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Book Review: Migration and the Making of Ireland

[Barry Sheppard](#) 29 August, 2018 [Reviews](#)



By Bryan Fanning

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Reviewer: Barry Sheppard.

This new work by Bryan Fanning, Professor of Migration and Social Policy at UCD is a very important and welcome addition to the history of migration in relation to Ireland. It is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, Irish historiography has long been concerned with the migrant.

However, it has overwhelmingly been concerned with outward migration, often forced, and the lamentable images which it conjures up in the popular imagination. For the

most part, Irish historiography has been less-concerned with inward migration, more often than not addressing the subject in relation to invasion or plantation.

Secondly, the book comes at a time when populist anti-immigration movements are on the rise across the globe. Such groups are by-and-large fuelled by half-truths and misinformation, preying on people's fears, and in an alarming number of countries resulting in opportunist politicians framing the debate in dubious terms such as 'taking control of our borders'. Not least in the neighbouring island. This is inextricably linked to the migration which this book, in part deals with. The book invites conversation. Conversations which urgently need to happen in any number of countries in these troubled times.

Byran Fanning's book is an overview of migration to and from Ireland since the middle ages.

The opening chapters deal with a topic which has been long in popular memory, yet as this book shows, much misunderstood, invasions. Chapter two challenges many accepted notions on the waves of invasions which have shaped Ireland, both physically, and in the national psyche. Mythology around Norse and Norman invasions is challenged by showing how commercial, cultural and religious links between the south of Ireland and England pre-dated the Norman invasion.

By the time Henry II gained control, Dublin already had a well-established international merchant class from Norse countries, what is now the Netherlands, Wales and various parts of England. In relation to the well-known accounts of Viking invaders mercilessly raiding monasteries in the land of Saints and Scholars, Fanning shows that fellow-Irishmen raided more monasteries in the same period than Vikings ever did.

Plantations and transplantation

On the much-vexed topic of Plantations, Fanning meticulously shows the reader that plantations of Ireland were not uniform, but made up of many varying schemes, both forced and voluntary, as well-as non political and internal plantations with people from different parts of the island. Pacification as well as colonisation took place alongside one another to great effect.

The legacy of colonisation is, of course still argued over passionately to this day. Pacifications, where land was confiscated and given over to other native Irish families, as happened with McMahon land in Monaghan, rarely features in these debates. Another fact lost to the mists of time was that in the seventeenth-century plantations it was estimated that 20 per cent of Scottish planters settled in Ulster were Catholic. The notoriety of plantations in popular memory is surely in need of more popular inspection.

The plantations or colonisation of Ireland in the 16th and 17th centuries are far more complex than is popularly appreciated.

The chapter on Transplantations is fascinating. Irish historiography has often been accused of focusing on the forced migration of the poor and hungry Irishman and woman who have become familiar figures in the nation's history as they left their home to occupy the bottom rung of the social ladder in another country.

Fanning bucks this particular trend by providing a fine account of those who have taken the less-traditional route in making up Ireland's vast diaspora. Military migrations make up a large part of transplantations, with tens of thousands of Irish soldiers of all ranks scattered across continental Europe, enlisting in the armies of a number of countries in the seventeenth century. Migrations of religious clerics and Gaelic nobles, and the impact they had on Spanish society are also addressed, and do much to challenge the picture of the helpless famine migrant which has continued to be the dominant figure which people associate with Irish migration.

Without doubt, the most controversial aspect of Irish transplantations in recent years has been the furore surrounding 'Irish slaves', which has contributed to fierce online debate and the protest culture among the 'Alt-right' in Trump's America. This grotesque misrepresentation of the past, employing grossly exaggerated numbers has been used as a historical stick to beat embattled African-American communities who are still trying to assert their right to equal citizenship.

While this episode of transplantations and their modern-day political impact has been confronted quite admirably by historians such as Tipperary's Liam Hogan, the political controversy is not directly addressed in Fanning's work. He does, however, cut through the exaggerations which the 'Alt-right' cling to, showing realistic numbers of forced transplantations and the autonomy which many of the transplanted Irish had.[\[1\]](#)

Minorities

The varying fortunes and experiences of a number of historical minority groups in Ireland are explored, such as Huguenots, Palatines, and Quakers. Although Quakers are the most lasting of these minorities in Ireland their contribution to Irish society is relatively under-researched.

The Palatines were small in number and relatively short in time span in terms of Irish history, nevertheless their experience getting to Ireland draws parallels with those of migrants to Ireland in more recent times. Indeed, Fanning highlights the fact that they were housed in temporary camps, and their lack of proficiency in the English or Irish languages as something which resembles the experiences of early twenty-first-century immigrants to Ireland. Fanning's assertion, in relation to Palatines, that 'assimilation writes diversity out of history', can equally be applied to the majority of the minorities covered in this book.[\[2\]](#)

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The chapter on emigrations is arguably the one aspect of migration which most people are familiar with. Poor famine migrants and deportations to Australian Penal Colonies have long occupied a prominent position in popular history, contributing much to the story of the worldwide Irish diaspora.

Despite the Irish diaspora holding an almost mythical space in the Irish psyche, the vast majority of Irish historiography has focused upon what has taken place within the confines of the nation state. Enda Delaney has addressed the treatment of both the nation and the diaspora in Irish historiography in "Our island story"? Towards a transnational history of late modern Ireland'.

He states that 'the existence of the Irish diaspora has been acknowledged, if then just as swiftly ignored. Historians chart the causes and extent of emigration in synthetic surveys, but the coverage invariably ends with the tearful farewells at Irish ports'.[\[3\]](#)

Fanning not only charts the causes and extent of emigration, he also provides fine accounts of the onward journey. Further than that he deconstructs the never-ending stream of Irish emigrants in categories based on religious persuasion. This is a useful approach, given that religion often played an enormous part in reasons for leaving, and

indeed on just where and how people within these groups progressed once they left Irish shores.

