

INTRODUCTION: BLACK, WHITE AND GREEN.

I am for speedy, immediate abolition. I care not what caste, creed, or colour, slavery may assume. I am for its total, its instant abolition. Whether it be personal or political, mental or corporal, intellectual or spiritual, I am for its immediate abolition. I enter into no compromise with slavery; I am for justice in the name of humanity and according to this law of the living God.¹

This uncompromising statement was made in 1832 by Daniel O’Connell, arguably one of the most important European politicians of the nineteenth century. Despite his relatively humble Irish origins and the disadvantages associated with being a Catholic, during his lifetime he acquired a legendary status and an international influence that few politicians enjoy. His reputation inspired his followers throughout the world, while it dismayed his adversaries. O’Connell’s autocratic style of leadership proved to be both controversial and divisive. However, his life-long commitment to constitutional tactics inspired politicians who came after him – from William Gladstone to Mary Robinson – who believed his philosophy provided valuable lessons for later generations of Irish nationalists. Yet O’Connell’s interests and his impact spread far beyond Ireland and the Irish community.

O’Connell’s concern with humanitarian issues arose, in part, from his Enlightenment education and its ideals of liberty and progress. Throughout his long political career O’Connell was involved in many reform issues. He spoke in defence of ‘the Tolpuddle Martyrs’, Poles under Tsarist rule, emancipation for British Jews, separation of church and state for France and Spain and even the Papal States, the condition of peasants in India, and the abolition of Negro slavery.² Additionally, O’Connell was concerned with the treatment of Maoris in New Zealand and of Aborigines in Australia. He was also opposed to prize-fighting boxing, flogging and the death penalty.³ According to one of his early biographers, Margaret Cusack:

O’Connell’s philanthropy was neither sectarian nor national: all men were his brothers, and he pleaded alike for all. His liberality was seen again and again in his defence

of the consciences of Dissenters, whose religious liberty he would guard with a sacredness which they had not always extended to others.⁴

However, of all the progressive causes which he became involved with, it was anti-slavery, the leading humanitarian issue of the day, that most emotionally engaged O'Connell and about which he admitted he was 'most ardent'.⁵ By playing a central role in this movement, he became the hero of American abolitionists. They, in turn, were in no doubt about the value of having somebody with the power and presence of O'Connell as their advocate. As early as 1839, John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker poet and dedicated abolitionist, wrote:

One million of ransomed slaves in the British dependencies will teach their children to repeat the name of O'Connell with that of Wilberforce and Clarkson. And when the stain and caste of slavery shall have passed from their own country, he will be regarded as our friend and benefactor, whose faithful rebukes and warnings and eloquent appeals to our pride of character borne to us across the Atlantic, touched the guilty sensitiveness of our national conscience, and through shame prepared the way for repentance.⁶

Whittier described O'Connell's support of abolition in terms of his wider quest for social justice, writing 'American slavery but shares in his common denunciation of all tyranny: its victims but partake of his common pity for the oppressed and persecuted and the downtrodden'.⁷ This sentiment was shared by the Glasgow Emancipation Society which, upon the occasion of making him an Honorary Member, described O'Connell as 'a friend of humanity, but especially, on this occasion, as the friend of the Slave'.⁸ Clearly, O'Connell's involvement in anti-slavery issues consolidated his international fame and demonstrated that his politics transcended simply Irish, Catholic or national concerns. Nonetheless, this aspect of O'Connell's remarkable career remains little known today.

O'Connell's role as a leading champion of abolition has not been extensively explored by his biographers. The multiple books about O'Connell, and even the eight volumes of his edited letters, give little idea of his pivotal role within various anti-slavery movements.⁹ By the same token, historians of abolition have paid scant attention to the contributions of either Ireland or of O'Connell in anti-slavery.¹⁰ Yet, for over twenty years, O'Connell showed himself to be a devoted and unwavering champion of the slave – whether in the West Indies, India or the United States. According to the historian Maurice Bric, 'O'Connell's involvement in the anti-slavery movement sheds some small light on the paradoxes of a career that made him a radical and a conservative, a nationalist and an internationalist, and a champion of equality in a deferential society'.¹¹ The chapters that follow explore this important, but overlooked, aspect of O'Connell's political life, and the impact of his participation in Ireland, Britain and the United States.

