



It is perhaps correct to suggest that, in general, Australia as a topic has not attracted attention on any great scale in this part of the world.

To most people (other than followers of Gaelic football in recent years) mention of Australia conjures up images of the convict ships, Botany Bay, political prisoners, United Irishmen, Young Irelanders and Fenians, and the poems of John O'Brien's *Boree Log* and the influence of the Catholic Church in that country, especially of the renowned Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr. Daniel Mannix, and others.

However the commemoration this year of the bicentennial brings that country more into focus. Items as diverse as the visit of Prime Minister Bob Hawke to Ireland in October, 1987, and the according to him of the rare privilege of addressing the Dáil, together with the T.V. programme by well-known presenter, Mike Murphy, must surely bring Australia and its people closer to us and promote a greater interest in the happenings and history of that country, particularly over the last two hundred years – since the first fleet of convict ships reached Sydney Harbour in January, 1788.

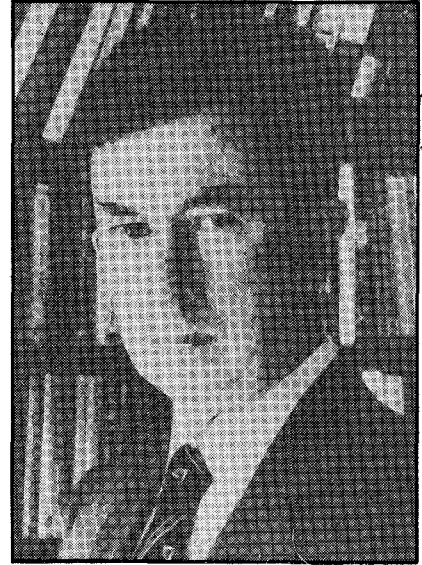
While emigration from Ireland to Australia could not compare with that to other countries such as the United

