

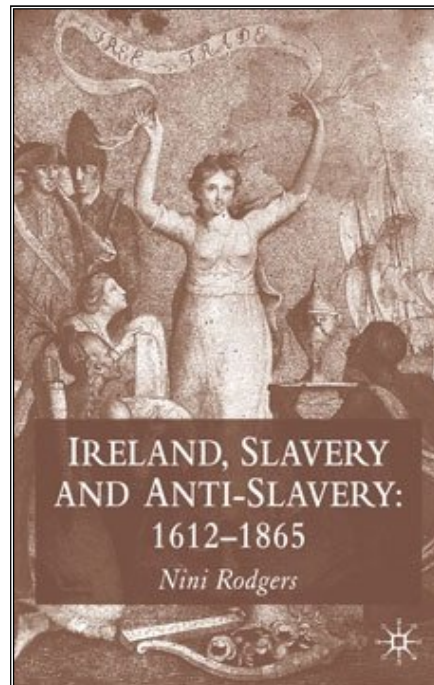
# Irish, On Both Sides of the Slavery Issue

By Maureen E. Mulvihill

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Special to The Irish Echo (NYC; Belfast)  
Published March 4 ~ March 10, 2009 issue, page 16

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Nini Rodgers, a recent guest speaker at Glucksman Ireland House and at Notre Dame University, has published important new research on Ireland's complex relation to the Black slave trade (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; 403pp; US\$120). The book's handsome jacket, imaged above, displays a popular allegorical lithograph (1780) by William Hincks, celebrating Ireland's new role in a global economy owing to its "free trade" status, granted by the British Crown in 1779.

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All nations have their dirty laundry. But through the quiet process of cultural erasure, cover ups, and whitewashing, historians and others have found ways to marginalize disturbing events. Ireland's complicitous role in the black slave market, dating from the 1600s, has surely been acknowledged by historians, but no one until now has undertaken an immersive reconstruction of the role of that small green island in the busy "black Atlantic" of the slave trade.

Before the abolishment of slavery by the British crown in 1833 and by America in 1863 -- and certainly well before the success of abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic -- many enterprising Irish merchants and property owners got rich in the Black slave market. Fortunes were made by an oppressed people on the backs of an oppressed people; even today, the historical irony of the situation is difficult to fully take in. Before 1833, the Irish had distinguished themselves as energetic players in human trafficking; and Ireland's profits from cotton, tobacco, indigo, and sugar products stimulated a feeble Irish economy and thrust forward its urban growth, particularly in such hubs as Dublin and Belfast, as well as in Limerick and Galway. For a while, many Irish were prosperous and Ireland had become a new member in the booming economic system of the Black slave trade. When the British crown granted Ireland "free trade" in 1779, many Irish got rich fast. Montserrat in the Caribbean, for example, a British possession from the mid- seventeenth century, was full of Irish and Irish planters who eventually created the island's Irish Creole identity. Charles II's Governor of Barbados described Montserrat as 'almost an Irish colony'.

Cometh the hour, cometh the woman. Dr Nini Rodgers (Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Queen's University, Belfast), a recent guest speaker at Glucksman Ireland House and at Notre Dame University, has done an important service for Irish Studies in her new book, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery, 1612-1825* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; 403pp; US\$120). Not only does

this closely researched monograph position a controversial subject in wholly new and necessary ways, but it also demonstrates a measured methodology in the classic mold. Drawing upon such primary sources as merchants' letter-books, slave trade statistics, census data, newspapers and pamphlet literature, parliamentary debates, planters' wills, legislation, and selected polemical writings and speeches, Dr Rogers has given us the yield of her dedicated researches on a highly complex subject. She wisely organizes a daunting range of information with two large intersecting paradigms: the economic and the moral. Economically, Ireland was deeply invested in the slave trade, and the island's growth and participation in the larger European theatre resulted at this time from an infusion of new monies from Ireland's slave trade activities. As Rodgers explained to this writer and to a riveted audience at Glucksman Ireland House (11<sup>th</sup> February 2009): "Slavery was so interwoven with daily life at this time – in America, in Ireland, and in Britain – that it was difficult to 'escape' some involvement. Mary Shackleton Leadbeater's father had the sons of West Indian planters among his pupils at his proper Quaker school in Ballitore Village, County Kildare. And the great Irish statesman and orator, Edmund Burke, when as M.P. for Bristol, defended (early on) the British crown's African Company which ran the British slaving forts in West Africa. Burke's brother, Richard, had an official appointment in the West Indies, and he owned at least 11 slaves and tried unsuccessfully to boost his family's fortunes by acquiring a large sugar plantation on St Vincent. Maurice 'the Hunting Cap' O'Connell, cousin of Ireland's famous 'Emancipator', Daniel O'Connell, sent out one of his nephews to Jamaica. 'Hunting Cap' O'Connell lived by buying and selling slaves on the island. And at the very time that Dan O'Connell was joining the anti-slavery society in London, his brother back in Kerry was saying he would have been ruined by failing butter prices if the West Indies market had not held up .... Overall, Ireland had become part of the global economy, an economy heavily dependent on slavery."

