

Postprint:

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Saothar: Journal of Irish Labour History*, Volume 46 (2021), pp.14-15,

<http://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/pdf/Saothar%2046%20BOOK%20REVIEWS%202021.pdf>.

Title:

Elizabeth Malcolm and Dianne Hall, *A New History of the Irish in Australia*, Cork University Press, 2019.

Review by Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, University of Wollongong

Review:

A New History of the Irish in Australia ends with something not quite new – the Irish joke. It may be unusual to begin a review with the end of the book but it is here that the authors make the point that whatever the waxing and waning of attitudes towards the Irish in Australia, derogatory stereotypes remain, even if they are trumped out much less frequently now. The significance of this? That jokes capitalising on such negative stereotypes reflect real contemporary and historical prejudice and discrimination. As Malcolm and Hall state, a nation of immigrants, like Australia, cannot afford to take such humour lightly. The challenge, as presented in the final chapter, is to try to understand why such negative stereotypes continue to have currency, even potency, today – more than 100 years after large scale Irish migration to Australia.

Understanding contemporary prejudice may be the challenge on which the book ends, but investigating the historical foundations of these attitudes and analysing their impact on Irish Australians – Irish-born migrants and those identifying as ‘Irish’ (with Irish parentage) – from the beginning of white migration to the colonies is the task which is sustained throughout the volume. To achieve this, the authors adopt a multi-layered approach. They examine the racialisation of the Irish. They also trace the impact that events in Ireland had on the experiences of the Irish diaspora in Australia.

Much of the authors’ investigation revolves around the concept of ‘race’. Race is, and has been, a much contested and maligned but highly pertinent category of analysis for a settler colonial society like Australia. Arguably, Australians have been obsessed by ‘race’ since white migration began. The colonies were built on the dispossession of Aboriginal people and, for much of its history, colonial, state and national policies and legislation were structured along racialised lines. In this first section of the three-part study, Malcolm and Hall explain the contested concept of the Irish as a ‘race’ beginning with the notion that Irish migrants were ‘lawless savages’ set to destroy the ‘civilised’ Anglo-Saxon character of the colonies. Through exploring interactions between the Irish, Indigenous Australians and Chinese Australians, Malcolm and Hall argue that the Irish occupied a somewhat liminal space in racialised narratives. Although they were never subject to the same degree of nineteenth century colonial violence as Australia’s First Nations people, the ‘white’ Irish were regarded as having much in common with non-European, non-white populations.

Not surprisingly, this issue of racialisation directs much of the second section of the book, ‘Stereotypes’. Here the authors cover an impressive breadth of topics from madness and criminality to popular culture and employment. To make the scope of this selection manageable, they employ a gender lens. For example, they trace the derogatory use of stereotype, including that of the ‘simianized’ Irish man, to undermine the potency and the revolutionary potential or danger of the rebellious Irish man. In a rigorously researched and engagingly titled chapter, ‘Bridget need not apply’, they also undertake a myth or reality test, assessing just how far the ‘Irish need not apply’ restriction was deployed in the Australian labour market. The result is revealing of the complex intersections of ‘race’ and ethnicity, class and gender at play in Australian society.

The final section of the book focuses on that seemingly troublesome and disruptive aspect of Irish life – politics. As the authors say early on in their study, plotting the history of the Irish in Australia is not simply about tracing a story of physical migration. Rather, it is about analysing how this group of migrants transferred and adapted ways of imagining the world. To do this, they delve into the culture they come from and with which they maintained contact over generations. The most obvious and perhaps dramatic of these cultural aspects – especially as the nineteenth century progressed and certainly as the twentieth century dawned – was the politics of Irish nationalism. Through examining the impact of Irish politics on the experiences of the Irish in Australia, the authors reveal the ebb and flow of sectarianism, while also exposing the quite stark distinctions between the experiences of Catholic Irish Australians, who were increasingly at odds with loyal imperial Australia, and Protestant Irish Australians who were overwhelmingly in synch.

Malcolm and Hall criticise a long tradition of Australian historiography for downplaying the significance and value of the contributions that the Irish have made to the development of modern, non-Indigenous Australian culture and society. While doing so, they acknowledge that their *New History of the Irish in Australia* knowingly builds on Patrick O'Farrell's ground-breaking 1980s study, *The Irish in Australia*. Some of O'Farrell's findings no longer resonate, still they applaud his 'courage' in posing the challenging questions that he did. In the same vein, these authors should be lauded for the courage they demonstrate in posing 'new' and sometimes uncomfortable questions about the place of the Irish in mainstream Australian historiography at a time when pursuing this strand of research is neither current nor popular. Their research is meticulous, attention to detail impressive, and their elucidation on the complex intersections of 'race', ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and imperial-colonised positioning makes their history so new, and so necessary.