

Heritage & Habitat

Remnants of an indentured people

In 1636 a ship sailed out of Kinsale bound for Barbados. Its cargo? Sixty-one Irish people destined to join thousands of others as indentured servants. Photographer Sheena Jolley met their descendants, the Red Legs, who still live there today

AN ESTIMATED 50,000 "white slaves" were transported from Ireland to Barbados between 1652 and 1657. Having succeeded in recruiting Irish men to die in the services of France, Spain, Poland and Italy, Cromwell turned his attention to others – men and women press-ganged by soldiers, taken to Cork and shipped to Bristol where they were sold as slaves and transported to Barbados.

This included the landlords who refused to transplant and whose properties had been confiscated by Cromwellian settlers, men who refused to join foreign armies, children from hospitals and workhouses and many prisoners. It was a lucrative business.

Today, behind the facade of a lush green, rural setting, the descendants of those transported still remain – a poor, white population of around 400 known as the Red Legs.

During visits in 2000 and 2008 I found a proud and friendly people. But behind their freckled faces was a sadness. It seems that time has not erased the effects of ill treatment and degradation. Their ancestors would have been branded, lashed by planters, mortgaged, sold, gambled or given as debts. They became a wretched, isolated and suppressed community.

History relates that the Red Legs were an ambitious and lazy group. But, marred by class distinction, afflicted by cruelty, malnutri-



Wilson and Louise Yearwood (above) live in a small, government-supplied timber house with their daughter, her boyfriend and children (pictured left). Right: Erlene Downie left school at 14 – she lives without electricity or running water



tion, the difficulty of labouring under a strong sun, high susceptibility to and dire effects of infections and diseases, it's said that it was difficult for members of this community to have any self-respect, let alone have the energy or inclination to work.

Today, most Red Legs have bad or no teeth due to poor diet and lack of dental care. Illnesses and premature deaths due to haemophilia and diabetes have left men blind and

without limbs.

They are no longer plagued by the old diseases of hookworm, typhoid, and cholera, but school absenteeism, poor health, the ill effects of inter-family marriage, large families, little ownership of land and lack of job opportunities have locked those remaining on the island into a poverty trap. Even today the Red Legs still stand out as anomalies and are hard pressed for survival in a society that has no niche for them.

Erlene Downie left school at the age of 14 when her father died of leukaemia to help raise 11 younger siblings. When we first met in 2000, she had been living alone for 33 years after her husband also died of the disease. She had neither electricity nor running water and fetched water from a standpipe. To earn money she collected coconuts, splitting them with a pickaxe and supplying the husks to a nursery for growing orchids.

In 2008, Erlene was living in even worse conditions, in a wooden hut, and still without running water, proper sanitation or electricity. She was sharing this tiny space with a nephew and the youngest of her five children.

I first met Erlene's great nephew Eric Bailey in 2000 as a rather sad and wistful 17-year-old with ambitions of becoming a cabinet-maker. When we met again, he was labouring on the roads. His younger brother Terrence was looking after the ducks, rabbits and pigs.

John Farnum has not worked for many years having had a leg amputated as a result of diabetes and is now virtually blind. He had owned four fishing boats but says he felt his black workers "try to lower the white man" and "decided to sell". His family makes a



John Farnum, who had a leg amputated due to diabetes, with his grandson Daniel

scanty livelihood by cultivating small patches of earth growing bananas, yam, potatoes and breadfruit. His stepson Jeffrey helps work the land and spread bagasse, a by-product of sugarcane, used to feed hens.

In 2000 Wilson and Louise Yearwood were living comfortably in a small government-supplied timber house. Wilson was unable to work due to an ulcerated stomach and a hernia. On my return visit, they were sharing their house with their daughter, her boyfriend and three small children. The young family shared the front room.

WILSON AND LOUISE NOW use the kitchen as their main room, with a section partitioned off for their bed. The toilet facilities are in corrugated sheds in the back yard. Still they smiled and welcomed me into their home. Louise excitedly told me that she had recently seen the whole island for the first time as, at the age of 65, she now qualifies for free bus transport.

The Red Legs have retained an ethnic pride, mostly marrying within their own community. There is now more integration with the black population and faint beginnings of new atti-

tudes towards colour, race and class. Peter Simons, in a report for the ministry of education in Barbados, suggested that a solution to the poverty and stigma of being a Red Leg is better education and intermarriage with the middle class blacks. He wrote: "Born with a brown skin and armed with a basic education, these children shall never know what it really means to be a Red Leg."