O'Connell brought an overtly Catholic dimension to the anti-slavery struggle. Until he became involved, the movement had been associated with Quakers and Protestant evangelicals, who were able to draw on their international church connections, and their family and business contacts. This was the case not only in Ireland, but also in Britain and America. In the latter, the attempts to reach out to Irish supporters through O'Connell brought the anti-slavery movement 'to reach beyond the traditional bitter hostility of Protestants toward the papacy and "Jesuitism" and ... constitute an important phase in the history of egalitarian thought in America.'¹² O'Connell also brought an overtly Irish dimension to a struggle that had been associated with Britain, but more specifically, England, leading David Walker, a freed black American, to declare in 1830, 'The English are the best friends the coloured people have upon earth.'¹³ In the subsequent decades, O'Connell and his compatriots were to prove repeatedly their commitment to freeing the slave from his or her bondage.

Anti-slavery had widespread support in Ireland and it brought the people, and notably Irish Catholics, into mainstream transatlantic politics. In addition to O'Connell, prominent Irish abolitionists included James Haughton, Richard Robert Madden,¹⁴ Richard Davis Webb, Mary Ann McCracken, Richard Allen, Thomas Spring Rice, and the second Marquis of Sligo. However, O'Connell clearly outshone his compatriots, and was frequently likened to William Wilberforce in terms of his importance to the movement. In a cause that attracted some of the most remarkable men and women of the period, O'Connell was conspicuous – a fact recognized by many of his contemporaries.¹⁵

The Act of Union of 1800, by bringing Irish politicians into the Parliament in Westminster, changed not only British, but international politics. An early indication of this was the slave issue. O'Connell was to claim on a number of occasions that the cause of anti-slavery had benefitted from the Act of Union as Irish MPs had played a key role in the 1807 and 1833 acts, abolishing the slave trade and slavery respectively in the West Indies. He portrayed Irish people as lovers of liberty, who enjoyed a special affinity with oppressed peoples elsewhere. O'Connell also frequently suggested that Ireland's anti-slavery traditions dated back to the time of St Patrick.¹⁶

Was Irish support for abolition informed by their own experiences as a colonized people? The rise of the anti-slavery movement was taking place when the political relationship between Ireland and Britain was undergoing a number of changes. For centuries, British conduct in Ireland had been based on the premise that the Irish were racially inferior. This was evident as early as 1366 when the Statutes of Kilkenny enshrined in legislation that the Irish were inferior to their Norman invaders. Thus the Anglo-Norman settlers were forbidden from mixing with, or behaving like, the native Irish. The creation of an area known as the 'Pale' – an area controlled by the English King – provided the physical

embodiment of this racial segregation, with the Irish being both spatially and ideologically regarded as being 'beyond the Pale'.

The condition of the Irish – especially the Catholic Irish – in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to comparisons between their poverty and oppression to that of slaves.¹⁷ Although many of the repressive penal laws, mostly aimed at Catholics, had been removed in the late eighteenth century, Catholics could still not be Members of Parliament. This only changed in 1829 following a campaign spearheaded by O'Connell. In 1800, the Act of Union had united the parliaments of Britain and Ireland. Regardless of the changed political context, Irish people were clearly not regarded as equal partners within the Union, but continued to be viewed through the prism of colonialism and racism.¹⁸

The racial stereotyping that had been a feature of Britain's relationship with Ireland, both before and after the Act of Union, has been compared by some historians as having parallels with the attitudes towards, and treatment of, black slaves. Richard Ned Lebow believed that depicting the Irish as 'black' and therefore inferior to the 'white' British, was an important tool in the continuing subjugation of Ireland. These attitudes reached their zenith in the nineteenth century, after the union with Britain had taken place.¹⁹ The psychiatrist Denis Jackson supported the view that the Irish were viewed by the British as black, 'not in the sense of physical pigmentation, but in the original pejorative sense of the Anglo-Saxon word for being dull and lacking in intelligence.'²⁰ The English writer, Charles Kingsley, confirmed this. When visiting Ireland in 1860, he was disturbed by what he saw, compelling him to write to his wife, 'I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country ... to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.'²¹

