



Patrick O'Farrell: soldiering on, with an infinite amount of campaigning to do

begins: "On the road to Mandalay, where your shock absorbers self-destruct" and goes on, "I had long regarded Mandalay as a place where the citizens lived in palaces of sandalwood and put up uncut rubies as collateral for the purchase of their elephants. But the streets smelt of sundried fish and were full of blaring transistors and kamikaze cyclists, many of them monks."

But it is clear that what we all suspected about the Irrawaddy is true: it is one of the great mysterious wonders of Asia and will remain so while the Burmese keep it so jealously to themselves.

The rivers Zambesi and Zaire are at the same time rumbustious — because of the people — and formidably lonely and distanced from what we think of as civilization. Drifting along somnolently on a hot afternoon coming, into Kinshasa, Wollaston's boat met a yacht going the other way. Sitting on a platform, wearing a leopardskin hat, was President Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga of Zaire, Father of the Nation, Guide of the Revolution.

Thanks to publishing and television, we are relatively familiar with some of these rivers but surprises remain.

For instances, there are a million nightingales along the Loire; at Memphis on the Mississippi, famous Beale Street was derelict, closed to traffic and not a blues trumpet was there to be heard; on the Nile delta, a man with a switch supervised a gang of children working for the equivalent of 40 Australian cents a day.

Travel writing becomes better and better. This book sets a new high standard for it in what can be called the short burst. □

## What the early Irish wrote home about us

By GERRARD WINDSOR

*Letters From Irish Australia 1825-1929*, by Patrick O'Farrell. New South Wales University Press, Sydney, & Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, \$19.95.

PATRICK O'FARRELL wears the writer's badge of authenticity; he soldiered on, with great stylishness and humanity, against myth, cliché, and tyrannical orthodoxy. And having chosen Ireland for his province, he has an infinite amount of campaigning to do.

Popular notions about the Irish at home and abroad are legion. And more often than not they represent stereotype and nonsense to the power of infinity. O'Farrell is our main hope for liberation from silly or simple-minded romance. He is the most distinguished and prolific authority on Ireland and Irish Australia that the antipodes have produced.

His major history of the Irish in Australia is planned for 1986. He describes this present work, *Letters From Irish Australia 1825-1929*, as "an ancillary volume" to the forthcoming history. The least pretentious and yet most substantial contribution to the 1988 Bicentenary that I have yet heard of was made public at the launching of *Letters*. The Irish ambassador announced that his government would subsidise the writing and publication of Patrick O'Farrell's history. *Erin go bragh!*

This gesture has a largeness of mind to it. For these letters from Irish migrants are culled from Irish archives, and Northern Ireland, O'Farrell tells us, has made a much better fist of archival collection than has the Republic. So, this is not a collection of missives from merry little leprechauns hailing from Kerry or West Cork, breathing republicanism, papistry and wit in every line. As the author says, "Protestants, and those who came from the Ulster counties generally, are overrepresented."

That is an understatement. They must take up about 90 percent of the book. But an author must work with what is at hand. Ulster Protestants were more literate, as well as more likely to correspond with a home district that had never become denuded by the migration of whole families as happened in parts of Munster or Connaught. So, for the experience of southern Catholics, we must wait for the history.

There is no one way these letters show Irish migrants adjusting to Australia, working out an attitude and code toward those still at home or moving toward a primarily Australian identity. Diversity is all; not a few of the "migrants" return to Ireland or move on to America or, in one case, Africa. Loans, gifts and bequests from Ireland were as much part of the traffic as remittances sent home from Australia. Five sons of the Maxwell family came to Victoria in the 1880s; the line seems to have died out in Australia but some of their descendants still work the original farm at Ballygannah, County Down.

Some of these Maxwell brothers write the most thoughtful letters in the collection. Hugh gave freely of his opinions. He exhorted his sister in



Ballygannah to "be careful to keep the bowels open, eat wheaten bread and . . . fruit" and to suspend her skirts and petticoats from bands over the shoulders instead of buttoning them around the waist. But his considered opinions could be much more abstract than this. He commented in 1886: "The Australian bush impresses newcomers very much on their first run up country." He admits he prefers the scenery at home but he adds: "Of course, art has done more for that of the home counties than it has yet accomplished in Australia." A remarkably pregnant observation, particularly coming from one who elsewhere never mentions art or literature (or indeed reading of any kind). The absence of such subject matter is universal. Most of the more voluminous writers took up small selections and their fights to survive on the land were all-consuming.

Many of the writers are eloquent on the pros and cons of Australia. A convict in 1835 says it "is for salubrity of climate equal to the garden of the world, Italy, but with this exception, not subject to brain fevers, or European diseases that them countries are." Isaac Sloane, an elderly wit, writes in 1892 of Hay where "they are all but roasted . . . not a green blade of grass, a bad place for an Irishman and he wants something green to look at."

The most moving letter is from a convict, Thomas Fallon, beseeching his wife in 1835 to find her way out. "Der mary let me know in youre next letter is my fathere live or know or did my sister go to meracar or know Der mary this is fine cuntry is there is in the wourld for ateing and drinking . . . if you wore in this cuntry you cud be worth pound per week but by owne labour . . ."

But the bon vivant's paradise is castigated as the civilised man's hell by an Antrim doctor visiting his sister in the Grampians in 1849. "There is nothing almost in any of the settlers' heads but some half dozen things, to wit sheep, wool, bullocks, drays, servants, horses, and occasionally a little about tallow and boiling down and huts and such like. That is the eternal, never ceasing lingo, day and night, summer and winter . . . last year when the most intense interest was prevailing amongst, one would have said, the whole civilised world with regard to the stirring affairs of Europe and the fearful changes and catastrophes occurring so plentifully on the continent, they out in Port Phillip neither read nor cared one fig about the entire matter and never would speak almost on the subject, except to curse the French for spoiling the price of their wool, and then they smoke and drink and drink and smoke."

Max Harris, Donald Horne, et al, memorably anticipated by a century! □