# The Irish in Australia

by Patrick O'Farrell

Review Article  
by R.B. Haslam

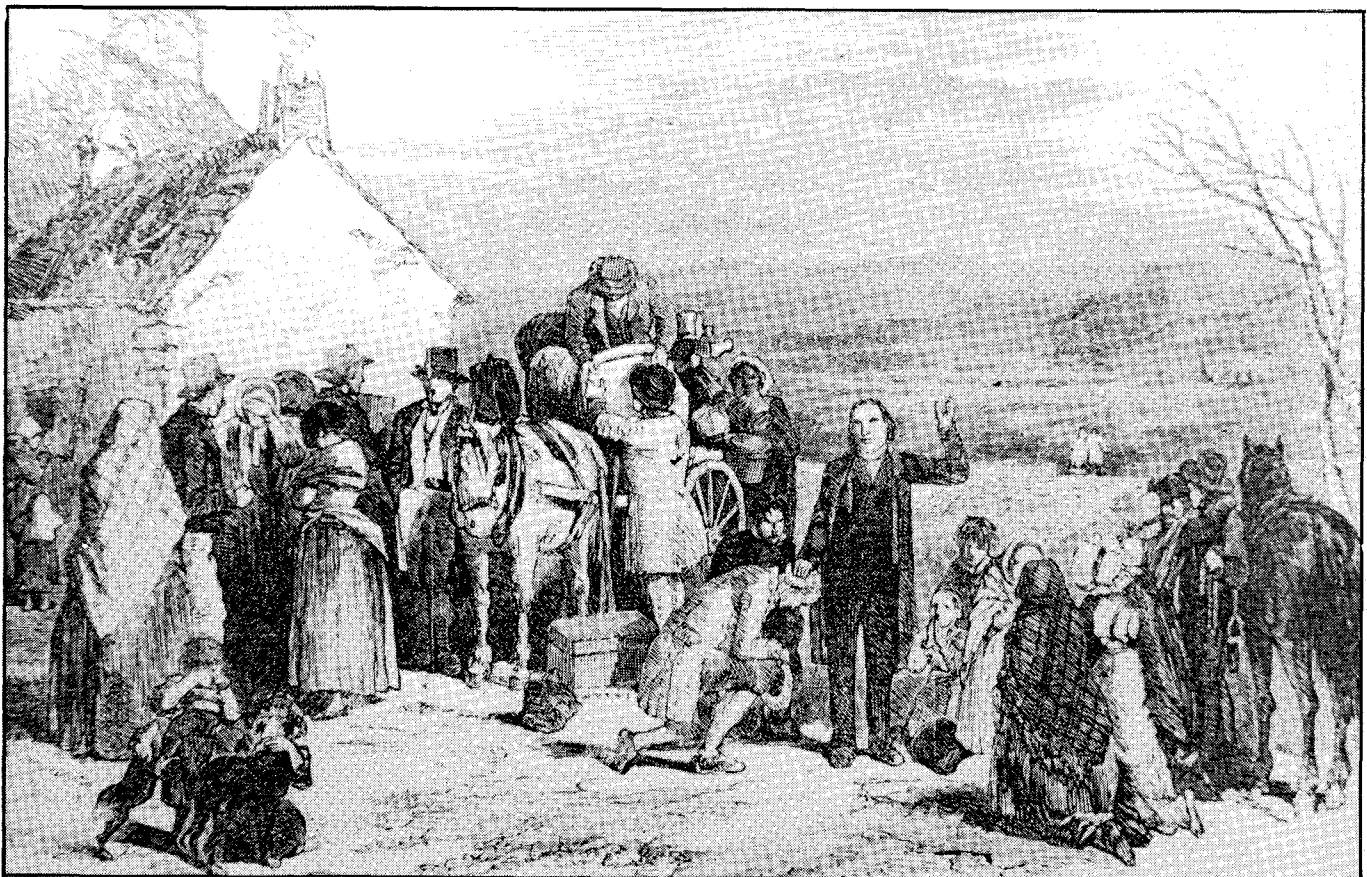
States or Britain during the last century, nevertheless, considerable numbers (perhaps as many as 1/2 million) did find their way to that distant land. As Irish people everywhere are wont to do, they did play no mean part in the political, social, economic and religious life of that country. Particular aspects, specific topics, and indeed individuals, have been dealt with but for an overall examination and study of an intriguing story spanning two hundred years, it would be difficult to surpass the recent publication *The Irish in Australia* by Patrick O'Farrell, Professor of History at the University of New South Wales, especially in the matter of detail. The book is a result of twenty years' research, not only in Australia itself, but also in places as far distant as Ireland and America. In many ways this is an enormous book – over 300 larger than usual pages, including some interesting photographs, extensive bibliography and detailed index – but enormous also for the massive amount of information on behaviour, attitudes



Patrick O'Farrell, the author of 'The Irish in Australia'.

and the contribution of the Irish to 'an evolving Australian civilisation'.

The book contains seven chapters, one introductory, with each titled to describe the evolving role and attitude of the immigrant as time passed;



A priest blesses emigrants as they prepare to leave home, 1851. (Illustrated London News, 10th May, 1851).



The harbour at Cork: mid-nineteenth century engraving.

chapters two and three deal with the prisoners and immigrants; four sees the Irish as 'Settlers and Unsettlers'; five deals with Irish nationalism; six focuses on rebels, and also examines attitudes to happenings in the Ireland of the early 20th century and independence era, and the last chapter – 'Australians' – recognises the absorption of those of Irish descent into Australian society and a consequent distancing from the old homeland. The author comments that 'By 1921 those of Irish descent in Australia had been taught the lesson that Irish politics was painful, embarrassing and damaging to them'. The Civil War in Ireland had its effects in far away Australia also, for we are told: 'As Irishman killed Irishman in Ireland, they also killed what remained of Australia Irish enthusiasm for Ireland's cause, whatever that was.'