Centuries of being dispossessed of their land had left Irish Catholics impoverished and dependent on a single crop, the potato. The comparison between Irish Catholics and plantation slaves was opposed by some contemporaries, who felt it diminished the awfulness of slavery.²² However, the poverty of the Irish shocked even the escaped slave Frederick Douglass, who visited the country at the end of 1845. Years after his visit, he remained disturbed by the condition of the Irish he had seen. In a lecture he gave in Ohio in 1854 he stated: 'I say, with no wish to wound the feelings of any Irishman, that these people lacked only a black skin and woolly hair, to complete their likeness to a plantation negro ... the Irishman, ignorant and degraded, compares in form and feature with the negro.'²³

In 1843, at the height of the repeal agitation, O'Connell published *A Memoir on Ireland: Native and Saxon*. In it, he outlined his view that British involvement in Ireland had been defined by its view of the Irish as racially inferior. Furthermore, British racism had allowed the extermination of the Irish throughout

the long centuries of colonial engagement.²⁴ O'Connell died in May 1847, at the height of a tragedy remembered as 'the Great Hunger', during the course of which over one million people died.²⁵ Many Irish people believed that the Famine could have been avoided if Ireland had been properly governed.²⁶ Some militant nationalists even regarded the British government as culpable of deliberate genocide, suggesting that plantation slaves were better treated than free Irish Catholics.²⁷ O'Connell, while frequently using the rhetoric of having been born a slave, had not agreed with this assessment, pointing out:

The [Irish] peasant has the heath to recline upon; he has the mountain with its lively stream, and he returns to his humble hut, as to some genial clime, and he indulges his paternal and filial affections, amidst his family, not the less concentrated for being poor.²⁸

In 1833, the British government abolished slavery in the West Indies. The Slavery Abolition Act was viewed as a considerable victory for the British anti-slavery movement. It not only ended slavery in the British West Indies, it served to inspire abolitionists throughout the world, especially in the United States. Rejoicing in the United Kingdom was short-lived, as the apprenticeship system, which replaced slavery, was just as oppressive and proved to be simply another form of bondage. O'Connell was one of the leaders of the campaign to end apprenticeship, which finally happened in 1838.

Victory in 1833 and again in 1838 allowed the attention of British and Irish abolitionists to turn to America. For many radicals and liberals in Europe, America presented a paradox – how could a country conceived in a struggle for liberty enslave so many people? How could slavery be justified in an increasingly liberal and democratic world? Furthermore, how could it be tolerated in the United States, the cradle of modern democracy? For some, religion and the redemptive role of slavery in exposing the enslaved to Christianity provided an answer. In this way, slavery could be viewed as an escape from life in Africa. The evidence that cruelty towards slaves was increasing in the early decades of the nineteenth century, combined with the lack of any religious instruction, made such righteous arguments difficult to justify.²⁹ Unlike other leading contemporary abolitionists, O'Connell never visited the United States, India, or the West Indies, although he campaigned for abolition in each place.³⁰ Following the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833, his attention became increasingly focused on the American slave-holding states, thus taking his abolition arguments into the geographical heartland of slavery. External pressure was regarded as essential to the ending of slavery in the United States. As one Boston abolitionist explained 'Irish, Scotch and English interference is to slavery what a Spanish fly is to a fever.'³¹ However, it took a further thirty years and a violent civil war to bring about the ending of slavery there.

For American abolitionists, both black and white, O'Connell's contribution was unsurpassed. As early as December 1832, 'Negroes of the Abyssinian Baptist Church' honoured O'Connell by reading a speech he had made in London earlier in the year. They also adopted a number of valedictory resolutions, including one to this 'uncompromising advocate of universal emancipation, and the friends of the oppressed Africans and their descendants'.³² The black American abolitionist, Charles Lenox Remond, after meeting O'Connell in London in 1840, felt reinvigorated by the contact on the grounds that 'For thirteen years I have thought of myself as an abolitionist, but I had been in a measure mistaken, until I listened to the scorching rebukes of the fearless O'Connell'.³³ In 1842, the most famous American abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, reprinted extracts of O'Connell's speeches of the previous ten years in his paper, the *Liberator*, explaining that, 'They will seethe like lightening, and smite their thunderbolts. No man, in the wide world, has spoken so strongly against the soul-drivers of this land as O'Connell'.³⁴

