The enriching of a rain-soaked island

Non-Fiction: Migration and the Making of Ireland, Bryan Fanning, UCD Press, paperback, 335 pages, €36.98

A new book offers a suitable riposte to the clouds of xenophobia in Europe and celebrates our own openness towards immigration.

Declan Kiberd, my UCD English teacher and chronicler of immigration, used to say that, far from Ireland being an 'Ourselves Alone' hard rock isolationist island, it was actually more like a sponge, absorbing different influences and waves of immigrations and throwing off its clothes of identity as quick as new ones come along. Just look at how so many of us have abandoned the Catholicism with which Ireland had been so synonymous.

The reason for this rather harmonious transformation has, in my opinion, been for a number of reasons - the labour demands of the economic boom (now being repeated), the almost total collapse of existing Irish concepts of religion and nationalism, which increased our openness to immigration and change, unlike say the UK or France.

However, it was also because of our general openness and fluidity, as described by Professor Kiberd. Part of this was our own experience of emigration as a people, and the millions of Irish who were given shelter and opportunity in the US, UK and Australia. Fanning also deals with the return to Ireland of some of this Irish diaspora. Those of us who believed that the only key ethnic difference ever spoken of in Ireland was between Catholic and Protestant haven't reckoned with the fact that actually we are all formed from waves of Celts, Normans, Vikings, and, according to Bryan Fanning in his valuable and comprehensive book, any other waves of migrants who come to our shores, albeit on a smaller level.

In many ways, his book is a trip down memory lane. He describes the arrival of the Vietnamese boat people in the early 1980s, as they fled Communism. I well remember during my South Dublin teenage years, a chip van that some boat people parked outside the local pubs at closing time - and the abuse they would often get from uncomprehending and inebriated locals, as they tried to make a living ("Vietnamese, Chinese - sure they're all the bleeding same!").

Fanning also describes the arrival of Bosnians in the 1990s, again fleeing political persecution, this time from the former Yugoslavia. Some years ago, I went with my family to a wonderful party in the Bosnian community centre in Blanchardstown, celebrating (if that's the word) the arrest of Serbian war criminal Ratko Mladic, who terrorised Bosnian Muslims. I had urged Irish and EU action in this newspaper.

Interestingly, the establishment of the Jewish community here has many parallels in the recent developments in Ireland's Muslim population, and the author reminds us of the ungenerous response of the Irish State to the predicament of Jews in Germany and elsewhere. The impact of the anti-Semitic views of civil servants such as diplomat Charles Bewley and Peter Berry at the Department of Justice was considerable.

But these are only some of the recent arrivals in what is a wide canvass of migration described and analysed by Fanning, with some fascinating details and stories. He goes right back to the origins of what might be called the first 'Irish' settlements, as well as right up to the huge levels of migration during the Celtic Tiger, so it's a wide canvass.

To be honest, this influx of immigration dwarfed anything seen in the country previously, and had a huge impact with the country more or less going from monocultural to multicultural. This has mostly been a harmonious and indeed hugely enriching experience, even if it has not been without problems and some racial tensions. Fanning focuses on this but one wonders if he focuses too much on such tensions, as is often the nature of these studies: the positive stories and successes are less highlighted than the challenges. It is the same with quangos and special interest groups - by their very nature.

It is worth reflecting on the level of this transformation. When the EU enlarged in 2004, the Irish State began to permit migrants from the 10 new East European member states to live and work in Ireland without visas and in doing so, immediately accelerated the pace of immigration.

In just one year, 2004-05, approximately 85,000 workers from those new EU states were issued with Irish national insurance numbers. This amounted to more than 10 times the number of new work permits admitted to those countries in the preceding year. The non-Irish national population rose from 419,733 in 2006 to 544,357 in 2011. The 2011 census showed 122,585 Poles living here, with Polish overtaking Irish as the second most spoken language in the state.

I see this transformation in my own area of north Dublin and it is fantastic, with Croatians, Somalis, Sudanese and Lithuanians walking the streets where once it was just boring 'white bread' Irish. In my kids' school, over 60pc of the pupils are foreign and they enrich the school with music, culture and a useful sort of competitive ambition. It is a credit to the teachers to be dealing with this huge change as well as the changeover from an essentially Catholic-ethos education system to a secular one.

However, there are always lessons to be learned. There is still a lot of controversy about the Direct Provision system which replaced the Refugee Agency in 2000. But then something has to be done to address the merit of asylum seeker applications, which too often are stuck in a conveyor belt of endless appeals that only enriches lawyers.

The great James Joyce picked Leopold Bloom, a Jewish ad-seller of Hungarian parentage, as his modern 'Everyman' as well as his quintessential Irishman and Dubliner. In Ulysses, the wise Bloom declares that "a nation is the same people living in same place".

It is a wonderfully easy, 'live and let live', non-judgmental and generous view of what a country should be, and a suitable riposte to the toxic xenophobes who are on the rise in Europe today.

Fanning charts just how rich this experience can be.

Indo Review