

Changing shades of green – who the Irish are today?



Migration and the Making of Ireland

by Bryan Fanning (UCD Press, €25)

Joe Carroll

This is “the first comprehensive history of migration to and from the island of Ireland”, according to the publisher’s blurb. It certainly is comprehensive as it goes back to Neolithic times and up to more recent arrivals of Nigerians, Poles, Romanians and Muslims.

The author (professor of Migration and Social Policy at UCD) also discusses other immigrants such as Normans, Ulster-Scots, Cromwellians, Palatines, Huguenots, Jews, Hungarians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Brazilians, Bosnians, Kosovars, Lithuanians and Latvians.

As if that were not enough Prof. Fanning also tackles Irish emigration to mainland Europe in the 17th Century and in later times to Britain and the US. This allows him to compare the treatment afforded to Irish exiles in their host countries with the reception which greets immigrants to our own shores.

But it would have been easier for the reader, perhaps, if he had concentrated on immigration and how it has affected Irish life.

He sees the 17th-Century plantations of Cromwellian and Williamite war veterans as the last immigrations to have a real effect on the gene pool. The arrival of the Palatine Protestants (in Limerick and Wexford) and Quakers in the 18th Century were on a minor scale.

Presence

Lithuanian Jews arrived at the end of the 19th Century and by 1926 their numbers had increased to about 5,000 north and south, but their presence steadily declined in later years with many deciding to emigrate to the new state of Israel after 1948.

The refusal to allow even small numbers of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in the 1930s to enter Ireland and great reluctance to take in young orphans after the war is still a stain on our record. The Fianna Fáil governments of the time were too ready to bow to the anti-semitism in the upper ranks of the Department of Justice.

In fact our record since then in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers cannot be called honourable and the book details the incompetence surrounding the treatment of Hungarian refugees in 1956 and the Vietnamese Boat People in the 1980s.

Governments distanced themselves from the problem, which was left to the Red Cross, the Catholic Church and voluntary bodies to try and solve. Disused army camps were the usual solution even for the Northern Ireland refugees who poured across the Border in 1969 and 1971 to escape pogroms.

The most interesting part of the book is the immigrations of the 21st Century. The Celtic Tiger attracted large numbers of economic migrants and the numbers swelled further when in 2004 the Government agreed to allow workers from the Eastern European countries which had joined the European Union to enter Ireland without any transition quotas.

The chapters dealing with Polish, African and Muslim immigration are well researched and feature individual experiences as well as overall statistics. In many cases the arrivals to fill lower-paid jobs are better qualified than the Irish they work alongside but encounter prejudice when they try to advance themselves.

The arrival of African refugees has been accompanied by the spread of Pentecostal churches to meet their spiritual needs. The direct provision system where they often linger for years is clearly unsatisfactory, if not inhumane.

The experience of Muslim immigrants (65,000 in 2016) is analysed. The spread of mosques in urban and provincial centres matches that of the Pentecostal Christian churches. Within the Muslim community there are important distinctions between Sunni, Shia, and the more severe Salafi sects.

There is also a divide between the more qualified arrivals and the less well-educated. The Poles are the biggest immigrant group doubling to 122,000 between 2006 and 2011, but levelling off in later years with the economic downturn. Polish has overtaken Irish as the country's second most spoken language.

The author summarises Ireland's response to immigration as "complex: open to labour migrants, often hostile to asylum seekers, not seeing the Irish-born children of immigrants as intrinsically Irish..."

However since 2014 there has been a steady rise in the numbers of non-EU immigrants becoming naturalised citizens. Some 20% of the present population was not born on the island of Ireland.

With Nigerian kids now such devotees of Gaelic games, whether they will become "more Irish than the Irish themselves" remains to be seen.