Ample evidence is forthcoming in page after page to support what, up to now, were for many purely opinions or speculation, and, on occasion, we have some myths exploded. In particular, when examining the 'Prisoners' (chapter 2), it is pointed out – perhaps to the surprise of some – that while 'Irish Australian historical tradition had depicted these Irish convicts as honourable victims of gross injustice, social oppression and national persecution, or as heroic rebels', the facts seem otherwise. In fact, political rebels, in the strictly national sense, among

the Irish convicts seemed relatively few – about 1.5 per cent – in the entire history of transportation, most of whom arrived before 1806. The majority were apparently 'ordinary criminals, mostly thieves', but we can be consoled, as the author tells us that 'generally the Irish were a better type of convict, less criminally inclined, more likely to completely reform, less inclined to turn to crime in Australia. They were taller, healthier, their stealing more likely to be of farm animals, their criminal impulses those of the destitute and desperate'. These people, we gladly note, quickly reformed and were 'remarkably well integrated into the middling orders of colonial society'. But what of the remaining majority of 'non-convict immigrants'? O'Farrell is of opinion that 'the best left – not the worst', quoting reports from Ireland that it was comfortable farmers, those 'with ample means' who were the emigrants.

It now emerges that emigration from Ireland to Australia differed substantially from that to America, the country which got not only the most of the Irish but the worst 'or at least the worst affected' – described colourfully as 'the massive outpourings of the famine, desperate, embittered, defeated, penniless and powerless'. Australia's Irish population was mainly post-famine – 'better educated, less traumatised'.

The longest chapter, entitled

'Settlers and Unsettlers', extends over eighty pages. It covers most interestingly the varying fortunes of the Irish in what was gradually becoming their adopted land. We read of conspicuous success, well documented, of people such as John Grant from Tipperary (from where he was transported in 1811 for attempted murder), who at his death owned 10,000 acres 'with thousands more under lease' or Ned Ryan 'King of Galong Castle', whose squatting acres were appropriate to an Irish kingdom, and his son, John Nagle Ryan, who lived 'on a scale of barbaric grandeur', and many others such as Thomas Dalton, who became a merchant in Sydney and died in 1900 leaving £1/3 million.

Failures there were of course also, and tragedies, such as one Thomas Finn whose bankruptcy in 1872 drove him to insanity. The Irish were not avaricious and status and repute mattered more than wealth. They suffered their own share, as O'Farrell succinctly states: 'In all the casualty areas of Australian society, the Irish were prominent to the extent of at least double their proportion of the total population'. A measurement of success-failure is expressed in the statistic that Irish Catholics, at 20% to 25% of the population, consisted only 5% to 10% of the wealthy. The 'national weakness' of the Irish – addiction to alcoholic drink – is treated (pardon the pun), as is

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the ensuing temperance campaign, leading to the conclusion', 'That for all the qualifications and explanations, many Irish drank too much for their own and their families' good'. Irishmen achieved distinction in the other domain for which we are noted – at home and abroad – politics – some reaching the highest offices as members of parliament, including premier-ship, such as Sir Charles Gavan Duffy in Victoria and Sir Patrick Jennings from Newry, Co. Down, in New South Wales in 1886.

Chapter 5 ('Nationalists') and 6 ('Rebels'), which together are about equal in size to the previous chapter on 'Settlers and Unsettlers', cover much the same topic, though different aspects are treated. This may be crudely described as 'The Irish Thing' – events in what was the homeland and its struggles for freedom. Despite receiving, supporting and sheltering Irish nationalists, such as Fenians or Young Irishmen, we are assured by the author that 'Irish nationalism as such was never strong in Australia – Ireland as a symbol was'. This is attributed to the fact that many Irish clergy brought to Australia their suspicion of Irish nationalism movements, and as time went on and the process of integration developed, the Australian Irish were, 'unwilling to go beyond that point where active sympathy with Irish causes would involve them in direct and deliberate conflict with other Australians'. Irish nationalistic fervour was also dampened 'by those who identified proudly with the power and prestige of the Empire, which they saw as in the main won by Irish blood and Irish valour' – a theme in general reiterated by Cardinal Moran, Archbishop of Sydney, when accepting the Freedom of Dublin City in 1888.

