

[O'Kane Crimmins on Wright, 'An Ulster Slave Owner in the Revolutionary Atlantic: The Life and Letters of John Black'](#)

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Jonathan Jeffrey Wright. *An Ulster Slave Owner in the Revolutionary Atlantic: The Life and Letters of John Black.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2018. 160 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-84682-736-5](#).



Reviewed by Finola O'Kane Crimmins (University College Dublin) **Published on** H-Albion (December, 2020) **Commissioned by** Douglas Kanter (Florida Atlantic University)

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This book publishes twenty letters written by John Black (1753-1836), an Irish slave-owner who eventually settled on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, to his brother Joseph at home in Belfast. Dating from 1799 to 1836, the letters are followed by six letters written by Black's daughter Adele to various correspondents. Jonathan Wright's substantial and far-reaching introduction to the letters introduces Black in all his many guises—son, brother, father, husband, planter, slave-owner, slave-trader, politician, debtor, resident, and exile. Preceding each letter is a helpful précis of its contents, and Wright's exhaustive footnotes pick up the many interesting threads that connect the Blacks to a social fabric stretching from the Caribbean to mainland America, North and South, to continental Europe and home to Great Britain and Ireland.

Born in Belfast into a Church of Ireland merchant family, John Black's maritime network included uncles and cousins in Cadiz and Bordeaux, where he spent some time in his teens. One of Ulster's most cosmopolitan and urbane families, its scions often became so trans-imperial that allegiance to any one empire seems to have proved challenging. Settling in Grenada in the early 1770s, John Black's various nefarious business dealings slowly eroded his good name, to the extent that he was eventually cut out of his grandfather's will. He then moved to Trinidad, where a helpful governor's regulation that excused all newcomers of debts contracted elsewhere made it a bankrupt's haven. A Spanish colony that fell into French hands, Trinidad's quarters were eventually overlaid by the English parishes that marked out the British occupation of 1797. Populated by those who, in Kit Candlin's words, “did not fit (or would not fit) into any one empire,”[1] its success derived from its geographical position as a gateway to the riches of the Orinoco basin and to South America more broadly. The “Caribbean's last frontier,”[2] late eighteenth-century Trinidad held many opportunities for enterprising Europeans, and Black, fluent in both French and Spanish, was well positioned to benefit from the island's potential.

Married to a French Creole (Bonne Clothilde, *née* Fournilliers, who remains largely a cipher in his letters), John Black demonstrated no great loyalty to any empire, religion, or language. Although he preferred to be ruled by a British administration, like many other Irishmen in the Caribbean he could tone down his nationality and politics when it suited him, and his remark in one letter that he should not “admire to be a Spaniard again” (p. 117) did not wholly denounce those circumstances that might require him to become one. Where the Caribbean Irish did differ from their relatives back

home was in their accommodating approach to religion. Black's statement that he was "almost indifferent" as to whether his daughter became "Protestant or Romish" while being educated in Belfast, must have occasioned some shocked confusion among his Ulster relatives (p. 110). Carefully charting the shifting sands of Caribbean and Irish identity, Wright describes well how John Black came to oscillate between which island to call "home." His introduction also explores how writing, in the eighteenth-century epistolary tradition, served to position authors and their extended families within a transatlantic framework of familial power and patronage.

But in one area of thought Black exhibited no flexibility. The ambiguity and ingenuity he demonstrated toward the legal niceties of debt and credit, which had caused him to flee Grenada for Trinidad, had no bearing on his plantation *régime*. He was a confirmed member of the island plantocracy whose enslaved workers toiled in appalling conditions for his profit. On race he remained fixed—and unlike other late eighteenth-century Irish gentlemen, particularly in the context of the 1790s, he exhibited no guilt or remorse at benefiting from slavery, adopting wholeheartedly the various proslavery narratives. The book will intrigue those interested in the notorious Thomas Picton scandal—when Trinidad's governor was controversially cleared of the torture of free, mixed-race Luisa Calderon, accused of theft. Wright argues convincingly that Black's so-called intimacy with the governor was more an instance of typical eighteenth-century patronage than a criminal relationship. Excused for his actions thanks to an argument hinging on the Spanish legal code that had once been in force on the island, Picton's patronage still drew Black into the scandal as a judge and member of the island council.

The letters also have their limitations. They begin when Black was forty-six years of age—for the Caribbean an old man and one long out of Ireland and his native Belfast. They do not document his rollicking youth—as he bounced from Grenada, "Britain's second leading West Indian colony,"[3] to Trinidad—and the bulk of them range over a few years. More could perhaps have been made of the island's historical geography and the position and character of Black's plantation, Barataria, a synonym for Ireland. The cover image (at very low resolution and uncaptioned) is of a St. Kitt's plantation[4] and while Wright labors to provide a spatial context for the Black family in the towns and foothills around Belfast, no convincing picture of Trinidad's landscape—its towns, ports and plantations—is painted for the reader.

A book on an Irishman in Trinidad provides a welcome correction to Jamaica's predominance in Irish histories of the Caribbean, although Black himself supports the historiographical bias by referring to the northern island as "the metropolis of the West Indies" (p. 146). Ireland, in part due to her own sometimes colonial identity, has been slow to recognize her contribution to the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and the plantation economy that developed from their labor. Nini Rodgers's pioneering work in the field is now being expanded by such detailed studies of primary sources—the necessary precursors to more comprehensive histories. Black's letters remain, for the most part, lively, engaging, and ultimately very expressive missives documenting the essential conundrum—how such a loving father, husband, and brother could have so dehumanized his many enslaved workers that he hardly ever referred to them by name. This absence of humanity can be keenly appreciated in letters such as these, where concerns of the most personal and specific kinds—of children's "creole" fevers, monkey gourds, and Stranmillis fish ponds—are thrown into sharp relief by Black's cold assessment of his plantation's output and that of the human capital he charged with producing its profits. The complex and complicit web of relationships, identities, and agendas that such letters

uncover reveals the Caribbean's central significance to any late eighteenth-century history of the Atlantic world and the contribution of another offshore island in making it so.

Notes

[1]. Kit Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795-1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012), xxi.

[2]. Ibid.

[3]. Mark Quintanilla, "The World of Alexander Campbell: An Eighteenth-Century Grenadian Planter," *Albion* 35, no. 2 (2003): 229-56; 245.

[4]. "Sandy Point Estate and Windmill, St. Kitts (St. Christopher), British West Indies, ca. 1795," *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, accessed October 28, 2020, <http://104.200.20.178/s/slaveryimages/item/1471>.

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