil action against Coffee for seducing away his servant. This was tried before a judge in Dublin in July 1770. The court found for the plaintiff and awarded £100 damages, payable by the defendant. Although evidence was given at the trial that Kent was a slave and had never been paid wages by his master, the verdict does not appear to have turned upon that point, but on the simple fact of Kent's having been a servant, whom it was illegal, without proper discharge, for anyone else to employ. No criminal charges appear to have been pursued against Kent; and since Armstrong at the end of the trial refused to take him back into his service, it would seem that Armstrong's interest had been in obtaining compensation for his loss, and not the recovery of his 'property'.²²

In practice, the main difference between a free black servant and a slave at this period seems to have been the fact that the latter received no wages. In certain cases, therefore, a slave running away from service was taking the only industrial action, so to speak, open to him if he wanted to bring about an improvement in his conditions of service. How successful this might be is shown by the following addendum to a runaway notice placed by Patrick Burke of Cork for his negro slave Jerry in March 1769:

²¹*Dublin Journal*, 21–23 Nov. 1769.

²²*Dublin Mercury*, 10–12 July 1770; *Freeman's Journal*, 17–19 July, 4–7, 11–14 Aug. 1770.

As the said Negro knows his Master's affection for him, if he will immediately return, he will be forgiven; if Freedom be what he wishes for, he shall have it, with reasonable wages.²³

What this indicates, surely, is that there was nothing uniquely oppressive or irremediable about the status of a slave in Ireland at this time, and that it shaded into other categories of dependent status, such as indenture or ordinary domestic service.

The great majority of the black people in eighteenth-century Ireland whose occupations are definitely recorded were domestic servants of one kind or another. As such, of course, they would have enjoyed a social status above that of common labourers or peasants working on the land. Some, indeed, may well have entered into service as a means of widening their experience or furthering their education. In this category, perhaps, was the negro boy of 'Humanity Dick' Martin, reputedly the son of a west African king, who resigned his master's service when his father died and he was recalled to succeed to the throne.²⁴ 'Mr Cudjoe', a servant of the earl of Halifax while Halifax was lord lieutenant of Ireland, was appointed by his master to be one of Ireland's state trumpeters.²⁵ A number of the Africans encountered in Ireland at this time were musicians. Jerry, the runaway slave mentioned above, played the violin.²⁶ Another, who ran away from his master in the vicinity of Kilkenny, played the violin and the French horn.²⁷ Many regiments quartered in Ireland had black drummers; at least one, the 29th, had only black drummers. Black musicians took part in the triennial 'riding of the franchises' (or 'fringes') in Dublin.²⁸ A black man sang the part of Mungo in Dibdin's comic opera *The padlock* on a Dublin stage in 1773;²⁹ and a black woman singer performed both in the city's theatres and pleasure gardens in the 1750s.³⁰ Several black youths were apprenticed to different trades: one, for example, to a Dublin apothecary.³¹ Others, apparently, were themselves employers, like the African salvage expert who was recruited to recover the cargo of an East Indiaman which had gone down in Dublin Bay.³² A black servant of the earl of Granard was recognised as a freeholder and therefore allowed a vote in the parliamentary election of 1783.³³ The 'coach-full of sable Africans' who arrived in Dublin in October 1791 had

²³*Bath Chronicle*, 16 Mar. 1769.

²⁴*Londonderry Journal*, 13 June 1786.

²⁵*Belfast News-Letter*, 23 Feb. 1773.

²⁶*Bath Chronicle*, 16 Mar 1769; *Cork Evening Post*, 6 Apr. 1769.

²⁷*Leinster Journal*, 8–11 July 1767.

²⁸For example, the reference to a 'Black-a-moor Kettle-Drummer' in the 1779 riding of the franchises in *Dublin Evening Post*, 26 July 1783.

²⁹*Hibernian Journal*, 10–12 Mar. 1773. A second performance was advertised but did not take place (*Dublin Journal*, 27–30 Mar. 1773).

