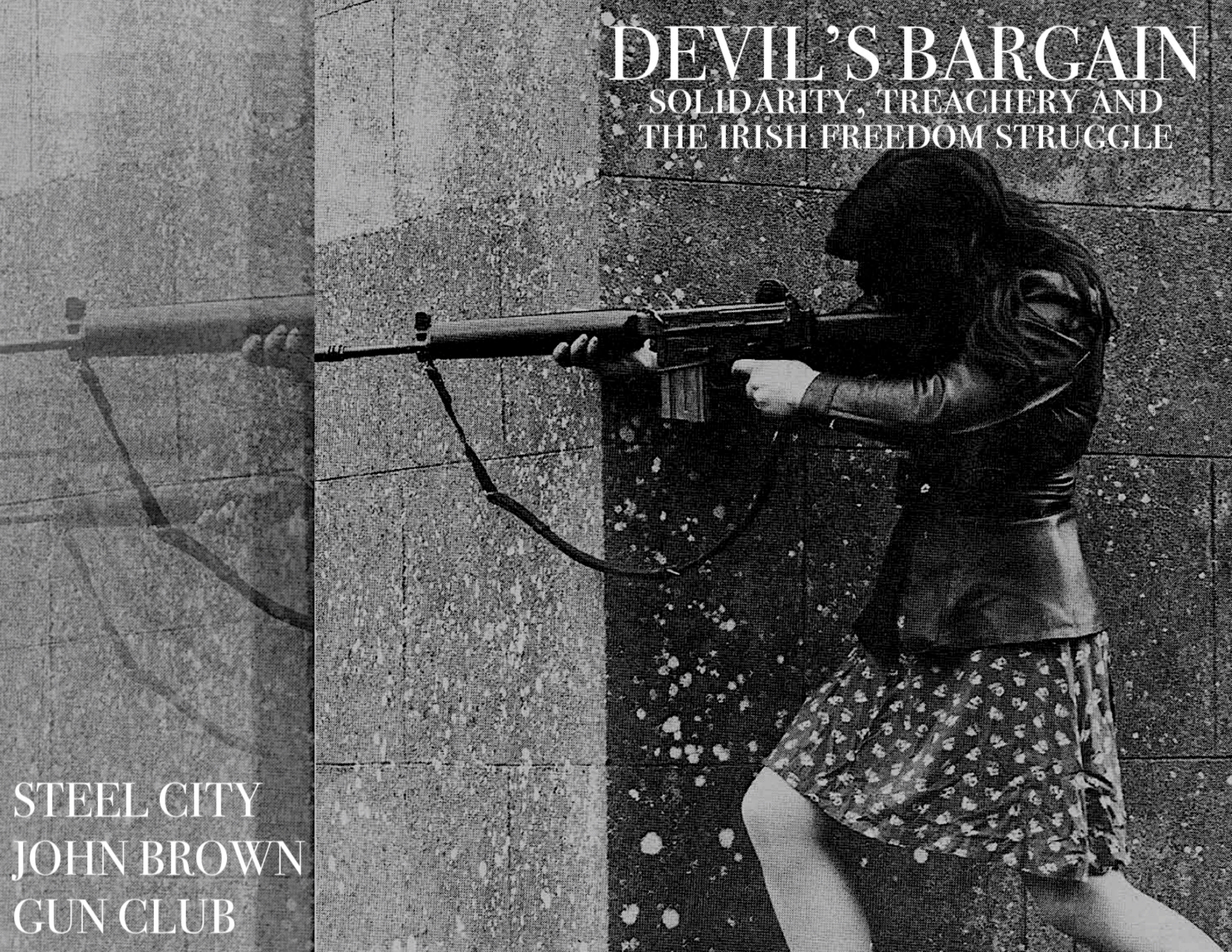


DEVIL'S BARGAIN

SOLIDARITY, TREACHERY AND
THE IRISH FREEDOM STRUGGLE

STEEL CITY
JOHN BROWN
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the legal framework that allowed Convict Leasing to exist, making it one of the first states to abandon this later-day form of legalized slavery.

