

Book Review. **The Irish in Australia**, by Patrick O'Farrell, UNSW Press – Fr. Tom Boland

Of some few books we can say that their appearance changes the direction of the study of their subject. Professor O'Farrell's *The Irish in Australia* will immediately become the focus of studies of Irish settlement in Australia; but it will soon become the mark against which all comers must measure themselves in tackling the central question: what makes Australia Australia?

His contention is that the Irish were 'the dynamic factor in Australian history, that is, the galvanizing force at the centre of the evolution of our national character.'

If that sounds like the rhetoric of St Patrick's Day dinners, the froth on the green beer of once-a-year Hibernianism, there are 300 pages of solid reasons to change your mind. One of the fringe benefits of this volume may well be the demise of the phoney Irish stereotype.

The author argues that the Irish in Australia struggled to win recognition of equal acceptability and equal opportunity from the assumption of priority by the generally English Establishment and the majority – what he calls "the extremes of Englishness".

He does not contend that the Irish were the only minority seeking this recognition, but that only they were of sufficient size and cohesiveness to effect the acceptance.

He recognizes other forces of egalitarianism but sees them as opportunities for, not alternatives to, the Irish drive.

For a long time historians have spoken of the radical influence of the Irish in Australian development, while they were puzzled by why they were impelled to say such a thing about a generally conservative people. Professor O'Farrell has finally made sense of this anomaly.

If we had only the first introductory chapter, we should have a major contribution to our history. We are asked the question: *Who were the Irish?* The answer is not so obvious as we might think. There is a valuable discussion of the meaning and influence of many terms and groups: Catholic Gaelic, Anglo-Irish, Ulster Protestant, Australian Irish, Irish Australian, Anglo-Celtic.

We are alerted to the difference between the Ireland of 1790 and that of 1890 as a source of Irish settlers. There is an interesting reflection on the degrees of wealth, loyalty to the Crown and social aspirations as modifiers of simple responses to the question: *Who were the Irish?* Professor O'Farrell has opened what one hopes will be the floodgates of comment, query and even challenge. One feels a confidence that no amount of comment or challenge will shake his fundamental thesis.

However, there are six more chapters in which he discusses in detail the stages of Irish engagement with the colonial and national development. Beginning, obviously enough, with the Irish convict presence, controversies about the nature of Irish crime and the reaction of official New South Wales to the presence and the type, he moves through various stages of the critical debate of the Irish with Australian society. One might recall the stages of expanding social opportunity as the periods of growth seen by Murtagh in his *Australia the Catholic Chapter*.

Here we see fully developed the Irish attitudes at which Murtagh could only hint – in particular the question of freer access to the land. The author promises us a fuller

account of one phase that could well be pivotal for our understanding of our own generation, that is, the period 1914-1921.

Chapter 6 of this volume, headed simply *Rebels* is enough to convince us that the Easter Rebellion-Conscription era has not yet been adequately documented. One might feel happier if the period were extended to 1923 to cover the reactions within Australia to the Irish Civil War.

In chapter 7, the shortest chapter, the author deals with the period from 1921 to the present day. If one experiences any disappointment in this magnificent study it is in the brevity of the treatment of this period of the flowering of all that Professor O'Farrell has so meticulously documented. Admittedly, it opens up a vast field of research, the more complicated in that it must deal with less tangible evidence. It will reveal the shades of Irish feeling and influences, glinting and glooming like the green seas and shallows under the changing Australian sun.

Historians hesitate to approach too nearly the politics of the present. We are provided with the shape of the present cast by the varied past. The author constantly allows the Irish vision, love of words and gift for rhetoric ensouled by meaning rise from the depths of process.

He concludes, appropriately, with an irony about Robert Emmett; but in doing so he tells us that "Ireland in Australia was both fact and dream. Its dimensions of fact coincide with the boundaries of the continent, but its dreams were unbounded, spanning the world – and more than the world. No man can fix the boundaries of the nation of the mind and heart. Least of all the soul. Nor call their territories complete."

This is a meaty volume, which only the master can produce. It is not without its artistry, original and not derived. It is enlivened by a fascinating collection of photographs, realistic, moving and revealing. Professor O'Farrell is noted for his insistence that books be produced as prices people, especially students, can afford. In this he has been assisted by the Irish Government. More power to their arm and to his.

This is one of the seminal works of our history. We shall be lucky to see its like in our time.

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