

Review Article: **Letters from Irish Australia 1825-1929**, By Patrick O'Farrell, NSW University Press and Ulster Historical Foundation, 1984. Written by David Fitzpatrick, **Historical Studies**, Vol.22, No.87, October 1986.

Patrick O'Farrell is widely known in both Ireland and Australia as an interpreter, at once provocative and reflective, of the political consequences of Roman Catholicism. The church in Australia has been the subject of his most comprehensive works, but his two synoptic studies of the Anglo-Irish relationship are particularly noteworthy for their insight into Irish Catholicism and its place in politics. Thus O'Farrell is unusually well qualified to penetrate the ambiguous, often shadowy history of Irish settlement in Australia, and the work under review is intended as only the prelude to a general study of this topic. Yet *Letters from Irish Australia* is no mere stopover in its author's intellectual migration from Catholic to ethnic history. Perhaps unpredictably, its pervasive colour is orange rather than green. The book draws upon 800 letters and diaries in 69 collections, most of which are in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland and were written by Ulster Presbyterians or Protestants. Catholic representation is mainly confined to the correspondence of 16 convicts seeking to bring out their relatives as 'free settlers', preserved at the State Paper Office in Dublin. Since at least four-fifths of Australia's settlers were Catholics, O'Farrell's unavoidable dependence upon the more systematic archives of Northern Ireland introduces a marked bias, both in class and religion, to his data. In fact, as he freely admits, no collection of emigrant letters should be presented as a representative sample of emigrant perceptions of their new environment, since letters tend to be written and preserved by the more educated and less geographically mobile classes. The author makes a virtue of necessity by stressing the benefits of documenting responses other than those of the stereotyped Irish-Australian, the Catholic pauper from rural Munster. The outcome handsomely justifies his strategy of thoroughly quarrying the riches available archives, rather than skimming and selecting in the futile quest of 'typicality'. One is not only entertained by the diversity of experiences, responses and modes of expression, but also taken aback by the tendency of many emigrant products of modes of expression, but also taken aback by the tendency of many emigrant products of the 'Black North' to discover more in common with southern Irish Catholics than with Scottish, or particularly English Protestants. A few, like Charles Elliott of Armagh, found their worst suspicions confirmed on the outward voyage: 'a most infernal lot of blackguards are the dirty Irish Papists: never had such an opportunity of judging'. But other emigrants of Orange background avoided involvement in the Order in Australia, expressed support for Home Rule or for the Boers in South African war, and found Irishmen of any colour better company than British expatriates. O'Farrell's explicit 'attempt at distilling "Irishness" from emigrant correspondence is all the more persuasive because of the often anomalous background of his subjects.

Emigrant letters to relatives at home have long been recognized as indispensable if intractable sources for the history of cultural adjustment. Historians in other contexts have gutted them for content analysis, plundered them for illustration, or allowed them to speak for themselves as edited transcripts. In the case of Irish emigration to north America, all three techniques have been applied (by Schrier, in his brilliant but unstatistical epitome of 222 letters; by Miller, in his forthcoming meditation upon 5000 letters and reminiscences; and by genealogists aiming to publish rather than interpret

correspondence). No Irish equivalent exists to Erickson's splendid *Invisible Immigrants*, with its 25 family files of correspondence involving British emigrants to America and its separate biographical and analytic introductions. O'Farrell, typically, adopts none of the conventional methods. Archival limitations preclude him from emulating the systematic analysis applied by Erickson, though nearly half the text is devoted to a single family saga (that of the Maxwells of Bangor and Victoria) more extensive than any used by her. No content analysis is attempted, presumably because of the perhaps insuperable problems of weighting and comparability. Few letters are given without excisions and the linking passages, amounting to about a third of the book, are no mere editorial commentary. Yet the published extracts shape the argument rather than illustrating it: as promised, the commentary draws out 'from between the lines of this correspondence material for analysis and meditation'. Occasionally the commentary seems to labour the obvious, but usually it is illuminating and exciting. Several good books could be built on the historical lessons teased out of these letters: the pervasive sense that 'no longer was there any such place as home': the often morbid sensitivity of emigrants to the news, or still more the silence from Ireland; the ambivalence of urban settlers towards the ethnic networks enmeshing them: the frequent hints, despite self-censorship, of disappointed expectations; above all, the mixture of alarm and relief at being uprooted.

O'Farrell's commentary skilfully mitigates the violent fluctuations in tone, style and content between correspondents. The reader senses the narrator's skeptical, questioning, unifying presence in every ship, shed and lodging, challenging him to draw his own comparisons. Most correspondents were male and took an eminently practical approach to acquiring wife-housekeepers to share their Australian loneliness: 'Could you not send me out a nice little Irish girl with a small fortune?', as James Twigg of Western Australia wrote to this sister in Cookstown. But Alex Crawford, elder brother of the Larne gunrunner, found love and frustrated desire to be an indispensable driving force for the pioneering sheep farmer. His obsessive meditation upon 'the kiss she gave me in the kitchen sitting on the table' only drove him into more and bloodier 'nigger hunts', whereas the more prosaic Twigg made friends with potential stock raiders who performed corroborees for his amusement and provided more stimulating company than his white neighbours, who dragged him 'down by old associations'. The ambivalence of emigrants towards their kith and kin is best illustrated by the case of the Maxwell family. All five sons emigrated to Australasia, the last under parental pressure and against his brothers' urging, while two eventually returned to Bangor. As 'new chums' most of the brothers exploited and welcomed the embrace of connections in Victoria, and worked as a family team to mutual advantage. But before long their ambitions diverged and kinship obligations became a burden, leading to family splits and breaches as the embrace threatened to stifle rather than sustain: 'Within twenty years the Irish Australian world of the Maxwell family had been born, flourished, and had fallen apart'. In other cases, even where correspondence continued, withdrawal from one's kinsmen in Ireland or Australia occurred much earlier. Few correspondents (contrary to stereotype) sent home money except under duress, while several struggled hard to wrest subsidies out of recalcitrant parents. Growing disenchantment with the Irish connection (Ireland is 'a good country spoiled by a lot of fanatics') was often balanced by distaste for Australian emptiness ('I want to get out of here before I am hampered by to many kids'). One convict declared himself to be 'very thankful to my prosecutors for sending me here to the land of liberty

and freedom', but this hyperbole was probably penned by a police copyist and intended for the eyes of the prison governor as much as his wife's.

Patrick O'Farrell has assembled a fascinating mélange of sagas, 'cameo portraits' and stray snippets of emigrant experience, handling diverse and difficult material with skill and humanity. Technically, the book is not unflawed: an unpleasant sepia-coloured ink is used throughout making some of the well-chosen illustrations indistinct, some literals have evaded detection, and the conventions for editorial interpolations in the transcripts are neither defined nor consistent. These minor blemishes cannot disguise the fact that *Letters from Irish Australia* is an innovative contribution to three historical fields (Irish, Australian and Irish-Australian), conveying insights which deserve to be noted by all students of the mental and cultural consequences of migration. As a work of art it is self-justifying. In the gravelly opening words of the introduction: 'Once, people were like this: Irish people'.