'My people'—the people who knew about oppression, discrimination, prejudice, poverty and the frustration and despair that they produce—were not Irish Americans. They were black, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos. And those who were supposed to be 'my people', the Irish Americans who knew about English misrule and the Famine and supported the civil rights movement at home, and knew that Partition and England were the cause of the problem, looked and sounded to me like Orangemen. They said exactly the same things about blacks that the loyalists said about us at home. In New York I was given the key to the city by the mayor, an honor not to be sneezed at. I gave it to the Black Panthers.

These are the words of Bernadette Devlin, the famed Irish civil rights leader and freedom fighter, following a visit to the U.S.

Devlin began her career playing leading role in the 1969 Battle of Bogside, the three day uprising that signaled the beginning of the period of civil strife commonly called the Troubles, for which she was jailed for incitement to riot. She has been a tireless advocate for Irish political prisoners and, in the aftermath of the Bloody Sunday massacre, struck the British Home Secretary in the face on the floor of the House of Commons when he dared to claim that the British troops who opened fire into a crowd of peaceful protesters, killing 14, had acted in self defense. In 1981, members of the Ulster Freedom Fighters, a pro-British paramilitary, broke into her home and shot her nine times in front of her own children. She survived the attack and lives to this day.

Her resume as a fearless warrior for her people is beyond question, but what her life, her politics and her own words illustrate is a deep concern for those suffering oppression beyond Ireland's shores as well as within them. Or perhaps it would be better to characterize her quote above as pointing to an understanding that the struggles of Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano

peoples in the U.S. are in fact just a different battlefield in the same conflict she has found herself fighting in Northern Ireland.

The White Race, in any way recognizable to us, has only existed since roughly the Late 1600's. Prior to this, the most important social divides (wealth and class) were obvious to all and openly acknowledged. The hyper-wealthy Planter class who established and ran the colonies in the Caribbean and North American coast, did not consider themselves superior to their servants by virtue of their skin color. Why would they, when up until very recently their serfs were mostly as white skinned as them and shared the same national origin. They ruled simply by the final self justification of every aristocracy: because they could. This is not to say that ethnic prejudice did not exist, but only that the difference in the disdain which a British lord viewed someone from Africa or East Asia, versus a commoner from Ireland, Scotland or England, was largely academic. The poor where there to be used for profit.

Unsurprisingly, the poor and exploited of different lands, suddenly thrust together by the new plantation system and suffering under the same boot heel, quickly found common cause. Though the indentured servitude under which most European servants labored was far from the same as the chattel slavery inflicted on Native and African peoples, the reality of shared subjugation proved fertile soil for solidarity and cultural exchange. The three groups lived together (or at least near one another), worked in the same fields, intermarried, and when they tried to escape their servitude, frequently did so together. Eventually they began to rise up together as well. To quote David Gilbert's "Looking at the White Working Class Historically"...

He departed the next day, leaving 107 militiamen behind to quell the growing miner army.

The conflict grew into an isolated civil war as the miners were joined by compatriots from other regions in Tennessee, and soon boasted war parties numbering up to 2000 in some instances, who began a shooting war with company men and state troops. This period also signaled a change in the relationship between the white and black miners. Whereas before, the convicts were mostly sent back to Knoxville to be recaptured, the repeated opportunities to talk to and spend time with the black workers seems to have help establish relationships between the two groups, as well as show the Scots-Irish miners the depths of cruelty under which their unwilling replacements were forced to live and work. From this point, the free miners began helping the convicts escape in the hundreds. On October 31st, a group of miners attacked the TCMC stockade at Briceville and seized the Knoxville Iron Company stockade at Coal Creek. Company buildings were burned and looted, and over 300 convicts were given food and fresh clothing and advice on the safest routs out of the area. Shortly after, another attack as Oliver Springs freed 153 convicts. This trend continued as the insurrection reached a fever pitch, with months of indiscriminate shooting between miners and State militia. The chaos and mounting body count on both sides eventually turned public sentiment against the miners, and legitimized an overwhelming government crackdown in the region, effectively crushing resistance and punctuating the conflict with the arrest and conviction of 300 miners.

Though the insurrection was ultimately defeated, it can be considered a victory in that it embarrassed the Tennessee Legislature into discarding

to these demands, but the largest Coal interest in the region, the Tennessee Coal Mining Company, rejected it utterly, fired all its workers, and two months later, began re-opening its mines under full convict labor. TCMC rubbed salt in the wound by tearing down the miners' houses to build stockades for the prisoners.