Abolitionists in the United States believed that O'Connell was ideally placed to woo Irish immigrants to the cause of anti-slavery. While O'Connell's condemnation of slavery was unequivocal, the extent to which Irish settlers in America were complicit in slavery was less clear. Large-scale emigration from Ireland, even before the Great Famine, had taken large numbers of Irish men and women overseas. Before 1845, approximately 1,500,000 Irish people had settled in America, a large portion of whom were Protestant.³⁵ Increasingly, those who fled were poor and Catholic and their arrival fuelled the anti-immigrant views of the nativist, Know-Nothing Party. Consequently, many Irish-Americans supported the Democratic Party, who tended to be more sympathetic to immigrants – but who were vociferous opponents of abolition.³⁶ As a result of this allegiance, Irish immigrants found themselves by default opposed to abolition. Regardless of the vulnerability of their situation, O'Connell repeatedly asked the Irish in America to make a stand against slavery. By doing so, he was, in effect, asking them to criticize the Constitution of their adopted home and to promote disunion in the country. Irish-Americans, led by their churchmen, rejected O'Connell's request, and overwhelmingly refused to support abolition.

Did this refusal mean that they opposed abolition, or were they simply keen to appear as good Americans? This point was made by the *Boston Pilot* in June 1842, which postulated that the fact that many Irish in America did not support the abolitionists, did not mean that they supported slavery.³⁷ Significantly, O'Connell misunderstood the role of the Catholic Church in America. Whilst his campaigns to win Catholic Emancipation and repeal had relied on the support and administrative network provided by the Irish Catholic Church, the American Catholic Church in the 1840s was antagonistic to abolition and did not support O'Connell in pursuing this aim. Crucially, O'Connell's involve-

ment in American abolition raised other spectres that were unresolved and problematic: where did Irish immigrants fit into their new host society; what was their relationship with black people in America, free or otherwise; what was the role of the Catholic Church in this struggle? If slaves were freed, would they take low-paid employment from unskilled Irish immigrants? Ultimately, O'Connell's interventions with Irish-Americans demonstrated the limitations of his political vision and his lack of understanding of the lives of his fellow countrymen after they had left their homeland. This point was made by John Collins, a leading abolitionist in Massachusetts. He believed that O'Connell's vitriolic denunciations hurt both Irish-Americans and the abolitionist cause. While other abolitionists were extolling the virtue of O'Connell's interventions, he claimed that O'Connell 'has done them much mischief by his contempt frequently expressed of slave-holders. The Irish were suffering much in consequence of his course'.³⁸ However, Collins, in separate communication, also written in 1842, admitted:

Nine tenths of the Irish are, at heart, thorough-going abolitionists. Yet it is very easy for these orators and editors who are capable of making 'the worse appear the better case', to make them believe that patriotism, religion and philanthropy demands their non-interference with slavery.³⁹

As Collins made clear, supporting abolition in America was vastly different from supporting it in Ireland, and O'Connell's demands placed Irish immigrants in a fraught situation, that was not fully appreciated by many abolitionists or by later critics. If O'Connell had made the same appeals fifteen years later, the response may have been different.

The historian Theodore Allen has suggested that, 'Irish history provided a case of racial oppression without reference to alleged skin colour'.⁴⁰ For Allen, Ireland provided a mirror image of American racial oppression and white supremacy. When transplanted to America, however, he believed that 'Irish haters of racial oppression' were transformed into white supremacists.⁴¹ A few years later, a similar theory was developed by Noel Ignatiev, who argued that in America, the Irish 'became white'. For him, 'the truth is not, as some historians would have it, that slavery made it possible to extend to the Irish the privileges of citizenship, by providing them another group to stand on, but the reverse, that assimilation of the Irish into the white race made it possible to maintain slavery'.⁴² More recently, Peter O'Neill has argued that 'colour and religion became wedges that divided two peoples who otherwise might have become formidable allies against a common oppression'.⁴³ He suggested that 'Any chance of lasting solidarity between Black and Green was lost in the exclusionary "melting pot" of America then under construction'.⁴⁴ Ironically, while many poor Irish emigrants viewed emigration to America as a liberating journey, to escape from the tyranny

of British rule, for black Africans the journey was the opposite, and signified their passage into slavery.