The chapter on emigrations is complimented by the eighth chapter on Expatriates. Reading this chapter, one gets the sense of just how many, often young and unskilled Irishmen and women left their homes in times of political and economic turmoil. The most interesting aspect of this chapter charts the decline of Irish in America and the growth of the diaspora in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. Fanning's use of emigration statistics is phenomenal which take us right up to the present day.

The tribute to emigrants within his own family, may at first seem awkwardly placed, nevertheless I believe it is a fitting tribute which gives a human account of the fortunes of the different generations who were compelled to leave their home country. It is a story which many will recognise within their own extended families.

Refugees

The plight of refugees across much of the world today is never far from the news. Therefore the work within this book offers a timely reminder about previous waves of refugees which sought solace in Ireland. The chapter covers the experiences of Jews and other groups who sought sanctuary in Ireland before, during and after World War II. Further to this it covers Hungarians, Chileans, Vietnamese, Bosnians and Kosovars, and refugees from Northern Ireland who were forced from their homes at the outbreak of the Troubles.

One of the more interesting refugee settlement programmes pre-World War II involved the transportation of Jewish teenagers under the age of seventeen to Northern Ireland. Under the *Kindertransport* programme young Jewish refugees were set up in hostels and a derelict 70 acre farm on the Co Down seafront where they worked the land throughout the course of the war.

Fanning states that no such programme existed in the Irish Free State, and that only a small number of young Jewish refugees were granted temporary status; a decision harshly criticised by hero of the Holocaust, Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld.

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The short passage on refugees from Northern Ireland is interesting, and a reminder of just how chaotic and bloody the early years of The Troubles were. Refugees who fled intimidation, violence, and the threat of internment were placed in refugee camps in Meath and Donegal, which were modelled on those which held Hungarians over a decade previously.

Migration in the modern era, and specifically the Celtic Tiger years show the fortunes of the various ethnic groups who contributed and continue to contribute to the Irish economy, North and South. One can't help but recall previous eras of Irish outward migration when reading about unscrupulous bosses taking advantage of non-English-speaking migrants, racist attacks, and low-paid and irregular employment.

One cannot challenge the fact that many minority migrants have been unfairly treated, and have been the victims of racist attacks. However, in many cases there have been very large and coordinated protests in support of attacked or badly-treated migrants and asylum seekers, especially in the North.

This omission can give the reader the impression that they have little support among native populations. Indeed, in the concluding chapter Fanning states that in the North 'immigrants have experienced fallout from the still-festering sectarian divides'. While this is undoubtedly true, the level of support which sometimes-embattled migrant communities in the North have faced dwarfs those who would seek to exploit or victimise them. This is evidenced in the many cross-community rallies and initiatives to support victims of racism.

As before, when writing in a previous chapter about his relatives who made the outward journey from Ireland, Fanning humanises his subject by including real life experiences of migrants, with names and back stories. It is perhaps easy to forget, especially when dealing with vast numbers of statistics as this book does, that each one is a human being with families, often facing tremendous pressure to survive in a land that isn't their own. He does this to great effect for Sikhs, Chinese, Brazilians, Poles, and Muslims. All who have helped shape Ireland in the last few decades.

African Migrants and Direct Provision

The chapter on African migrants is very interesting, as it is not a new issue. As far back as the 1960s Ireland had a small African population, many who came as medical students. Many of their experiences were not positive, with many racist attacks being reported in Dublin on Nigerian students outside dancehalls and in the street.

As well as attacks on African students, Fanning reports on what has become all too familiar, institutional abuse of children. In this instance mixed race children born of Irish mothers and African fathers. The reflections of some African-Irish children of their time in industrial homes are shameful and heartbreaking, in an era already littered with shameful accounts of abuse.

The fact that Dublin had some 300 Nigerian students studying in the city is further evidence of the opening up of Irish society in the 1960s. This is something which is also found in Northern Ireland. Dr Eric Morier-Genoud of Queen's University Belfast has also been researching the influx of African migrants to Belfast in the 1950s. This is surely a topic which merits more attention.

This book is a fascinating look at migration in relation to Ireland. It is as complete a study as you are likely to find.

The scandals of Direct Provision centres, the privately owned shelters for asylum seekers are laid bare for all to see. Female victims of sex trafficking placed alongside male inmates, overcrowding, and dire sanitary conditions in an 'alienating and dehumanising' system are a disgraceful reminder of how some of the most vulnerable are treated. Incidents such as this are in direct parallel with examples which have long been rallying points for people recalling the many injustices against Irish emigrants of previous generations.

This book is a fascinating look at migration in relation to Ireland. It is as complete a study as you are likely to find. At many times it uncovers historical facts which some will find uncomfortable. It certainly displays many contemporary truths which people should find uncomfortable. Its scope is at times breath-taking. As one would expect of a project this size, the array of sources used go far beyond any regular historical venture. It would not be amiss to say that almost each of the chapters could be a complete book in their own right.

Although the latter chapters go beyond historical study, they fit seamlessly with the earlier chapters in giving an overall experience of migration which has shaped the island of Ireland over the past number of centuries.

The book will be a very important work in the field of Transnational History, spearheaded by the likes of Enda Delaney, Ciaran O'Neill and others, which show that even from the earliest modern period Ireland was more open culturally, economically, and socially than previously admitted.

References

- [1] Bryan Fanning, *Migration and the Making of Ireland*, p. 49.
- [2] Fanning, p. 62.
- [3] Enda Delaney 'Our Island Story', p. 600