

Marking the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act

March 2007 marked the 200th anniversary of the passage of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act by the British Parliament. This Act made illegal the slave trade throughout the British Empire.

During the year events were held to remember those who suffered from slavery, to consider the impact of slavery on our own community and the reaction to it, and also to be challenged to act on behalf of those who today are exploited as economic commodities.

Defining Slavery

“No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”

Article 4, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

What is slavery?

Common characteristics distinguish slavery from other human rights violations and are established in international law.

A slave is:

- forced to work – through mental or physical threat;
- owned or controlled by an ‘employer’, usually through mental or physical abuse or threatened abuse;
- dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as ‘property’;
- physically constrained or has restrictions placed on his/her freedom of movement.

Extract from [CTBI site](#)

St Patrick turns to God during his slavery in Ireland

‘I, Patrick, a sinner, most rustic, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many. My father was Calpornius, a deacon, son of Potitus, a priest, of the village Bannavem Taburniæ; he had a country seat nearby, and there I was taken captive.

I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people – and deservedly so, because we turned away from God, and did not keep His commandments, and did not obey our priests, who used to remind us of our salvation. And the Lord brought over us the wrath of his anger and scattered us among many nations, even unto the utmost part of the earth, where now my littleness is placed among strangers.

And there the Lord opened the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my abjection, and mercy on my youth and ignorance, and watched over me before I knew Him, and before I was able to distinguish between good and evil, and guarded me, and comforted me as would a father his son.’

Slaves in Ireland

Trade in the eighteenth century took Irish people to many parts of the world and they must have brought back some human cargo. Newspapers carried advertisements such as this: ‘A most beautiful black Negro girl, just brought from Carolina, aged eleven or twelve years who understands and speaks English, very fit to wait on a lady, to be disposed of. Application to be made to James Carolan, Carrickmacross, or to Mr. Gavan in Bridge Street, Dublin.’ Dublin Mercury, 1768

In 1786 a merchant, Waddell Cunningham, proposed setting up a Belfast Slave-Ship Company but nothing came of it, probably because of local opposition.

Support for Abolition of the Slave Trade in Belfast

Olaudah Equiano (1745–97) visits Belfast

Olaudah Equiano was born in Africa, captured when he was 11, sold into slavery and transported to the West Indies. He spent time in Virginia before being brought to London. He was eventually sold again in Montserrat, where he bought his freedom. He had become educated and was a Christian evangelist. His autobiography was published in 1791 and its detailed accounts of international slavery and the slave trade galvanised the British campaign for abolition.

His book sold well in Ireland where the desire for abolition chimed with the call for religious and political freedom, and the metaphor of slavery was often used when attacking other forms of injustice, such as the Penal Laws and tithes. Belfast was a centre for radical thinking and when Equiano visited the town in 1791 he stayed with the Presbyterian United Irishman, Samuel Neilson. Afterwards the United Irishmen promoted anti-slavery in their literature and some, such as Thomas Russell refused to consume rum, sugar, or tobacco because they were seen as the products of slavery.

Irish merchants and traders benefited by exporting food and textiles to the expanding West Indies slave economy. Beef, pork, fish, butter, soap, candles and linen went out while sugar, rum and tobacco came in. For Belfast this trade was very important. Numbers of shoemakers expanded as they made shoes for slaves on the other side of the world. The growth of Belfast in the late eighteenth century was partly dependent on the existence of slavery. On the other hand increased prosperity helped to bring about the confidence where radical ideas could emerge and this in turn led to support for abolition.

Thomas Russell

For the Anglican radical, Thomas Russell, slavery was an abomination and he encouraged the boycott of the sweet products of the West Indies. He quoted: ‘On every lump of sugar I see a drop of human blood’ and said that ‘the blood of the Africans cries to God for the vengeance of these wrongs.’ His poem, ‘The Negro’s Complaint’, attempts to describe the feeling of an African slave, torn from his homeland and abused. In 1796 his Letter to the People of Ireland called for religious freedom at home and the end to slavery. He was executed in 1803 following Robert Emmet’s failed rebellion.

The McCrackens

‘All evils I think proceed from the want of real, vital and practical religion, for were all who profess to be Christians truly so in heart and practice, obedient to the commands so simple and easy to be understood...there would neither be slave holding in America...nor any of the numerous unjust and oppressive laws with which Gt. Britain abound...’

Henry Joy McCracken, McCracken letters, quoted in *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken*, p.98

The devout Presbyterian, Henry Joy McCracken (executed as a United Irishman leader following the 1798 rebellion) and his sister Mary Ann McCracken, the political and social activist, were closely connected with Belfast’s trading economy. Their father, John McCracken was a ship’s captain who travelled to and from the West Indies. Like other supporters of the United Irishman movement Mary Ann was a founder member of the Women’s Anti-Slavery Society and, even when she was in her late eighties she continued to

haunt the Belfast docks handing out literature attacking the existence of slavery. It was ironic that her own entrepreneurial involvement in the textile industry unintentionally helped to sustain the slave economy.

Slavery today

Slavery today takes many forms and affects men and women, young and old, from children sold to work in factories, women from eastern Europe are bonded into prostitution, men forced to work as slaves on south American agricultural estates. But could it happen here? People who speak another language, lack information about their rights, and work in isolated situations, can easily be exploited by unscrupulous employers. There is also no doubt that when people are trafficked they are at the mercy of others and can end up in a powerless position. This is certainly true of some women who end up in the sex industry here. There is also anxiety about children who arrive in Ireland alone. Are the people who may claim them really their relatives? Have they been brought here for some sinister purpose? Might they end up in the sex industry or become domestic slaves? It is difficult to get accurate information about the local situation but research has been done in the south.

See The Irish Refugee Council's recent report, [Making Separated Children Visible](#)
See also Philip Orr's reflections on the anti-slavery movement in Belfast,
[Am I not a Man and a Brother](#)

'The question for us today is whether we are living up to this fine standard or not? Slavery is, arguably, more prevalent in the 21st century world. ... Let us remember that over 200 years ago, local believers saw it as their task to expose exploitation and injustice. We should follow their path.'

Sources:

St Patrick's Confession

Denis Carroll, *The Man from God Knows Where: Thomas Russell, 1767-1803*, Dublin 1995.

Mary McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken 1770-1866: A Belfast Panorama*, Dublin 1960.

Nini Rodgers, *Equiano and Anti-Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, Belfast 2000.