³⁰Rachael Baptist, for whom see below, pp 30–31.

³¹*Dublin Journal*, 4–8 Apr. 1758.

³²See below, pp 29–30.

³³*Freeman's Journal*, 19–21 Aug. 1783; P.R.O.N.I., T/3765/J/1/2/3. The debate which preceded his being allowed to vote seems to have revolved around the claim that he had married a Catholic rather than the colour of his skin.

their own black servants, and we must therefore assume them to have been people of some wealth. In short, Africans in eighteenth-century Ireland, although predominantly domestic servants, enjoyed a wide range of occupations and thus a varied social status.

Finally, in eighteenth-century Ireland the sexual relations between white and black seem to have been fairly relaxed. There were examples of white men with black wives, and, more commonly, black men with white wives. Given the number of black people in Ireland, such marriages were sufficiently unusual to be the subject of comment in the newspapers; for example, the following report appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* in 1785:

The following extraordinary match took place last week at Drumcar, near Dunleer. About two years ago a ship was wrecked near that place, on board of which there was a black, who very soon afterwards became a servant at Drumcar; he often expressed the desire of marrying a white woman; this coming to the ear of Miss Margaret O'Brien, of Clintonstown, in that neighbourhood, she took several opportunities of dancing with him at the little parties in the neighbourhood; this encouraged him to propose for her, and he got some friends to interfere; they had several meetings, and at last settled everything, and they were married before a vast crowd of people. No young girl could behave with more propriety or modesty; there was a very elegant supper prepared, and the bride and bridegroom seemed as happy as possible, and are now enjoying all the comforts of married life.³⁴

Of another marriage, this time involving the daughter of a reputable Dublin tradesman and her black servant (and so having social as well as racial overtones), the newspaper writer concludes (as far as one can judge, without irony): 'What a fair prospect of mutual advantage and unalienable love!'³⁵

One cannot but be struck, in reading eighteenth-century Irish newspapers, by the rarity of anything approaching an overt expression of racial prejudice. On the contrary, there seems to have been an active interest shown in Africans who displayed outstanding abilities, and so disproved the racial stereotypes purveyed by the West Indian lobby. A liberal newspaper, the *Belfast News-Letter*, having printed a poem by the black American poetess Phyllis Wheatley, went on to quote the views of 'a friend to humanity and the species':

That the Africans are an inferior link in the grand chain of nature is a prejudice, which has been indulged and propagated by Europeans, especially in modern times, from considerations peculiarly sordid and contemptible; the fact is, that the mental faculties of the negroes are by no means of a subordinate description to those of any other men.³⁶

This is unusually explicit, but it does sum up the prevailing attitude of Irish people towards Africans, as reflected in contemporary newspapers.

³⁴*Freeman's Journal*, 21–23 Apr. 1785.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 27–30 May 1786. Not everyone regarded the prospect with such equanimity. A correspondent of the *Dublin Chronicle* in 1788, significantly a former magistrate in Jamaica, wrote that he would rather see 'the heads of the whole [black] race piled upon each other, than to see even the lower rank of British subjects, contaminated by this African taint'. His views were promptly denounced by a 'Lover of Humanity'. (*Dublin Chronicle*, 26–29 Apr., 6–8 May 1788, and subsequent issues)

³⁶*Belfast News-Letter*, 5–8 Sept. 1786.

III

Beyond such general observations about Africans and how they were regarded in eighteenth-century Ireland, it is worth looking at three examples of Africans who as individuals attracted the attention of their contemporaries. They are, it must be said, untypical. But they are worth dwelling on for that very reason, because they help to challenge the stereotypes many of us have about Africans and their activities at this period.

