MIGRATION AND THE MAKING OF IRELAND, REVIEWED

"Perhaps the most striking characteristic of many new immigrant communities has been their near-invisibility within Irish media and political debates," writes UCD's Professor Bryan Fanning, in his new book *Migration and the Making of Ireland*.

Sandwiched between two countries — the US and UK — obsessed with immigrants, this has been something of a blessing for me, as an immigrant. But as Ireland struggles with an increasingly acute shortage of (housing, hospital and other) resources, how long can this last?

As the government continues to flail around, searching for a way to shift the blame for the country's housing-and-homelessness crisis from its policies to something or someone else, it recently seems to be staring meaningfully at that traditional scapegoat, immigrants.

Late last year, the head of the government's Dublin Region Homeless Executive tried blaming some people's homelessness on "years of bad behaviour". Then the head of the government's Housing Agency said the issue was families becoming homeless to try to get social housing faster, which he called "gaming the system".

More recently, Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy blamed local councils for including people in homelessness statistics who should not be there. And in the *Independent* on 6 May Philip Ryan transcribed a new bit of spin, offered to him by government "sources" hiding behind anonymity.

Murphy "has been told by his senior officials that hundreds of non-EU nationals, who may not be legally entitled to housing, are currently recorded as homeless", Ryan dutifully wrote. He quoted a "source" as saying:

"We have people coming off planes and at train stations who we then have to provide emergency accommodation for without them going through immigration. It's been going on for a while but it's been increasing recently."

Neither this anonymous coward nor Ryan offered any evidence to support this assertion, but this is the way of things in politics in most of the world these days: when in doubt, it's time to start blaming immigrants (as opposed to, say, building more social and affordable housing).

Jews and Nazis

Fanning's readable account of the history of Ireland's relationship with migration begins at the beginning. "An ice age curbed populations of flora and fauna until around 10,000 years ago," he writes. Since the ice receded, this island has seen wave after wave of new arrivals, including early immigrants the Celts.

"The Celts, which means something like 'stranger' (*kelton*) in Classical Greek, came to be known as 'Gaels' … It has been argued that Celtic people moved to Ireland in two waves: from western France or northern Spain into the western seaboard, and another from Britain …"

Then it was St Patrick, the Vikings, the Normans, the Plantation of Ulster and the Huguenots – all relatively familiar territory. When it comes to the Second World War, Fanning takes a close look at how the state treated Jews fleeing the Continent, compared to how it treated Nazis and collaborators sneaking off after the war.

"An overt policy of discrimination against Jews emerged in Ireland in 1938, which lasted throughout the Second World War and the aftermath of the Holocaust," Fanning writes. "Various Department of Justice memoranda from before, during, and after the Holocaust opposed the admission of Jewish refugees."

When Irish people sought to rescue Jews from the murderous Third Reich, two Irish officials in particular blocked them: Peter Berry, "the senior civil servant in the Department of Justice", and Charles Bewley, "Ireland's envoy to Berlin from 1933 to 1939. Bewley was both openly anti-Semitic and an enthusiastic admirer of the Nazis."

"No *Kindertransport* refugees were admitted to the Irish Free State during the war", Fanning writes, referring to an organised international effort to rescue Jewish children from the Continent. "Efforts to bring over 100 Jewish orphan children from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, soon after the Second World War, were opposed by the Department of Justice …"

In contrast, “Following the defeat of Germany, around 40 Nazi collaborators, including some fleeing charges of war crimes or prison sentences, were admitted to the Irish Free State”, Fanning writes. These included Albert Folens, “a journalist who had been employed by the Sicherheitsdienst or SD, the intelligence service of the SS … He settled permanently in Ireland and became a successful printer and publisher.”

Folens died in Ireland in 2003 at the age of 86, and an *Irish Times* obituary, headlined “Flemish Patriot Found Home in Ireland” does not mention his work for the SD, though it does mention that “He came to Ireland in 1948 on a ‘doctored’ passport, having escaped from Allied imprisonment, after finding himself on the wrong side of the Second World War.”

Let’s Not Be Hypocrites

Ireland joined the UN Refugee Convention In 1956, and it welcomed a group of Hungarians that year, and groups of refugees from Chile in 1973, Vietnam in 1979, Bosnia in 1991 and Kosovo in 1997.

When the Celtic Tiger arrived and the EU expanded, larger numbers of people began to arrive came from elsewhere in Europe, and also from further afield – prominently Nigeria, India, China and Pakistan.

In relating the stories of these groups Fanning does an excellent job of painting contours of the big picture with broad strokes on historical movements and statistical trends, and then also zooming in on individual stories through first-person accounts by new arrivals.