The miners responded quickly and militantly. A meeting of miners and local merchants was called on July 14th to determine a course of action, and that night a force of at least 300 men, likely led by Knights of Labor organizers George Irish, Marcena Ingraham and Eugene Merrell, took up arms and marched on the mine. The Guards on duty surrendered instantly and the miners evacuated the convicts from the stockade and then burned it to the ground.

The sad element of this early skirmish was that the convicts, though not abused, were quickly put on trains back to Knoxville, where they were likely re-imprisoned. However, as the conflict spiraled into a low intensity war and further stockade attacks increased contact between white and black miners, this would change.

Shortly after this opening Salvo, Governor Buchanan, attempting to keep a foot in both camps, traveled to the region accompanied by three Tennessee militia companies. Once there he was confronted by a mob of angry miners who demanded him to intercede on their behalf in accordance with his pro-labor platform. The Governor assured him that he was on their side, but insisted that he was bound to enforce the rule of law. Eugene Merrell stepped up to rebuke him and damned the state government as a "disgrace to a civilized country". That night snipers from the miner contingent fired on the stockade, close to where the Governor was sleeping.

There were a series of servile rebellions that threatened the plantation system in the period preceding the transition to racially designated chattel slavery and white supremacy. Allen cites numerous examples. In 1661 Black and Irish servants joined in an insurrectionary plot in Bermuda. In 1663, in Virginia, there was an insurrection for the common freedom of Blacks, whites and Indian servants. In the next 20 years, there were no fewer than ten popular and servile revolts and plots in Virginia. Also many Black and white servants successfully escaped (to Indian territories) and established free societies.

These cross-ethnic insurrections were the real cause of the establishment of the White Race as we know it today. The Planter elites, seeing the threat to their profit machine presented by a united working class, devised a way to divide one half against the other. The next hundred years saw a steady march of new legislation aimed at excessively punishing black and brown slaves and incentivizing poor whites to act as their jailors. This period also saw the establishment of harsh anti-miscegenation laws and brutal punishments for whites who escaped with or aided blacks and natives.

In a collective act of collaboration worthy of the greatest historical shame, most of the poor white population eventually took the bait and turned on their former comrades. The legacy of this betrayal would pave the way for the ascent of white supremacy (hand in hand with corporate gangsterism and misogynistic violence) as the primary social force of the American epoch.

However, as this text will illustrate, the flame of working class, cross-race solidarity was never entirely extinguished. It survived through history any time working class and poor whites realized their common cause with neighbors of color and renewed the fight...

The Irish: Collaborators and Freedom Fighters

Much has been made of the prejudice that the Irish (as well as Germans, Poles, and most other ethnic Europeans) faced when they first came to the U.S. The stories of anti-catholic mobs and “Irish need not apply” signs outside businesses are usually cast as the opening chapters of a what we are taught to see as an American success story, ending in the acceptance of the huddled foreign masses into the ranks of whiteness. Hopefully anyone who has read this far understands this as what it was: a re-confirmation of whiteness and a fresh betrayal of people of color.

In the decades that followed the eventual acceptance of the Irish as white were marked by the adoption of the police as their trademark profession. These times also saw the birth of an ugly dynamic in which many Irish-Americans, knowing full well that they had been the at the bottom of the social ladder in British controlled society, tripped over themselves to embrace the “at least there’s someone more despised than me” logic of white supremacy, grotesquely reconfirming the cross-class pact of oppression. Many Irish emigres and people of Irish extraction made sure to be the first to reach for the rope or the club when racial talk turned angry, evidencing a memory of when they were the preferred object of mob violence and an “if you cant beat em', join em'” mentality.