Clearly, whilst anti-slavery enjoyed extensive support within Ireland, the relationship between slavery and the Irish in America was more ambivalent. The debate coincided with the large influx of Irish immigrants, which was to increase as a consequence of the Great Famine. Immigration helped to reinvigorate the anti-immigrant feeling, one manifestation of which was the spread of the anti-Catholic, Know-Nothing Party. Just as Irish-Americans were searching for an identity, so too were native-born Americans. O'Connell, who had never visited the United States, was not forced to confront these tensions first-hand. However, for those Irish who resided there, especially newly-arrived immigrants, to attack the institution of slavery was disloyal and marked them out as being 'un-American'. The abolitionist William Cooper Nell summed up their response thus, 'The opposition of Irishmen in America to the coloured man is not so much a Hibernianism as an Americanism.'⁴⁵ Irish historian Bill Rolston added further complexity to the debate by suggesting that Irish racism, in fact, had its roots in Ireland and had been evident during the visits of various black abolitionists. Thus racism and anti-racism had co-existed in Ireland in the years prior to the mid-nineteenth mass emigration.⁴⁶ His contention suggests that voyaging across the Atlantic was not the only reason for Irish-American resistance to abolition.

Irish immigrants who opposed abolition had a number of powerful champions, both in Ireland and in the United States. Many who supported repeal were uncomfortable with O'Connell's high profile statements on slavery. John Mitchel, renowned for his militant nationalism and social radicalism on Irish issues, when he arrived in the United States in 1853 made clear his support for slavery. The Irish-born Bishop (later Archbishop) John Hughes of New York was also opposed to O'Connell's interventions. Simply, he believed abolitionism to be unconstitutional.⁴⁷ Moreover, like many others, he disliked the perceived extremity of American abolitionists and their support for women's suffrage and labour rights. If some Irish-Americans were ambiguous in their attitude to slavery, they were unambiguous in their dislike of abolitionists. Did O'Connell's interventions on slavery achieve anything? Despite his growing influence in the transatlantic movement, O'Connell remained a divisive figure. Many attacks were made on his personal and political integrity, one suggesting that his involvement in abolition was calculating and cynical, his motive being to wield more influence in the British Parliament.⁴⁸ However, O'Connell's involvement in anti-slavery divided his supporters in Ireland and served to undermine support for the cause of repeal amongst Irish-Americans. Championing abolition lost support for the repeal movement in the United States and it lost support for O'Connell in Ireland. According to the historian Douglas Riach, 'O'Connell's abolitionism had little lasting influence on a country in which so many saw

America as a haven for the immigrant, a beacon of republican liberty, a potential ally against England, and a munificent provider of relief and aid.⁴⁹ This view was not shared by O'Connell's fellow abolitionists, in Britain, Ireland or America. American abolitionists believed that British and Irish public opinion would play a crucial part in ending slavery and they regarded O'Connell their most important champion, who had overtaken Thomas Buxton and William Wilberforce in significance.⁵⁰ On the eve of the American Civil War, O'Connell's speeches were being reprinted, as an important weapon in the battle for hearts and minds that preceded the actual conflict.⁵¹ His words now found a much more receptive audience amongst Irish-Americans. Finally, O'Connell's participation in the movement highlighted both the Irish and the Catholic involvement in the leading humanitarian issue of the nineteenth century. In essence, O'Connell was motivated by his life-long quest for justice and human rights, and he brought to this task the same energy and passion that he had brought to achieving Catholic Emancipation and a repeal of the Act of Union. In 1829, as O'Connell was beginning to win recognition within the anti-slavery movement, he informed a meeting of the Cork Anti-Slavery Society that:

In the estimate of my pretensions and abilities, I shall say I bring zeal and perseverance to the cause ... I cannot be temperate upon it. I must be intemperate; it is for liberty or slavery, therefore I have but one choice and must be intemperate for liberty.⁵²

Until his death 1847, he remained true to this principle. In a career in which he sometimes chose pragmatism over principle, O'Connell's stance on abolition was consistent and frequently unpopular. His unwavering commitment to the cause of abolition, and to human rights generally, marked him out as one of the truly great statesmen of the nineteenth century.

