

How the Vietnamese Thrived in Eighties Ireland

Author(s): Mark Maguire and Shirley Kelly

Source: *Books Ireland*, Nov., 2004, No. 271 (Nov., 2004), pp. 253-254

Published by: Wordwell Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20624069>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wordwell Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Books Ireland*

JSTOR

How the Vietnamese thrived in eighties Ireland

IF YOU THOUGHT racism in Ireland was a recent phenomenon, one of the uglier off-shoots of economic prosperity, then think again. According to social theorist Mark Maguire, author of *Differently Irish: a cultural history exploring 25 years of Vietnamese-Irish identity* (Woodfield Press), the *céad míle fáilte* for which we're famous has always been at best conditional. In the aftermath of world war 2, Ireland's response to the Jewish refugee crisis was paltry. In the 1950s, several hundred Hungarian refugees were quarantined in a military barracks in county Clare and were so unhappy with their new surroundings that they went on hunger strike and demanded to be sent to Canada or America. A smaller group of Chilean refugees was temporarily resettled here in the seventies and hung around just long enough to warn the Vietnamese boat people against coming here at all.

For the Vietnamese, however, choice was a luxury that was lost, with most of their belongings and some of their loved ones, on the open waters of the South China Sea. Their plight featured in news reports and television broadcasts throughout the late seventies. An article in the *Irish Times* in July 1979 described how one boat-full of refugees arriving in Malaysia was twice towed back out to sea, where it was attacked four times by Thai pirates. The Irish government had refused previous requests to resettle Vietnamese families on economic grounds; unemployment was high and the country was buckling under the weight of a billion-pound trade deficit. But under pressure from a confederation of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and the Catholic Church, the government finally agreed to accept one hundred refugees. Later, at an international conference in Geneva, where Ireland's presidency of the EEC ensured that its response was widely noted, this figure was increased to two hundred.

As the most established group of immigrants in Ireland, Maguire felt the Vietnamese community offered the best model through which to explore immigration issues here.

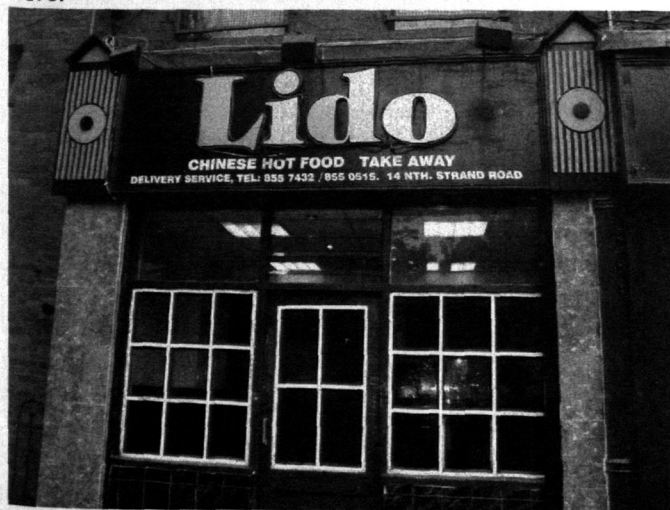


Mark Maguire and friends: "We can't just disconnect when it suits"

"The Vietnamese-Irish stand out as one of the only refugee populations to remain in Ireland," he says. "Rather than reacting to more recent migrations, I wanted to explore a slice of cultural history, amongst a mature and established community that generally does not draw attention to itself. The first-generation immigrants are particularly quiet and private; I think the only reason they agreed to talk to me was because they liked the idea of leaving a record of their experience for future generations."

The first group of 58 refugees to arrive in August 1979 were housed in two units of the James Connolly Memorial Hospital in Blanchardstown near Dublin. When a second group arrived in October, the Christian Brothers at St Mary's in Swords provided a reception centre. Here, refugees were provided with English-language tuition, but by special education teachers, primarily trained in the education of the deaf, which both the Vietnamese and their teachers found unsatisfactory. After the refugees were dispersed to different settlements around the country, in line with internationally accepted migration policy aimed at preventing ghettoisation, language tuition became even more erratic. Vietnamese children of school-going age, with very little English, were often left to sit in silence, or placed in classes well below their age level.