Likewise the Scots Irish, an earlier, mostly Protestant Irish settler population, played their own part in establishing white rule. Emigrating mostly from Ulster (Northern Ireland) because of a crisis of mass evictions and rent hikes, the Scots Irish had originally been rebellious border Scots. The British Crown tried to kill two birds with one stone by deporting them in droves and resettling them in Northern Ireland, where the English desired a Protestant foot hold against the “wild” Catholic Irish. While many

Much ink has been spilled in recent years on the Mine Wars of the early 1900s, and specifically the Battle of Blair Mountain. Far from being unhappy with this trend, we will end these historical sketches by exploring a less discussed but deeply radical and uplifting example of Scots-Irish rebellion against not only institutional white supremacy, but against the Prison and Labor systems as well.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Coal Creek watershed experienced a coal boom because of the expansion of railways. The region exploded with new operations, drawing the local population, mostly white farmers of Scots-Irish extraction, away from traditional subsistence farming and into the mines. This economic boom also happened against the backdrop of the implosion of Reconstruction, when traditional power elites in former Confederate States were looking for any rout to re-institute the racial caste system. One such scheme was convict leasing. This involved the selling of convict (overwhelmingly black) labor to industrial concerns at a low price, thereby building up the non-agrarian commercial power to rival the northern counterparts. This slavery-by-another-name was fueled by mass arrests and convictions of black men for minor or trumped up offenses such as loitering or vagrancy.

In Coal Creek, the mining industry had experimented with convict leasing, but always encountered push back from “Free” Scots-Irish miners, protective of their livelihood. The 1890 election of several labor friendly politicians emboldened the free miners however, to push for several key concessions from the owners. Namely, to be paid in U.S. currency instead of company scrip, and to use their own checkweighmen (who weighed the coal to determine how much per load of coal a miner earned), instead of ones hired and controlled by the company. Most of the smaller companies bent

The Coal Creek War

Historical Note: There is some contention over the inclusion of the Scots-Irish as a part of the Irish Diaspora. Though these people, also called Ulster-Scots, certainly do come from a strongly Gaelic historical lineage, the ethnic group is often treated as a dominant cultural system in areas such as the Appalachian Mountains even to this day by sloppy historians, white supremacists and descendants with an unhealthy interest in self-mythologization. This is a misnomer, as modern Appalachian culture is a deep admixture of a number of peoples, including the Scots-Irish but also African, Hispanic, German, Italian, Slavic and Native. Similarly, most people today identifying as Scots-Irish are a genetic mixture of most or all of these peoples. We include them here specifically because there is a growing movement of people becoming more aware of themselves as descendants of this ethnic group, and the majority of the opinion and scholarship informing this movement is uncritical and often passively racist. Some fascist organizations like the League of the South are monopolizing on the tendency, and we must not abandon this discourse and growing identity to our enemies to be once again weaponized against our neighbors.)



of the Scottish settlers naturalized and intermarried with the locals, the project also succeeded in its intended purpose of solidifying English control of the Island. The “Ulster Plantation” in many ways set the stage for the Protestant vs. Catholic conflict that has consumed so many lives since. This being the case, it is painful to look back and see the same pattern replay itself as the Scots-Irish were once again used as the tip of the sword of colonization, this time against the Indigenous peoples of the Appalachian Mountains. Upon reaching the port cities of America, the Ulster emigres were quickly offered land (not theirs to offer) in the western mountains, by English and Quaker elites. These landowners viewed the new arrivals as illiterate savages, but saw the advantage of sending a population, both acclimated to violent ethnic conflict and bearing white skin, as the shock troops of western expansion. And thus another race war was constructed.

But there is another line of history for us to follow, if we can face the realities of the first one.

The Irish are a unique example that highlights both the darkest sins and brightest possibilities for European-Americans and white skinned peoples. This is because, though “white”, they are also a colonized people with a millennia of anti-imperialist struggle defining their history. Not only this, but they also exist close to the very heart of 20th century empire, in Western Europe, throwing the human costs of imperialism into sharp relief. The colonization of Ireland was in many ways the laboratory of European conquest, and though many in the U.S. made the choice to align themselves on a basis of race against their class allies of color, a strong counter-tradition exists. The Irish have been situated in such a way that those who are willing to look have a better than average view of their history in relation to Empire, and the records are heavy with examples of Irish and

Irish-Americans who understood themselves first and foremost as enemies of oppression.