The first was a north African, and therefore not a black sub-Saharan, which is the group mainly under consideration in the present article. His name was Ahmet Ben Ali, although whether that was his real name, as with many other supposed 'facts' about him, is uncertain. He has previously attracted attention, in an article in the *Dublin Historical Record*, as a 'Moorish' merchant resident in Dublin in the 1780s who claimed to have paid the ransoms of a number of Irish ship's captains enslaved in north Africa.³⁷ However, even if true, this was not the whole story. As far as it is possible to piece together the details from the newspapers of the time, they are as follows. In June 1780 the *Dublin Journal* reported that a 'Moor', the captain of a Tunisian ship, with members of his crew, had travelled to Dublin from Waterford, having escaped from imprisonment at Malaga aboard a Dutch vessel.³⁸ This captain, by his gentlemanlike manner, made a particularly good impression on the Dublin merchants, who, in an impressive act of charity, made a collection among themselves in order to enable the unfortunate strangers to return to their own country. Three years later, in June 1783, they had reason to think their generous action rewarded when the captain, Ahmet Ben Ali, reappeared in Dublin, announced that he had spoken of the Irish, and of their kindness to him and his crew, to the Bey of Tunis himself, and that a Tunisian ship loaded with African commodities was at that very moment on its way to Ireland from Marseilles, to initiate what it was hoped would be a new era of commerce between Ireland and north Africa.³⁹ In the euphoria that followed this announcement, Ben Ali's sayings and doings in Dublin were regularly reported in the press. He professed himself a keen admirer of the Volunteer movement and was enrolled as an honorary member of the Dublin Volunteers.⁴⁰ He let it be known that his son was on his way to Ireland to be educated.⁴¹ He had his own portrait painted, and an engraving was published in *Walker's Hibernian Magazine*.⁴² In August 1783 Ben Ali's place in the cultural life of the Irish capital was officially ratified, as it were, by his being elected an honorary member of the

³⁷J.W. Hammond, 'George's Quay and Rogerson's Quay in the eighteenth century' in *Dublin Hist. Rec.*, v (1942-3), p. 50.

³⁸*Dublin Journal*, 17-20 June, 13-15 July 1780.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 7-10, 10-12, 11-14 June 1783.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 19-21 June 1783.

⁴¹*Freeman's Journal*, 12-14 June 1783.

⁴²*Walker's Hibernian Magazine*, Oct. 1783. Horace Hone painted a miniature of Ben Ali, which Ben Ali took with him on his departure (*Dublin Journal*, 11-13 Nov. 1783).

Dublin Society.⁴³ In short, he seems to have enjoyed a considerable vogue among Dublin's respectable classes.

All this ended abruptly in early November 1783. Probably tongues had already begun to wag at the non-arrival of his ship and its African cargo. At any rate, Ben Ali vanished. He slipped out of the city overnight without saying anything to anyone, and was never seen in Dublin again. The *Freeman's Journal*, which in common with other newspapers had reported extensively on Ben Ali and his activities, permitted itself a little sarcasm at the expense of those gullible people who had been taken in by his professions.⁴⁴ Three years later, when the scandal had died down, the paper printed a report of the death on the Continent of 'Ben Ali, the Swindling Turk'.⁴⁵ But the story of Ben Ali, as revealed in these snippets, leaves a number of unanswered questions. Who was he? Was he really from Tunis, as he claimed, or was that part of his story also an invention? Was he simply an impostor and confidence trickster, or instead a businessman who, like many businessmen before and since, became carried away and promised more than he could deliver? In either case one might be surprised that the shrewd business folk of Dublin allowed themselves to be so comprehensively taken in.⁴⁶

The second example of an African in eighteenth-century Ireland is more straightforward. This is the man referred to in the Dublin newspapers as the 'African Diver'. In March 1783 an East Indiaman, the *Count of Belgioso*, bound for China from Liverpool with a cargo of ginseng and silver bullion, was driven by a storm on to the Kish Bank at the lower end of Dublin Bay, and was sunk with all hands.⁴⁷ In the following months the underwriters tried to recover the silver from the wreck, first of all by employing a Scotsman called Spalding who had experience of salvage work using a diving-bell. A failure in the signalling system of the bell led to a fatal accident in which Spalding and his nephew died of suffocation.⁴⁸ His replacement was the 'African Diver'. We are never told his name. The first that is heard of him in Ireland is in July 1783, when he and his all-black crew were practising their routines with the diving-bell in shallow water by the pier at Dunleary, watched by a crowd of spectators.⁴⁹ By the middle of August he was ready to begin in earnest, and took his ship out to the marker buoys on the Kish Bank, where the *Count of Belgioso* had gone down. He made several descents in the diving-bell, staying down for thirty minutes at a time, and brought up a number of objects from the wreck. At one point the diving-bell became jammed and there was panic.

