

Irishness will out

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The State Visit by President Michael Higgins provides a timely opportunity to celebrate the role of the Irish in Britain, and perhaps to help debunk a few lingering myths.

In one small, but significant way, this happened in March, when Queen Elizabeth hosted a special reception at Buckingham Palace recognising the contribution made to life in Britain by the Irish. More than 300 people from the worlds of business, politics, the arts, showbiz, sport and charity attended the event, underscoring the long tradition of the Irish presence in British life.

Indeed, the Irish are the longest-established and largest minority community in Britain. Four out of every five children born in Ireland between 1931 and 1941 emigrated here in the 1950s; the majority crossing the Irish Sea to Britain. In Britain today there are at least 1.7 million people born to Irish parents, and as many as six million people of Irish descent. The Irish have become an integral part of British life and culture, so much so that we claim many of them as “our own”, particularly when they achieve fame in the arts, entertainment or sport: Sir Terry Wogan and Sir Bob Geldof are but two notable examples.

That said, the first Irish people to come to Britain did so largely out of economic necessity in the 19th and 20th centuries, working in low-paid jobs and often suffering discrimination. However, although it has not always been portrayed as such, for the majority of Irish in Britain the migrant experience has been a positive one. After the natural stresses of leaving home for another country, most found work and settled, made friends and met partners, married and raised families, whilst keeping in touch with home. Some eventually returned to live in Ireland, but the majority chose to stay in their adopted homeland. Sadly, as a 2007 report, *The Forgotten Irish*, by NGO The Ireland Fund, many are still here, often living in isolation, poverty and deprivation – without the support of friends or family.

Changing perceptions

Times change, and there is now a need to rethink our perceptions of the Irish in Britain, both those born here, and particularly about those who continue to travel to Britain to pursue their careers, many of whom

are highly qualified and work at the highest levels of public life: there are 50,000 Irish-born directors of British companies (more than any other non-British nationality). The Irish top the list for the number of companies formed by migrant entrepreneurs in the UK, with more than 56,000 companies formed and registered by Irish citizens.

In short, the Irish who come to Britain today have left behind the baggage of inequality that their grandparents and forebears brought with them. In large part this is due to the success of the Irish economy over the last two decades, a success that needs to be seen in the context of the European Union, which has enabled Ireland to flourish economically as she does today, despite the impact of the global financial crisis.

The roster of names regularly included among lists of notable British people with Irish roots – from Charlotte Brontë to David Bowie, taking in Tony Blair, Lord Wellington, Alfred Hitchcock and Barbara Windsor – evidences the extent to which the two nations’ identities have become entwined through the centuries.

Furthermore, polls show that young people in the UK are keener than ever to claim Irish ancestry. A survey carried out by Guinness in 2001, when the Great Britain census included an Irish tick box, showed that more than 40 per cent of under-35s said that they had Irish forebears.

Looking back, it’s probably fair to say that few people back in the 1950s would have predicted that within a generation a significant proportion of young British people would consider the fact that they have distant relatives in the old country – despite never having been there – grounds for being considered ethnically Irish in the Census.

One explanation for this desire to embrace our Irish roots (yes, this author’s great grandmother was Liverpool Irish) that seems to make sense is that many young people in England, and particularly in London, now feel that they have no specific culture of their own, and envy the strong sense of identity of which the Irish seem possessed. There is a pleasant paradox in all this: despite the best efforts of many people from Ireland over the decades to assimilate and integrate into British society, there seems to be something about the Irish that can’t be kept down: in short, Irishness will out. **F**