

## **REVIEW: ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN WALES**

*Elinor Kelly*

Charlotte Williams, Neil Evans and Paul O'Leary, **A Tolerant Nation? Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales**, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, 244pp, pb, £14.99, ISBN 0708317596.

**A Tolerant Nation? Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales** is the most recent set of essays to be published dealing with ethnic diversity and racism outwith England, within the polities where longstanding nationalist tensions have dominated. Hainsworth's 1998 volume deals with **Ethnic Minorities and Racism in Northern Ireland**, MacLachlan and O'Connell focus on **Psychological, Social and Cultural Perspectives on a Changing Ireland** (2000), and now we have an overview of topics that writers in Wales consider the most compelling to offer at this time.

**A Tolerant Nation?** contains a varied menu of essays of three kinds – chapters 2-5 display the skills of historians, probing case studies in imperial history that were obscured from view while the narrative was led from metropolitan England; chapters 6-12 deal with data of direct salience to familiar debates, still challenging the myths of 'tolerance', while developing grounded analysis in which generalisations are made only when there is supporting evidence; in the Introduction and chapters 1 and 13 the distinctive, specific detail of Wales is compared and contrasted with the other Celtic countries, and a more abstract commentary about nation and nationhood is developed.

In chapters 2-5, some intriguing questions are raised – about the connections between national pride in Welsh missionaries, their expulsion from India, ideas about race, difference and power, and the rise of the Welsh language

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movement (Aaron and Jones). We are led into the excavation of the thinking about nationhood, international relations and the politics of race and gender that lies in some Welsh writing in English (Bohata). The celebrated case of 'Hughes the Congo' is re-analysed, suggesting that his demise was not necessarily an indicator of a lurch towards racism in Colwyn Bay (Wynne Jones).

In chapters 6-8, the geography and varieties of ethnic violence are discussed as an index of populist response to different waves of in-migration (Evans); there is discussion of institutional barriers in sport that were, and still are, encountered by aspiring black athletes; players are compared with the reasons for the readier progress of Irish in-migrants (Evans and O'Leary); the decline in religious observance in Christian churches is contrasted with the religiosity of in-migrants, most notably Muslims, and new forms of ecumenism (Chambers). The conclusion of Chambers' chapter warns that while there is much vigorous activity within and between denominations, there have been few signs of political inclusion: 'A recognition of a religiously pluralistic Wales is one thing and a tolerance of ethnic diversity is perhaps another, but only an unqualified acceptance of the right of minority faith groups to participate within civil society can truly be termed religious tolerance' (p.136).

This statement is an indicator of what follows in the next four chapters as 'myths of tolerance' are tested in various ways. The years of official and institutional exclusion, neglect and ignorance are discussed, demonstrated by the fact that systematic collection of ethnic data and the commissioning of relevant research studies are only just starting (Williams). The everyday racism that is reported and resisted by minority ethnic people in rural Wales is contrasted with the unreal imaginings of the majority (Robinson). The challenge posed to Welsh politicians and civic leaders by the in-migration of asylum seekers, dispersed to Wales as a 'cluster region' by the Home Office, is discussed (Robinson). The impact of the failure of the Welsh Assembly to achieve a single black or minority ethnic Member is assessed in the context of the new legal duty to deliver race equality outcomes and achieve more diverse participation (Chaney and Williams). Do these debates seem familiar to readers in Scotland?

Pulling together the insights of historical case studies with contemporary data, the editors demonstrate that the facts of successive waves of in-migration into Wales, and of populist reaction, have been submerged beneath

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absorption in other issues – the nationalist campaign, the language issue, regional inequalities. This book reveals that the geography and demography of Wales have been such that there have been relatively few instances of inter-ethnic conflict, but when they have occurred, ‘they have been among the most vicious within Britain’ (Evans, p.30). It also confirms that the 1999 devolution may have created a new political class in the Assembly and other new institutions, but this class is not inclusive of in-migrants and the minority ethnic population, indeed it may even have retarded progress in ‘race’ relations. Nonetheless, Williams states: ‘There are opportunities to challenge the myth of Welshness and to identify and disengage those symbols and meanings of national pride from narrow ethnic absolutism to points of relevance for a wider and engaged civil society. And there are opportunities to bolster an infrastructure that gives people from black and minority ethnic communities a visible, legitimate and influential public presence’ (pp.232-3).

Much of the debate in this book should resonate in Scotland where years of political and civic neglect of the needs and aspirations of in-migrants, and of black and minority ethnic in-migrants in particular, are being uncovered as the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Executive and other public authorities feel the pressure of meeting their new statutory obligations (under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 as well as the Scotland Act). Scottish devolution has failed as abysmally as its Welsh counterpart in achieving inclusion and participation by its black and minority ethnic population but, as in Wales, the curtain of nationalist struggle cannot be drawn across the stage in the same way as before.

In Northern Ireland, Ireland, Wales and Scotland, ethnic conflict has been of forms different from those found in metropolitan England. The myths of the four countries have been dominated by their unreconstructed relationship with England, obscured by the intellectual hegemony of researchers and analysts who believed that there was no problem in generalising on the basis of research carried out in English cities. Robert Miles is one of the few who has repeatedly made the point that Scottish politics have not been ‘racialised’ in the same way as in England and that, therefore, there is worthwhile research to be done in Scotland, precisely because it could be revealing of factors that are obscured when ethnic conflict occurs in areas of dense settlement and organised right-wing campaigning. It is no accident that, until recently, Miles led this critique from a base in the University of Glasgow,

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where he was able to observe and study everyday nationalist and sectarian tensions that were as evident as racism.

Devolution is unleashing a momentum that must be charted not because it can solve the problems of the past, but because it is shifting the balance between covert and overt, between mythology and reality, between rhetoric and substance. In Scotland, the depth of the challenge to time-honoured ways of thinking, to taken-for-granted assumptions is being deeply felt – perhaps even more deeply than among our Celtic neighbours? Carol Craig has documented the Crisis of Confidence that she has found in Scottish culture, identifying the need of many Scots to change their mythology – to do away with the inhibitions that disable them, make them fearful of engaging with a wider, more inclusive world. The essays from our Celtic neighbours should make us engage in more radical thinking, reflecting on the parallels in our historic and present experience, and seeking in every way to draw on the experience of the new Scots – the long-established settlers, the in-migrants and, of course, the asylum-seekers and refugees who have been dispersed into Glasgow.

We need new insights if we are to achieve a real, meaningful understanding of the impact of an in-migration that is unique in Scottish history, not in terms of scale (there have been bigger migrations in the past) but because it is a ‘forced’ migration, initiated by the Home Office at the very time when devolution was underway. We have even more urgent need of new insights if we are to ensure that racialisation of politics and populist action is prevented from gaining the kind of grasp in Scotland that is now accelerating in both metropolitan and rural England.

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