⁴³*Freeman's Journal*, 12–14 Aug. 1783.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 11–13 Nov. 1783, 16–19 Sept. 1786.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 21–23 Sept. 1786.

⁴⁶Sir Jonah Barrington's story of Dr Ahmet Borumborad shows that the case of Ben Ali was not unique (see Barrington, *Personal sketches of his own times* (3 vols, London, 1827–32), i, 230–42). So also does the following: 'It is the fate of this country to be eternally the dupe of schemers and imposters, Mr Omer, Mr Ducart, J. Wynn Baker, and the *Irish Turk*, have successively and successfully played on our simplicity and credulity' (*Belfast Mercury*, 9 Mar. 1786, quoting the *Volunteer Journal*).

⁴⁷*Freeman's Journal*, 20–25 Mar. 1783.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 3–5 June 1783.

⁴⁹*Dublin Journal*, 24–26 July 1783.

The signal [to raise the bell] was repeatedly pulled in vain, all was anxiety, confusion and terror! One of his faithful Blacks . . . now appeared naked on the gunnel (with half a hundred weight in his hand, in order to sink him) determined to lose his own life, or save that of his beloved master! when to the inexpressible joy and astonishment of all hands, he plunged from the entangled machine! and with the celerity of a Dolphin ascended smiling to the surface! His wife, his sister, and his Moors, appeared almost frantic with joy: the whole crew gathered round him, and the agent and captain expressed their pleasure at his happy deliverance.⁵⁰

The newspaper reports paid ample tributes throughout to the African Diver's courage and skill. The underwriters who were financing the salvage work clearly allowed him considerable discretion over the conduct of the operation. This is an interesting example of an indigenous African skill — in swimming and diving — such as may still be found along the west African coast today, being wedded to what were then advanced developments in European technology. In the event, it proved insufficient. An early and sudden deterioration of the weather in late August and September made it too dangerous to continue and the salvage work was abandoned for the season.⁵¹ The diver and his team returned to England.⁵²

The final example of an African in eighteenth-century Ireland is Rachael Baptist. She was a black woman, apparently born in Ireland (on her stage début she and her co-débutante were described as 'natives of this country') who enjoyed a successful singing career in the theatres, assembly halls and pleasure gardens of Ireland and England for the best part of a quarter of a century. She had been a pupil of Bernardo Palma and first performed in a Dublin concert for his benefit in February 1750.⁵³ Over the next six years she sang regularly at Marlborough Green Gardens and occasionally at other venues in Dublin.⁵⁴ The playwright and actor John O'Keeffe, who attended the Marlborough Green concerts as a boy, remembered her as among the outstanding singers of the time:

She always appeared in the orchestra in a yellow silk gown, and was heard by the applauding company with great delight, without remarks upon her sables.⁵⁵

Between 1757 and 1767 she was in England, performing in London, Bath, and other of the principal towns, by her own account, 'with universal applause'.⁵⁶ In the winter of 1767–8 she reappeared in Kilkenny, having in the meantime married a Mr Crow (or Crowe), a music teacher and picture restorer, and gave a series of concerts and balls in Kilkenny and the neighbouring towns.⁵⁷ One performance inspired 'a gentleman of Kilkenny' to

⁵⁰*Freeman's Journal*, 19–21 Aug. 1783.

⁵¹*Dublin Evening Post*, 6 Sept. 1783.