For example, he quotes from Nogugo Mafu’s account of her time in the asylum system in Ireland, where she fled to from “Zimbabwe in 2002 with her six-year-old son after her husband, a political activist, was killed”.

Mafu found the system “alienating and dehumanising”, and said it turned people into “helpless institutionalised zombies”. “At these centres nearly every decision about their lives is made for them … Needless to say that this creates in the asylum seeker feelings of helplessness and dependency, robbing them of their dignity …”

In his book, Fanning also persistently highlights the parallels between the experiences of people who emigrated from Ireland to other countries, and the experiences of people immigrated to this island. This reads like a drumbeat of “Let’s not be hypocrites. Let’s not be hypocrites …”

For example, “Stereotypes of the Roma as beggars and outcasts recall those of pre-Famine Irish migrants in England during the nineteenth century … the apparent disorder of their lives masked purposeful seasonal migration aimed at supporting their families at home.”

Or, “Like the Irish in the United Kingdom from the 1970s to the 1990s, but to a far greater extent, Muslims in Western countries have come to be treated as a suspect population.”

People have come to Ireland for all kinds of different reasons, and combinations of reasons: to work at tech companies on the Silicon Docks; to work in mushroom farms, meatpacking plants, or the construction trades; to start businesses; to flee danger or destitution at home; to stay with loved ones coming for these or other reasons.

As Fanning points out, the individual stories in this book will sound familiar to Irish people who have emigrated, or lived abroad, or who have friends or family who have.

Policy Changes

As Fanning guides the reader through history, he keeps an eye on how government policies have affected who came and when, and the experiences of the new arrivals – whether they felt welcomed or felt isolated, whether they struggled or thrived.

For example, when more people with darker skin began arriving in the early 2000s, Ireland decided it was time for a referendum on who was allowed to be Irish. In 2004, the Irish people voted that being born on this island was no longer enough to qualify.

This was "presented by Michael McDowell, the then-Minister of Justice, as a response to African women entering Ireland to exploit a 'loophole' in the Irish constitution". Fanning writes that "[S]ome African migrants did come to Ireland because they hoped to obtain secure residency status through the birth of their children" in Ireland, who would be citizens.

But why was the law that allowed this acceptable until people from Africa began to avail of it, at which point it became a "loophole" that needed to be closed?

In the aftermath of the referendum, "most Africans who had arrived as asylum seekers became eligible over time to apply for Irish citizenship". But when they applied, many were refused: in 2009, Ireland refused 47 percent of citizenship applications, Fanning writes, compared to the UK's 9 percent in and Canada's 3 percent.

This changed radically after Fianna Fáil was swept from government in 2011. "The turn-down rate dropped from 47 per cent to less than 3 per cent of applicants," Fanning writes. "Alan Shatter, the Minister of Justice, by overturning barriers to citizenship received the *Africa World* newspaper's man of the year award in 2012."

The new government introduced positive, public naturalisation ceremonies, and at one such event in 2012, Taoiseach Enda Kenny told about 2,250 new Irish citizens: "Since you arrived on these shores, you have enriched your communities, enhanced your workplaces, bringing new light, new depth, a new sense of imagining, to what it means to be a citizen of Ireland in the 21st century."

Now What?

Of course, in 2012 both Donald Trump and Nigel Farage were still funny jokes. Now they are unfunny jokes, and we are supposed to take the views of Nazis and xenophobes and racists and other types of fearful little people seriously.

Ireland isn't in that same place – not yet at least. But that does not mean that it mightn't suddenly slide in that direction, especially if politicians or anonymous "sources" in government, aided by complicit journalists, decide it's in their political interest to start blaming immigrants for society's ills, or the government's failings.

This is especially the case because there seems no way for new arrivals – or their children or grandchildren – to become "Irish". We can become citizens of Ireland, but, as I have written before, the term "Irish" denotes both a citizenship and an ethnicity, so there are many people who will never let newcomers be that (if they wanted to).

Fanning also sees this as an issue, it seems. "The empirical answer to the question 'Who are the Irish?' has changed as people of many races, faiths and traditions from around the world become Irish citizens," Fanning writes. "However, this has yet to be reflected in Irish institutions, politics, the media, or popular culture."

If, as Fanning suggests is necessary, the "imagined community" that is Irish society were somehow slightly "reimagined" to make space inside it for the newer arrivals on this island of immigrants, perhaps we'd be less appealing as scapegoats.

And if Irish institutions, politics, media and popular culture reflected the demographics of Ireland's population a bit better, perhaps government would be less likely to decide the way forward is to smear "foreign nationals", and the media would be less likely to play along.