

The Irish in Australia, by Patrick O'Farrell: University of NSW. A Review by
Gerard Windsor.

Just occasionally some plan or rumored book becomes a personal dream, a promised visitation from on high.

And beyond any other this has been my feeling about Patrick O'Farrell's long-gestated *The Irish in Australia*. It has been the kind of Argo that one prays for through the shoals of an author's illness and academic commitments. And it has arrived. Cead mille failte.

Not that the vessel is any vision splendid. It is a heavy graceless production – but this allows the first of the felicitous subtleties the book abounds in.

The cover is shimmering green and the dust wrapper has assembled all the vintage Irish clichés: background white (easily dirties up a bit). Celtic script, gold paving, two little Irish mothers and small children, and the sort of curlicue fretwork that has been the bane of Irish art and design since the Book of Kells was such a hit. But this ragbag of everything predictable and unimaginative serves only to remind the reader: here you are entering upon a topic that is a minefield of myth and wishful thinking.

O'Farrell's book is an argument for the thesis that “the Irish have been the dynamic factor in Australian history, that is, the galvanizing force at the centre of the evolution of our national character”. In particular, he argues Irish refusal to accept a monolithic British system was the decisive factor that made Australian society essentially open, pluralistic and multicultural (though to O'Farrell's spectacular credit he manages to avoid that word).

The book's progress is magisterial, dealing always with two inseparable issues: the migrants becoming Australians and the migrants remaining Irish. As the thesis evolved it also answers a host of those other questions that anyone must think a book of this title should address.

Were the Irish convicts mostly political prisoners? How Irish were Castle Hill and Eureka? When did the immigrants come? Did we get the Famine victims? Did Australia do better or worse than America in the Irish it got? Were there ever concentrations of Irish settlement?

The second thesis emerges along the way, Irish Australian interest in Ireland itself was of a very particular kind. In November 1916 an Irish-born Queensland Cabinet minister, John Fihelly, asked the question: “Why stick to a wet little island” on the other side of the world?

This was by way of an unfortunate faux pas for Fihelly was talking about not Ireland, but England. But in fact that was what the Irish in Australia had done to their even smaller wet little island. O’Farrell’s profound explanation of whatever Australian interest there was in Irish affairs is that “Ireland had become a convenient allegory, the medium through which local points were made, the public language of inner feeling, a way of working home things out”.

And Ireland was at a remove in another way. It had been made a synonym for holiness and purity and spiritual refinement. And when the veil was lifted the disillusionment was terrible. O’Farrell’s pin-pointing of this deserves quotations. (He must be one of our finest, if unacknowledged, stylists: sheer intelligence and analytical rigor and sense of evidence can open out into passages of uncontrived emotional force).

So much of Irish Australia “had been erected on clerical dreams, on the good things remembered, invented, wished, and – dare it be said? – demanded of psychological necessity to justify their own lives ... the Irish clergy of Australia had long been fabricating fairytales, a fantasy culture which took little account of the real Ireland.

“Nor were the clergy alone in this conspiracy of romance: involvement in Ireland’s cause had been for many the pursuit of ideals, a search for lost youth, a quest for their dream worlds ... but even the most determined dreaming was not proof against the repeated brutal assaults of Irish facts in the decade that followed 1916: Ireland had not merely fallen short of romantic expectations, it had pioneered new directions in terror, Irish Australia would have nothing to do with this: it would not exchange dreams for nightmares.”

Such grand resonant judgments are never instances of mere rhetoric that blunts insight. Try O’Farrell on the Ryan graveyard at Galong or on the Irish slowness to accumulate land or property: “It was not so much that the Irish heeded by grinding

necessity, the biblical rhetoric – What doth it profit a man ...? But that their historical experience and cultural structures gave them souls with a sense of self divorced from possessions. History had made them pilgrims and the pilgrims traveled light.”

A major element in O’Farrell’s achievement in fact has been to retain the Irish note of high sentiment and yet to harness it to relentless intelligence. His last paragraph is a meditation on the Irish monument in Waverley Cemetery, carved with the names of Irish heroes to whom Australia meant nothing but who journey here in the minds and hearts of their compatriots.

O’Farrell quotes Irishry’s most famous piece of rhetoric, Robert Emmet’s speech from the dock: “When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth the, and not till then, let my epitaph be written.” The Waverly monument, O’Farrell observes, “Is innocent of the name of Robert Emmet.”

Lest that be too political a message let me list five other delights of the book: the judgment that the stance of Irish Australian literature has always been sentimental journeys: the explanation shy Tommy Moore’s melodies were so suitable for the Australian Irish: five photos of Daniel Mannix: one photo of “John O’Brien” as a child with six of his siblings: and a genuine Irish miracle – Queen Victoria in 1902 granting St Patrick’s Day as a public holiday, presumably because St Pat was able to be at her elbow to give her a nudge. May he give an equally powerful push to this finely tuned epic.