⁵²*Freeman's Journal*, 19–21 June 1787.

⁵³*Dublin Journal*, 10–13 Feb. 1750.

⁵⁴For Rachael Baptist's performances between 1750 and 1756 see the index to Brian Boydell, *A Dublin musical calendar, 1700–60* (Blackrock, 1988).

⁵⁵John O'Keeffe, *Recollections of the life of John O'Keeffe* (2 vols, London, 1826), i, 66.

⁵⁶*Finn's Leinster Journal*, 21–25 Nov. 1767. I have not so far been able to corroborate any details of her English performances from an independent source.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 5–9 Dec. 1767, 5–9 Mar., 30 Mar. – 2 Apr. 1768.

write a poem in her honour, which was published in *Finn's Leinster Journal*. As poetry it is undistinguished, but it is testimony to the warm regard in which Rachael and her singing were held, and it is interestingly explicit about the racial angle:

Fame's done thee right, thou hast the lulling art,
That can soft Music's melody impart;
Envy herself must thy perfections own,
And say thou'rt worthy of the laurel crown.
Let the white Fair-ones swell with proud disdain,
Despise thy colour, and thy dusky mein [*sic*];
Yet what of that — even these nor want their charms,
Nor grace to lure the lover to thine arms:
Such was *Amaryllis*, of a dusky hue,
If what the poet Virgil says be true;
And tell us now, ye Fair, the reason why
Ye think, ye boast a more bewitching eye:
Here's eyes as bright, nor yet inferior shine,
Tho' she wont b'lieve the foplings, they're divine;
But hark t'her voice, sweet music in her tongue,
As if the fibres by *Apollo* strung;
Her voice will chant ye with melodious sound,
And *Echo* from the vaulted roof rebound.
The rapture-giving note will charm each ear,
Chear the sad heart from melancholy care;
Wil't think of colour then? wil't think of face?
When charms more moving seem to merit grace?
Disgust will vanish, b'lieve me, and disdain,
Nor wil't thou say, the Syren sung in vain,
But wil't be forc'd to clap her o'er again.⁵⁸

In Kilkenny, it is also worth noting, she was referred to as a celebrity on a level with Thomas Ryder, the famous actor-manager, and the Italian *castrato* Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci.⁵⁹

The following season, 1768–9, Mrs Crow, as she was now known, and her husband took their combined talents to Limerick and Ennis, where they gave another series of concerts and balls.⁶⁰ In 1770 Mrs Crow performed at Bandon and in Cork.⁶¹ The couple reappeared in Belfast in the winter of 1772–3 and once again put on a season of concerts and balls.⁶² These Belfast performances are the last record we possess of this remarkable woman. She may have continued her singing career, but perhaps, after almost a quarter of a century of travelling and performing, she simply decided to call it a day. In the 1830s the organist in the Catholic church in Derry, a Dublin man, was called Crowe.⁶³ It is just possible that he was a descendant of Rachael Baptist and her husband and had maintained the family's musical tradition.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 5–9 Dec. 1767.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 16–19 Dec. 1767.

⁶⁰*Limerick Chronicle*, 23 Oct. 1768.

⁶¹*Cork Evening Post*, 4 June, 9 July 1770.

⁶²*Belfast News-Letter*, 27 Oct. 1772.

⁶³*Londonderry Sentinel*, 18 Oct. 1834. I owe this information to Nuala McAllister.

Rachael Baptist has her own particular significance, in showing how a gifted and enterprising black woman in eighteenth-century Ireland could move beyond what we assume to have been the limitations on the careers and opportunities of black people at that time. But the existence of the social group from which she emerged, Ireland's forgotten eighteenth-century black population, has a more general significance. It is a reminder that Ireland, although an island on the edge of Europe, was not a place apart, but instead was closely integrated in that wider nexus of relations, the Atlantic world that grew out of the European exploring voyages of the fifteenth century, a world linked by ocean trade routes, which Africans played a major part in shaping and in which, in consequence, they were everywhere to be found.

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