Voluntary support groups were established locally to facilitate integration, but the quality of accommodation provided varied widely, from private houses to mobile homes, and by 1982 there were clear signs that the resettlement programme wasn't working. The ad hoc government committee charged with managing resettlement had begun to wind down, leaving local voluntary groups high and dry. And refugees dispersed from



Donegal to Tralee had begun a second migration, back to Dublin, where there were more employment opportunities and a greater concentration of other Vietnamese families. Also, in the face of ever-increasing unemployment, the Vietnamese were creating their own economic niche in the fast food industry, and coming face to face with violent racism. Local gangsters in poor Dublin housing estates were demanding £100 per night or burning takeaway vans and beating up the occupants.

It is a testament to the Vietnamese community's tenacity and spirit that, despite the government's sink or swim policy, they not only survived but thrived in their new environment. Most of the people Maguire spoke to had worked hard to raise and educate their families and had high hopes for the next generation.

"Almost without exception, they have an outstanding work ethos and place a great premium on the education of their children," he says. "For the first generation of Vietnamese refugees, their great hope is that, through hard work, the next generation will get good jobs and prosper. But there's a great lack of self-promotion and a reluctance to network beyond their own community, which could hold them back in the long term."

Maguire offers no magic solutions to the immigration issues currently facing Irish society but believes that a closer examination of immigration history and cultural difference should inform future policy.

"There are lessons here for the Irish government," he says. "It must recognise its public education role as a matter of urgency; there's a lot of confusion about refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and a sense that all of this is very new to us, when in fact it is not. And we need to take a long, hard look at ourselves as a society. We tend to think of ourselves as an island, but we are intimately connected with the wider world, and not just through the diaspora. That connection carries with it certain responsibilities and we can't just disconnect when it suits. You could argue that we were entitled to refuse refugees back in the seventies when our economy was in the doldrums, and many people did. But our international responsibilities don't change with economic circumstances." □

**CONGRATULATIONS! TO KEN BRUEN,
WINNER IN THE BEST NOVEL CATEGORY
OF THE 2004 SHAMUS AWARDS,**

presented by the Private Eye Writers of America, for *The Guards*,
the first novel in his breakthrough Jack Taylor series.



"Collectively, the Jack Taylor novels are Bruen's masterwork." *This Week*

"There are a hundred writers who can entice us with their plots for every one with an original voice, and Bruen is an original, grimly hilarious and gloriously Irish." *Washington Post*

0 86322 323 0 **The Guards** (2001)
0 86322 294 3 **The Killing of the Tinkers** (2002)
0 86322 302 8 **The Magdalen Martyrs** (2003)
0 86322 319 2 **The Dramatist** (2004)

BRANDON

IRISH BOOKS FOR WORLD MARKETS

Études Irlandaises

A JOURNAL OF
IRISH STUDIES

Published twice-yearly, papers in French
or English with bilingual abstracts

Yearly subscription

Personal : €30,50 inc p&p

Institutional : €42,70 inc p&p

Single issue : €19,82 inc p&p

Contact us by email at: etudiri@univ-lille3.fr

web: www.etudes-irlandaises.septentrion.com

or write to us at the following address:
Presses Universitaires du Septentrion
Rue du Barreau - B.P. 199
59654 Villeneuve d'Ascq CEDEX, France

ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY

Special edition

Columcille the scribe

Columcille the scribe is a version by Seamus Heaney of an early Irish poem beginning "Sgith mo crob on scribinn" which has been translated by the poet and written in a script derived from the *Cathach* on vellum by Tim O'Neill, renowned calligrapher. The vellum is mounted in a linen-bound portfolio.

There are only 125 numbered copies of this specially commissioned work, which will be signed by the poet and scribe and will be available at the price of €650.

Available November

ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY
19 Dawson Street
Dublin 2
Tel + 353 1 676 2570
www.ria.ie