These photographs, as well as illustrating the obvious current poverty, should show the courage, humour, and dignity of the Red Leg community in spite of their hardships. I experienced a special kindness, warmth and generosity that was demonstrated, even though they have little to give.

They illustrate a society hampered by psychological problems as well as physical circumstances forcing them into a position from which they cannot yet escape. It is sobering to realise that the descendants of the first Irish slaves remain prisoners, almost 400 years later, albeit now of circumstance.

History has been unkind to these people; poverty is, to quote George Bernard Shaw, "the greatest of evils and worst of crimes". At first glance, it would appear that the Red Legs of Barbados are locked into a hopeless situation, but greater opportunities and encouragement and better education combined with an optimistic hope for a better future could see them experience a very different future.

Sheena Jolley's photographs of the Red Legs in Barbados will be seen in a documentary called *The Celtic Connection, To Hell or Barbados* on TG4 on Monday, December 28 at 8.20pm. See sheenajolleyphotography.com



Eric Bailey and his grand aunt Erlene Downie – in 2000, Bailey had ambitions of being a cabinet-maker, but by 2008 he was working as a labourer on the roads

“Their ancestors would have been branded, lashed, mortgaged, sold, gambled or given as debts. They became a wretched, isolated, suppressed people

EYE ON NATURE

Mirabile dictu, I spotted not just one, but a group of five red squirrels foraging for ripe cones on the Japanese larches on Hellfire Hill, overlooking Dublin, recently. It is the first time in almost 20 years I have seen them there.

Michael Fewer, Dublin 16

Outside Virginia, Co Cavan, a startled bird flew from the hedgerow. It made the blackbird's alarm call, but it had a brown head and pure white body plumage. It did not have a red beak.

Justin Doyle, Athboy, Co Meath

It was a leucistic or partially albino female blackbird.

In early September, I met a huge, fat, pink caterpillar on Mangerton Mountain, Co Kerry. It was about six inches long and looked like a load of raspberries strung together. It moved like a regular caterpillar and didn't seem to be bothered by water as it was wandering in and out of puddles.

Katherine Finn, Spencer Dock, Dublin

It was the four-inch caterpillar of the goat moth, which spends two to four years burrowed in the heart wood of a tree, usually willow. It forms a cocoon from wood dust and its own silk and pupates on the ground. This year has been remarkable for reports of goat moth caterpillars.

Michael Viney welcomes observations at Thallabawn, Carrowiskey PO, Westport, Co Mayo. E-mail: viney@anu.ie. Include a postal address.

On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer – and Vixen



MICHAEL VINEY
ANOTHER LIFE

THE NATURAL history of Christmas was impulsively launched in this column some years ago as a promising serial theme for an indefinite number of Decembers. I began comfortably with holly and ivy, those mid-winter pledges of enduring life, and the pagan decoration of spruce trees as revived in Victorian England by Prince Albert.

Mistletoe warranted scrutiny of its strange botanical habits and very local Irish presence as an alien parasite (even its myths are Norse). Wrens had legitimate cultural origins in folk magic; robins rather less so, their Christmas card PR launched by the red-breasted uniforms of early English postmen.

Yule logs supported an essay on the flammability of ash, oak, birch and turf briquettes. The spices and nuts of Christmas puddings and mulled wines justified excursions to tropical vines, bushes and trees. Capercaillie and mead recalled indigestions past; caviar and sturgeon, the high points of tigerish over-indulgence.

This leaves me, for the moment, with rein-

deer, seen a month ago accompanying Santa to the precincts of the big shopping centre in Ballymena, Co Antrim, an event duly sanctioned in advance by the Parades Commission for a joyous assembly for no more than 10,000 citizens, many astride their fathers' shoulders.

The history of Christmas reindeer, to no one's surprise, is far from natural. A search for their place in the seasonal charade leads initially to a poem, *The Night Before Christmas*, supposedly written by a Manhattan biblical scholar, Clement Clarke Moore, for his children in 1823. It became extraordinarily famous ("when all through the house/not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...") and planted in the glib human psyche the image of St Nicholas zooming in on a flying sleigh pulled by eight reindeer. The story of a ninth, Rudolph, was written in 1939 for a chain of US department stores, which gave it away by the million, and the mind-infesting jingle was first conceived and vocalised a decade later.

