

Patrick O'Farrell, **Vanished Kingdoms, Irish in Australia and New Zealand, A Personal Excursion**. New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1990. A Review by Michael L'Estrange in *Eureka Street*.

Patrick O'Farrell has long stood pre-eminent among Australian historians for the breadth of his historical vision and the elegance with which he has expressed it. For almost a quarter of a century, he has blazed a trail through the history of Irish Australia. He has set standards, developed themes and established linkages in the story of our past that will challenge generations of scholars and students to come.

But Professor O'Farrell's appeal is not to academic specialists alone, or even principally. His writing gives pleasure to all who value intellectual thoroughness, reasoned originality and literary power.

His latest book, *Vanished Kingdoms*, should further enhance O'Farrell's standing. It is multi-layered: a scholarly and a popular history, professional as well as intensely personal, anecdotal as well as thematic. It also launches a frontal attack on many cherished assumptions of the Australian history profession and of diehard Irish Australians.

Vanished Kingdoms is a highly personalised account of family loyalties and experiences, and at the same time a history of grand themes about the immigrant experience, in particular the colonial assimilation of the Irish in Australia and New Zealand.

It is infused with an abiding affection for Irish culture and Irish ways. But it is also a history tinged with bitterness about lost opportunities and disdain for the 'holy jingoism' of the Irish clerical empire in Australia. It appears driven by sometimes competing, and sometimes complementary sentiments – ambitious, yet also quite specific, admiring, yet also angry.

In *Vanished Kingdoms* O'Farrell attempts to put the Irish-English interface in Australia into a new historical framework, and in so doing, he is uninhibited in his chiding of the Australian history profession for its subservience to majority values. Australian historians, he observes unapologetically, 'took – still take – an English view of appearances, accept English priorities, reflect Protestant value-judgements.' His conclusion is inexorable: the Irish Catholic sub-culture has no real existence for such historians who write 'from and about the walled garden of the Establishment'.

Vanished Kingdoms revisits some long-established O'Farrell themes. There is the insistence on the centrality of the Irish-English interaction to the course of Australia's history. There is the demolition of the myth that the Australian Irish were an 'irrelevant underclass of pathetic peasants and stereotyped rebels'. There are the broadsides against 'Irish clerical imperialism'. There are the unambiguous correctives to the effect that membership of the Catholic Church and the labour movement are only partial aspects of the full Australian Irish identity. But *Vanished Kingdoms* is not just a synthesis of old arguments. The book breaks new ground and in doing so invites close scrutiny and criticism.

O'Farrell explores in a greater depth than he has done previously the notion of a 'hidden Ireland' in Old Australia distinguished by its 'old, hierarchical, autocratic Gaelic society'. He argues that for many in Ireland, penal Australia offered more opportunities than it did punishment, promising them the idealised form of disciplined, ordered, secure

and productive society that Ireland used to be. Australia offered the Irish, the chance to once more 'aristocrats of an anarchic kind'.

O'Farrell uses family history in a way that will set new standards for historians. The experiences of his parents in emigrating to New Zealand early this century, their interaction and that of their family with a new society in a new world, and the family's move to Australia form the foundation for a venture into the grander themes of Irish colonial integration and assimilation.

Vanished Kingdoms also has a more powerful and less complicated nationalist sentiment than much of O'Farrell's previous writing. It is highly critical of the Irish clergy in Australia who 'simply did not know how to think of themselves in relation to Australia and Australians', and who failed to 'attend to any culture other than their own'. He laments the 'failure to locate the Catholic faith in a real Australian cultural setting'. He dismisses the notion of an Australian Catholicism modelled on Ireland as 'a contrivance, a bit of play-acting' and argues that, when its props fell bare 'what was revealed was the irrelevance to Australasia of the Roman-Irish religion.'

These are grand themes which clearly challenge many of the orthodoxies of the Australian history establishment, and the comfortable myths that have sustained many Irish Catholics, and their descendants, in Australia. My guess is that O'Farrell has sparked a controversy with this book which is likely to have a life of its own for years to come.

For all their power, however, the grand themes of *Vanished Kingdoms* and the moving depiction of family life that it contains often lack a sense of integration. The linkage between the O'Farrell family experiences in Greymouth, and elsewhere, and the extrapolated themes of Irish colonial assimilation is not always obvious, indeed sometimes seems a little strained. History of the kind that *Vanished Kingdoms* epitomises will always be, to an extent, unsatisfying to its readers because of its inescapable subjectivity. Sympathetic though I am to O'Farrell's arguments, it seems that, at a minimum, the linkage between the family history and the grander themes ought to be more explicit. At times, *Vanished Kingdoms* seems like two separate books. On the one hand, there is a family and social history, lovingly presented and superbly crafted. On the other, there is a political and religious critique that, for the history profession at least, constitutes a revolutionary challenge to many of its orthodoxies. But it is open to question whether the former does sufficiently illuminate the other, whether the themes of the politico-religious critique are sustained and underpinned by the social and family history.

There is no doubt that O'Farrell has dared to say what others have only courage to think about the direction of Australian history writing over recent decades. There is also no doubt that he has opened up new areas for historical research and argument. But, with *Vanished Kingdoms*, he has put an opening argument, not the last word.

Vanished Kingdoms is as much a literary work as it is an historical one. But its style is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because it is moving and evocative. O'Farrell has a rare gift for the memorable phrase. One telling example is his description of the Australian Irish identity in the 1930s and 1940s as 'caught between colonial mindlessness and Irish irrelevance'. His portraits of characters such as the New Zealand Marist Brother Egbert, Vincent Buckley and Daniel Mannix, his portrayal of

families such as the Tullys and the Hanrahans, his tales from personal visits to Ireland and his depiction of the Roman-Irish Catholicism of Australia are all superb examples of historical writing at its personalised best and most powerful. But the rhetoric is all capable of taking on a dangerous life of its own, of becoming heavy and repetitive, so that the point being made is obscured or laboured unnecessarily. *Vanished Kingdoms* could be considerably shorter without compromising its historical purpose or its literary power.

But such criticisms should be put in perspective. *Vanished Kingdoms* says much that was crying out to be said. If there is criticism of what it did not do, or how it did what it has done, then such criticism should be seen rather as the desire to take a stimulating argument further than as denigration of the start that has been made towards a complex and difficult change of historical approach.

Of one thing there can be doubt: *Vanished Kingdoms* will become a benchmark in Australian historiography, and enhance the standing of an historian who is greater than many who are more famous.

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