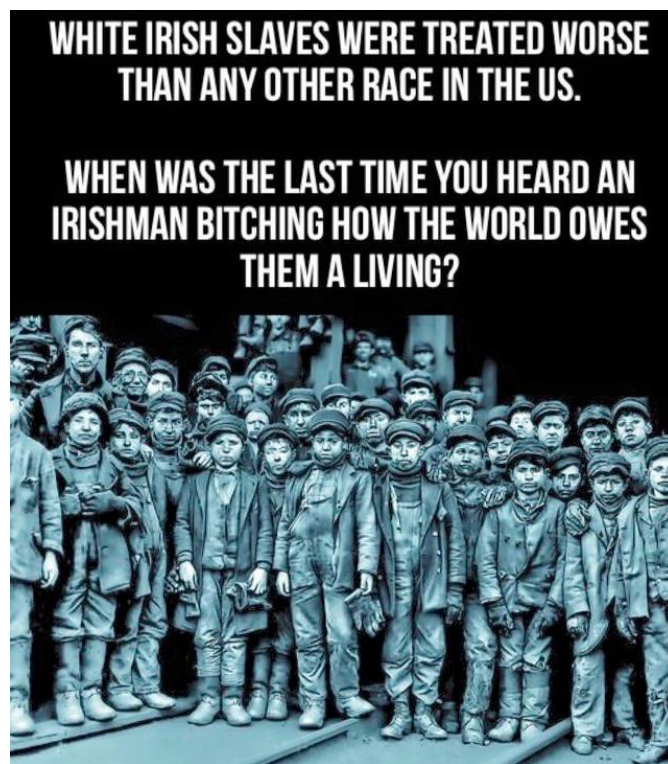


There were no Irish slaves—here’s how bad history became a racist meme

All it took was one bad book and a lot of Internet forums

By Asher Kohn

On the Internet, anything looks true if it is written in the Impact font. Even “White Irish slaves were treated worse than any other race in the US.”



It’s a wildly false statement, but one that has caught on in certain online circles. A bizarre mix of Tea Party politics and resistance to Black Lives Matter, the image above has been shared over 100,000 times from a single Facebook post. Sharing an image macro is a novel way to misunderstand history for political gain.

The story of Irish migration to America is indeed brutal. Anglo Americans brought over huge numbers of indentured servants from Ireland, many of whom suffered through heinous working conditions in England’s Caribbean colonies. Irish servants, however, were treated by law as humans. African slaves were treated as chattel.

According to Irish historian Liam Hogan, the conflation of the two histories dates back to 2000. That's when *To Hell or Barbados*, a book that, according to Hogan, “fails to differentiate between slaves and servants over 100 times,” was published.

“This is laughably bad history, but it has inspired a seriously dangerous mythology,” wrote Hogan. People took to message boards to discuss *To Hell or Barbados*, giving the myth a Google-able trail. Last St. Patrick's Day, *Scientific American* blogged about the horrors of Irish slavery—taking block quotes from an unsourced genealogy website.

This week, Hogan got 67 academics and scholars to sign an open letter critiquing *Scientific American* and Irish news sites that have “added a veneer of credibility to what is a well-known white nationalist conspiracy theory more commonly found on Neo-Nazi and Neo-Confederate forums.” But what are a few dozen signatures compared to hundreds of thousands of social media shares?



Figure 30 Irish, Anglo-Teutonic, and Negro heads, from H. Strickland Constable, *Ireland from One or Two Neglected Points of View*, 1899.

This characterization of different head types was made by a H. Strickland Constable, who previously wrote a book called *Equality: A Socialist-Radical Fallacy*.

The “Irish slave” myth is so popular because it sets up Irish Americans as a model minority who have overcome very real discrimination to become part of white society in the United States. But Irish American assimilation is the result of access to opportunities via Social Security, the GI Bill, and the Fair Housing Act in the 20th century—opportunities that the United States government did not offer to African Americans.

As St. Patrick's Day parades begin this weekend, the Irish American community will celebrate its heritage on main streets throughout the United States. The Irish story, unfortunately, is being simultaneously mangled all over the Internet.