Nevertheless, the cause of the new republican Ireland was not totally neglected and the fortunes of 'that largest and most significant' organisation, the Irish National Association of New South Wales, are treated and described in some detail, especially its founder, Albert Thomas Dryer, who although he had never been to Ireland, dedicated his lifetime to Irish affairs from 1914, when he had read Alice Stopford Green's book *Irish Nationally*, until his death in 1963. Archbishop Mannix's leadership and views also receive much coverage and we are reminded that the Archbishop proclaimed "that to cultivate an Irish atmosphere was to cultivate true religion".

As one goes through this book, one cannot but stand in awe and admiration at the extent and depth of research which the author has embarked upon; in particular, his knowledge and interpretation of Irish history is most impressive. The lives and times of our ancestors in this far away place – this

large continent – have been examined and studied from many angles, neatly classified in different roles as the chapter headings indicate, evolving over time from prisoners to Australians. However attractive or convenient this classification may be, it has, necessarily perhaps, but regrettably resulted in 'that most potent Irish influence within Australia – the Irish clergy of the Catholic Church' – not having a separate chapter of its own. This is of course acknowledged by the author when he mentions his anxiety to avoid overlap in view of his extensive writings on Australian Catholicism. Nevertheless, one would expect that a book on the Irish in Australia would have an analytical chapter on an influence which more than any other bound the immigrants together, and one which arises in every chapter, as is acknowledged time and again throughout the work. It is also epitomized in Sir Maurice Blackburn's statement that 'a man here

occasion by a turgid style, involving rather long, complicated sentences and seemingly endless adjectives – almost pretentious at times, e.g. 'Many of the first Irish emancipist generation were of this kind, semi-literate, with no understanding of principle, contradictory, factional, selfish, unpredictable...'; or 'The ideal Irish family, rural, humble, large, pious, reasonably prosperous, happily stable...' Not to mention, surely, the *pièce de résistance*, for when referring to literary efforts whose setting was old Irish Catholic Australia, such as the celebrated million dollar best-seller, *The Thorn Birds*, we get this thunderous comment: '...exaggerated to novelistic absurdity and fittingly mythologised into a saga of heat, dust, drought, bushfires and kangaroos, populated by stereotypes of clerics and brogues, passions and plotting' – one gets the feeling that the author derives a curious pleasure tying up his readers in such resounding prose!



**BUSH LIFE: INSIDE A TAVERN:** 'The Queensland bush tavern is a terribly fascinating spot to the shepherds or stockmen who have led a solitary life for many months, drinking nothing stronger than tea'.

is a worker first, and a Catholic second, Irish third' which is again an acknowledgement that the Irish fell in line with the only leadership that existed – that of the Catholic Church.

From the mass of details which is presented in this book, some contradictory conclusions appear occasionally. For example, at one stage, we are led to believe that Fr. P.J. Hartigan's ('John O'Brien') *Little Irish Mother* was obviously exceptional, while some pages further on, it is stated that 'Irish settlement in Australia has a rural image encapsulated in *Around The Boree Log* of independent and reasonably prosperous farming – the image is justified'. Again, it is stated at one stage that 'few Irish women remained celibate in Australia if they had the opportunity to marry' but later that 'many Irish and Irish Australian women never married, especially those better off'.

The undoubted pleasure one gets from this book can be diminished on

The classification under chapter headings of immigrants, while roughly corresponding with chronological sequence, does at times interrupt the free flow of historical narrative. Nevertheless, on broad canvas, the spirit and atmosphere of life in Australia by the Irish is captured and portrayed in admirable fashion.

This major and outstanding contribution to the study of *The Irish in Australia* will most certainly have a wide appeal for all interested in this fascinating story, from whatever angle. The author admits he had 'an impossible subject, too vast, too various, too complex and certainly too elusive'. The degree to which he copes with, and conquers, such obstacles and constraints is remarkable.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is to be commended for assisting in the publication of this work.

(This review is reprinted from the *Limerick Leader*, 19th March, 1988)