In 1823, Daniel O'Connell had helped to found the Catholic Association for the purpose of trying to win the right for Catholics to sit in the British Parliament. Within a short time, he had built a disciplined, mass political movement that had no equivalent in Europe. The success of this movement brought O'Connell to the attention of the British government. His refusal to use physical force to achieve his ends made him an unusual nationalist leader, while his knowledge of the law made him an adversary to be feared by the authorities. Shortly after founding the Catholic Association, O'Connell met James Cropper, a leading British anti-slavery campaigner, who was visiting Ireland. O'Connell was immediately won over to the cause. His involvement gave a Catholic dimension to what had traditionally been a movement associated with various nonconformist denominations, even in Ireland. Chapter 1 examines O'Connell's early involvement with the British and Irish abolition movements and his determination to agitate for two diverse political ends.

The granting of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 enhanced O'Connell's political reputation not only in Ireland, but throughout the rest of Europe and in the United States. Although he declared that his main purpose was now to bring about a repeal of the Act of Union, he played an active part in all of the main political debates of the day, especially those concerning the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. His impassioned speeches brought him further publicity and mixed attention. It also brought him to the notice of American abolitionists, notably the outspoken William Lloyd Garrison, who regularly reprinted in his newspaper, the *Liberator*. Chapter 2 outlines O'Connell's growing reputation in both Britain and North America as a champion of anti-slavery. In 1835, O'Connell entered into an alliance with the British Whig Party and as a consequence, repeal was put on the political back-burner. During this period, he consolidated his reputation as a leading figure in the campaign against slavery. His interventions against slavery meant that he was becoming the leading international figure in the abolition movement. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, his uncompromising statements were causing concern in the United States and even led to him being publically condemned in the American Senate.

The year 1840 was a momentous one for Daniel O'Connell as he revived the repeal movement with the avowed purpose of overturning the Act of Union of 1800. In the same year, he spoke at the first International World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Although Thomas Clarkson, the acknowledged leader of British anti-slavery, was the President, O'Connell was the star, captivating delegates from around the world. Chapter 4 explores O'Connell's rise to become the leading figure in transatlantic anti-slavery. An outcome of the London Convention was that O'Connell promised to organize an address from the people of Ireland to the Irish in America, appealing to them to support abolition. Absorbed with his repeal activities, the Irish Address was actually penned by fellow Irishmen Richard Webb and James Haughton. They clearly had underestimated the antagonism that the appeal would engender. Chapter 5 looks at the growing divide between anti-slavery sentiment between the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in America. O'Connell had declared 1843 to be the year in which the Act of Union would be repealed. This did not prove to be the case. The year was notable, however, for O'Connell making some of his most excoriating attacks on American slaveholders, culminating in the 'Cincinnati Letter'. As Chapter 6 shows, O'Connell's virulent denunciation of slavery polarized opinion amongst his fellow repealers, while alienating Irish-American opinion. Yet, he continued to campaign on behalf of the slave despite advanced years, and failing health.

O'Connell died in May 1847, but his influence continued. Throughout the 1850s, the slave question increasingly dominated American political discourse, yet successive administrations failed to stop the descent into civil war. During this decade, the speeches of O'Connell were frequently reprinted and his argu-

ments were used to bolster the abolitionist cause. As a consequence, his writings became one of the most powerful tools in the propaganda war that preceded the Civil War. Chapter 7 looks at the ways in which O'Connell's writings on slavery were used to inform and influence a new generation of Irish-American immigrants. Chapter 8 is concerned with the memory and legacy of O'Connell, in relation to the slave question. It concludes that his contribution was remarkable and that 'Ireland's greatest contribution to the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century was Daniel O'Connell'.⁵³

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