But from a moral point of view, slavery was undermined – and eventually outlawed – owing to the force of public opinion whipped up by fierce abolitionists in Ireland, England, and the new United States. Rodgers gives special attention to anti-slavery agitation created by such public personalities as Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, William Wilberforce, Edmund Burke, and, to a lesser extent, by such Quaker women writers as Mary Birkett in Dublin and the prolific Mary Shackleton Leadbeater in Kildare, a protégée of Edmund Burke (see her poem, “The Negro. Addressed to Edmund Burke,” *Poems* [Dublin & London, 1808], pp [87]-93).

This is a serious book, not to be missed. It will benefit students in Diaspora Studies, Slavery Studies, Irish Studies, and Irish-British relations circa 1612-1865. Dr Rodgers is presently delving into selected family papers (circa 1870 and thereafter) with an eye to women and marriage, child-rearing, careerism, missionary work, and literary activity. Hats off to Nini Rodgers for all that she has done and given us. And now: Let the debates begin.



**Maureen E. Mulvihill, a Scholar & Writer with The Princeton Research Forum (Princeton, NJ), edited Mary Shackleton Leadbeater for Alexander Street Press (*Irish Women Poets* series, 2008) and she was Advisory Board Member and contributor to *Ireland & The***

*Americas*, 3 vols (ABC-Clio, 2008). To the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009), she contributed the Leadbeater article; and to the *Oxford DNB* (2004), she contributed the first-ever article on James Esdall, a patriot printer of 18th-century Dublin. In 2007, she initiated and taught a course at New York University on Diaspora Paradigms (African, Irish, Jewish). Recent essays on: Thomas Sheridan, Swift, Dublin Print Trade, Mary Tighe, Oscar Wilde (*Irish Literary Supplement*, 1996-); Bloody Sunday atrocity (*New Hibernia Review*, Winter 2002); review, *The Field Day Anthology: Irish Women's Writing*, Vols IV and V (*Eighteenth-Century Studs*, Summer 2003); Mary Tighe, Emma Donoghue, and 'Bidly Jenkinson' (*Irish Women Writers*, ed. Alexander Gonzalez, 2006); Flight of the Earls, Donegal 1607 (*Seventeenth-Century News*, vol 67, 2009); Lady Gregory and also Jack B. Yeats (WB Yeats Society of NY, 2004, 2009). On the conference circuit, she spoke on the Brooklyn connection of James Johnson Sweeney, Director, Guggenheim Museum, NYC, at the first-ever Sweeney Conference (2008) convened by Ciaran Bennett, Dublin, and funded by the Krasner-Pollock Foundation/SUNY Stony Brook. At the 2009 Society for Textual Scholarship Conference (New York University), she spoke on her Leadbeater edition. The Mulvihill Collection includes the Lytton Strachey copy of Mary Tighe's *Psyche and Other Poems*, and writings by Maria Edgeworth, *et al.* Dr Mulvihill is at work on Irishwomen's political writings & response, pre-1800. Selected online hostings:

<http://www.yeatssociety.org/coole.html> (Lady Gregory; opens with music)

[http://www.yeatssociety.org/JackYeats\\_Mulvihill.html](http://www.yeatssociety.org/JackYeats_Mulvihill.html) (Jack B. Yeats; opens with music)

<http://www.janeausten.co.uk/magazine/page.ihtml?pid=766&step=4> (Jane Austen; opens with music)

<http://burneycentre.mcgill.ca/mulvihill.pdf> (Frances Burney, market valuations 2009-2010)

[http://www.ilab.org/eng/documentation/81-literary\\_property\\_changing\\_hands\\_the\\_pegraud\\_collection.html](http://www.ilab.org/eng/documentation/81-literary_property_changing_hands_the_pegraud_collection.html)

(Peyraud Collection, Bloomsbury Auctions NY, May 2009)

<http://www.carlkohler.com/> (Final Weeks of Virginia Woolf)

<http://repositories.tdl.org/tdl/bitstream/handle/2249.1/9386/Van%20Varick.pdf?sequence=1> (Dutch NY)

<http://www.millersville.edu/~resound/ephelia/> (opens with music) (A Famous Case in Concealed Authorship)

[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/eighteenth-century\\_studies/v036/36.4mulvihill.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/eighteenth-century_studies/v036/36.4mulvihill.html) (Irish Women Writers: Field Day IV & V)

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new\\_hibernia\\_review/summary/v006/6.4mulvihill.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_hibernia_review/summary/v006/6.4mulvihill.html) (Bloody Sunday)