What follows is a brief survey of some of the most striking examples of cross-racial and international solidarity between Irish descended peoples and others fighting for survival against tyranny. Our hope is to illustrate that, though the sins of complicity cannot be ignored or swept away, those of us who are settlers have another history within our reach. One of resistance and solidarity which offers us common cause with the struggling nations of the global south and our own black and brown neighbors in their fight for dignity and self determination. We have the option, if we are brave enough, and willing to turn away from the devil's bargain of white supremacy, of making this heritage of revolution our own, and reigniting the servant revolts again in our own time...

However, by the 1960s, popular Irish sentiment had turned squarely against the Israeli government as their own situation of low-grade civil war and urban guerrilla conflict began to look more and more like the day to day experience of the average Palestinian.

Unlike other examples in this text, the relationship between the fighters of the Irish freedom struggle and the Palestinian people is better understood as a longstanding kinship based on a mutual struggle, than an isolated event or rupture. Irish republicans have, for decades, understood the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) and Palestinians generally as comrades. In the immediate aftermath of the Second Intifada, Palestinian flags could be seen flying from Catholic homes and in Catholic neighborhoods across Ulster. Similarly, Northern Ireland and especially Belfast, is dotted with murals of pairs of armed and masked riflemen, respectively wearing the colors of the IRA and PLO, under the slogan "ONE STRUGGLE".

Material aid between the two organizations has also been a reality, especially in the 1970s, as the height of the Troubles, when Irish guerillas traveled to train with the PLO in Libya and Lebanon.

From Ulster to Palestine



Throughout the 20's and 30's, the Irish interest in the middle-east was primarily oriented around the Jewish freedom struggle in what would become Israel. They shared a common oppressor in the British Empire, and Irish Nationalists saw in the Jewish struggle parallels of their own history of victimization and frequent displacement, stemming from the Great Famine back as far as the *Imeacht na nIarlaí* (Flight of the Earls) in 1601, when the last of the resisting Irish Chieftains were forced to flee Ulster, signaling the end of the native Gaelic order in much of the country.

St. Patrick's Battalion



The "San Patricios" are a unique part of Irish American history, that speaks directly to the anti-imperialist solidarity that runs under, behind and through the mainstream history of the U.S. The Mexican-American War is mostly remembered for being the war in which most of the future generals on both sides of the U.S. Civil War cut their teeth as junior officers. But the conflict itself is often overlooked as the cynical land grab that it was. The territory now known as Texas, while formally under the control of Mexico, had been heavily salted with white, American settlers from various parts of the South and Appalachian region. These settlers were often fleeing troubles in their home regions and flight to Texas eventually became such a conventional solution to legal problems that "Gone to Texas" became a euphemism for skipping town to avoid debts or the law. The Mexican

Government for their part, was willing to turn a blind eye to the illegal settlers for a time. Mexico had been militarily weakened after it's separation from Spain, and much of it's northern territory had fallen under the de facto control of the Comanche empire that had taken root there. The State's hope was that the settlers could help fight back control of the territory from "Comancheria". In truth, the migration paved the way for a demographic shift that gave Washington the excuse it needed to begin it's project of Manifest Destiny in earnest.

Simultaneous with this, *An Gorta Mor* ("The Great Hunger", known in the U.S. as the Irish Potato Famine) was ravaging Ireland. When all was said and done, the island had lost roughly a million to starvation and disease and a million to immigration, reducing the total population by 20-25%. Many of these deaths and displacements could have been avoided by well coordinated relief efforts, but the British decided instead to minimize the relief to better consolidate control of their often troublesome colony by monopolizing on the population drop and property vacume. Today, it is often said that while the blight was an act of God, the Famine was an act of the British Government.

The overwhelming majority of those fleeing the Famine traveled to the U.S., risking their lives in the infamous "Coffin Ships". Those who survived the trip found themselves on the shores of a land wracked by nationalistic warmongering and anti-catholic fervor. At this time, Nativism was a strong, even dominant political outlook among Americans, who were overwhelmingly Protestant and believed that a Catholic citizenry would slavishly vote at the direction of the Pope. At play also, was naked racism. Most of the Irish arriving in the U.S. at this time had a visibly distinct

spite of their own dire situation. Over the coming months, these wounded and still starving survivors raised \$170 (slightly over \$5'000 today) from amongst themselves, taking much needed food out of their own mouths, and with help from Quaker allies sent it to ease the suffering of a people they had never laid eyes on.