Moore's claim to originality has recently been challenged by a Vassar English professor who finds him lifting the poem from the work of a New Yorker of Dutch descent, Henry Livingston, who also wrote of the Norse god Thor and his chariot pulled by flying goats. But the possible plagiarism didn't stop one of Moore's handwritten copies of the poem selling for \$211,000 at a Christie's auction in 1997. (Thank you, Google; have a happy holiday.)

Reindeer (caribou in the US) are among the lost mammals of Ireland, surviving the last ice cover in the company of giant deer, bears and wolves, but extinct by the time the first hunters arrived. Today, they range gregariously through much of northern Russia and



The history of Christmas reindeer can be traced to a poem, *The Night Before Christmas*. Photograph: PA/Chris Radburn

parts of Norwegian and Swedish Lapland, and migrate seasonally between treeless tundra, mountain and forest. The traditional, semi-wild reindeer herding by Norway's Sami people is increasingly threatened as new hydro-power and mining projects, wind farms and holiday cabins fragment their habitat.

Some readers may recall enjoyable TV scenes last Christmas of the chaotic Lapland theme park in marquee in the UK's New Forest, where discontented parents thumped Santa Claus and the elves while reindeer fled across the mud. From this, and the Ballymena event, it is fair to deduce that herds of reindeer are alive and well in these islands, their com-

mercial appearances at Christmas helping to pay for their keep.

They come, indeed, from a "free range" herd of reindeer in Scotland's Cairngorm Mountains, where, 50 years ago, a visiting Swedish reindeer herder, Mikel Utsi, noticed the plentiful supply of ground and tree lichens ignored by native red deer and other local ungulates. He brought in some of his reindeer as an experiment, founding a herd that stands today at some 150 animals.

All the deer in today's herd have been born there, and many are tame enough to wear bells, pose on the mountains for family snaps, and even trot on clicking heels to their annual engagements in Ballymena, Cardiff and elsewhere. Others, as visitors to the Cairngorm Reindeer Centre at Aviemore are warned, stay friskily wild and may take violent exception to the sound of mobile phones.

In Ireland, "reindeer moss" – actually the lovely grey filigree lichen *Cladonia rangiferina* – is scarce enough to earn a place on the Red Data List of endangered species. It grows around hummocks on some of the surviving raised bogs of the midlands, but architects who stick the moss onto their urban models to simulate trees and hedges are, one trusts, buying imported stuff from a garden centre.

In the far north of Russia, where the moss grows abundantly, reindeer herders complain that climate change is melting the snow too soon in spring, making it harder for the deer to pull their sleds. But on the night before Christmas, watch out for Dasher, Dancer, Prancer and Vixen, not to mention Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen. And leave the mobile switched off, just in case.

HORIZONS

SYLVIA THOMPSON

Being green this Christmas

Have yourself a clean, green Christmas – that's the message from Repak, which is encouraging householders to recycle all the extra packaging that comes with the festivities. While Irish people have one of the best records in Europe for recycling, cleanliness is still an issue. So remember to keep all cardboard clean and dry and remove plastic inserts before flattening for recycling. Glass bottles and jars should be empty and rinsed out, with their lids left inside. And yes, aluminium trays from take-aways can be recycled, but cleaned first. Used batteries can now be brought back to shops which sell batteries and check out sites like freetrade.ie to pass on unwanted gifts. See repak.ie for details of local recycling centres.



A bird in the hand

Birdwatch Ireland's annual Garden Bird Survey is up and running for 2009/2010. Now in its 16th year, the survey monitors winter bird populations.

"Watching birds in the winter garden brings cheer to cold, dark days and participants have the satisfaction of helping different species survive," says Oran O'Sullivan of Birdwatch Ireland. "Increased participation helps us track changes and provides data on biodiversity."

After a succession of mild winters, 2008/2009 brought the coldest conditions in 18 years. Meteorologists are predicting a white Christmas this year. See birdwatchireland.ie for tips on feeding wild birds in the winter months.



Assembling a sporting list

The Irish Sporting Heritage Project is a new project whose aim is to assemble a comprehensive online database of sport in Ireland since the mid-19th century.

Funded by the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, the project will give details of all sports, from cricket to tennis, Gaelic football, golf and boxing.

The project co-ordinator, Roisin Higgins, is currently seeking information from the public on past and present sporting sites in their locality.

See irishsportingheritage.com, e-mail higgins@irishsportingheritage.com or tel: 01-614 7452 for more details.

Ecoweb

rothar.ie

Check out this community-based bicycle recycling project which accepts donated bicycles, repairs them and resells or donates them to disadvantaged groups. Cycling training is also available.