deliberately desolate regions west of the Mississippi. This atrocity, now known commonly as the Trail of Tears, is most associated with the forced relocation of the Cherokee people from their traditional homes in in so-called Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and North Carolina. But in reality it also included Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, Ponca and Choctaw peoples as well. The magnitude of anguish inflicted and life lost to this era of State sponsored ethnic cleansing is not, and cannot be, easily understood. In each of these cases, those being relocated were subjected to a death march to their new internment half a continent away, pushed along by armed militias and U.S. troops. The death toll along the route itself was astronomical, and was only added to later on as the survivors, weakened from their hellish ordeal, fell prey to disease, further brutalization, or manufactured war between them and the Native inhabitants of the territories they were forced to settle in. Best estimates speak to 2000-4000 Choctaw deaths, 3'500 Creek, 500-800 Chickasaw, 8000 Cherokee, and 700 Seminole. Added to this must be an appreciation, or as close as we can come to one, of the incalculable loss of being torn violently from the land which these nations had occupied and lived in communion with since time immemorial.

In 1847, When the surviving Choctaw had mostly been relocated and were still trying to recover from a Cholera epidemic brought on by their ordeal, An Gorta Mor was in full swing. "Black 47" would be remembered as the worst year of the famine by Ireland's traumatized population. An ocean away, a U.S. army Colonel named William Armstrong stationed in Oklahoma showed newspaper coverage of the devastation in Ireland to the Choctaw. The pictures and first hand accounts of mass graves, starved corpses littering roadways and hungry mouths stained green from eating grass, filled the Choctaw with empathy, and they quickly moved to help in

culture setting them apart, and many spoke Gaelic amongst themselves, or even a primary language.

Unsurprisingly, many were pressured into the Army almost as they stepped off the boat with promises of access to land after the war, by a local governments that didn't want them and a military that needed cannon fodder.

Once in the field, the new recruits from Ireland and other, then racialized, Catholics were treated abysmally. Anti-catholic sentiment was even stronger in the Army than it was in the general public, and abuse from Protestant officers and fellow soldiers was rife. The brutal treatment can be attested to by the accounts of George Ballentine, an Englishman who was serving with the U.S. Army:

I have good reason to believe, in fact in some cases I know, that harsh and unjust treatment by their officers operated far more strongly than any other consideration to produce the deplorable result.

The horrible result he refers to is mass desertion, which would be the route of escape from this situation for hundreds of Catholic recruits. And many if not most of these defectors would eventually join the Mexican Army and be formed into the *Batallón de San Patrici* or Saint Patrick's Battalion. While the Mexican State definitely tried to entice catholic conscripts to their side with the same promises of land allotments that the U.S had used, Historians agree that the two primary reasons for defection were feelings of affinity with the people they were being sent to invade and kill, based on their shared faith, and a recognition in the U.S invasion, of the same imperialist logic at play in their home country under British occupation.

The San Patricios were eventually organized into an elite artillery unit under the command of a Irish deserter and former British army officer named John Riley, and would comprise between 175 and several hundred fighters, not only of Irish, but German, French, Canadian, Polish and Scottish defectors, as well as escaped African slaves from the Southern U.S. The Battalion would serve with distinction in several key battles throughout the war including the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, the Siege of Fort Texas, the Battle of Monterrey and the Battle of Buena Vista.

The San Patricios finally met their defeat only at the climactic Battle of Churubusco, and only because they were cut off from supply lines and ran out of ammunition. The incident degenerated into brutal close quarters fighting with bayonettes and sabres, and was noted for the high casualty rate of U.S. Officers, as the doomed Catholics tried to take their final revenge on their former oppressors.

Choctaw solidarity with the Irish during *An Gorta Mor*



It should not be taught that the Irish have only been the deliverers of solidarity in the face of imperialism. To do so would erase the great history also of solidarity being extended to the Irish people from others fighting for survival under Imperialism. One of the most beautiful and uplifting examples is the aid given by the people of the Choctaw Nation in the immediate aftermath of their own experience of ethnic cleansing.

Between 1830 and 1850, Native peoples of the Eastern U.S. were forcibly removed from their traditional homelands at the point of a gun, to