

## BOOK REVIEW

### *A New History of the Irish in Australia*

Authors: Elizabeth Malcolm and Dianne Hall

Publisher: NewSouth Publishing, 2018

ISBN: 9781742235530

Paperback: 436 pages + *viii* pages.

Price: AUD\$34.99, NZD\$39.99

Reviewed by John Carmody\*

Patrick O'Farrell began his *The Irish in Australia* (1987) with a question: 'The Irish in Australia is an impossible subject, too vast, too various, too complex, and certainly too elusive. Why attempt it when some degree of failure is assured?' My answer (though he gave another) is, 'When you are such an excellent and discerning historian and so fine a writer, your obligation is plain.' O'Farrell was a rare scholar, one of the 'old school' (Mark McKenna is another modern example), who believed that it is the primary task of the historian—after being as truthful and reliably-informed as possible—to tell a story: to the *entire* tribe (not just his academic colleagues), to help them understand their society and their part in it.

Of course, as more information comes to light—which it unremittingly does when there are so many students at work (and it's 30 years since Professor O'Farrell's book was published)—it is necessary to re-think and then rewrite *all* history. Like life itself, it is not set in stone. Nonetheless, to follow O'Farrell is a formidable challenge, even for people who see the world differently. Inevitably, therefore this new book by Drs Malcolm and Hall is different from his. To begin with, it is (paradoxically) almost entirely secular in its focus and it is nowhere as elegantly written. It has ten chapters, together with an Introduction and a (contemporary) Epilogue, group into three themes: Race, Stereotypes and Politics. O'Farrell's concerns were—intellectually, culturally and emotionally—distinctly different.

Unsurprisingly, because the authors are based in Victoria, their book

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gives an unbalanced attention to Melbourne and, at times seems not to understand NSW ideally; then—for all that it opens with a paragraph on the St Patrick’s Day March in 2018 in Brisbane—Queensland seems very much an afterthought. Given that there was a very significant Irish immigration to that state *and* that the ALP (with its Irish genes) was essentially born in regional Queensland, that is a regrettable absence from a book which purports to have a national purview.

Nevertheless, what the carefully researched book does offer is as engrossing as it is disturbing—even enraging. In that respect, ‘The Irish race’ (Chapter 1) is the one which will generate most readers’ anger towards the splenetic bigotry and frank hostility which the dominant Protestant British part of society unremittingly directed at the Irish. The authors begin with examples from that British home-soil, citing the Scots anatomist, Robert Knox, who in 1850 wrote in *The Races of Men* that the ‘Irish Race must be forced from the soil; by fair means if possible; still they must leave. England’s safety requires it’; and the Anglican clergyman and novelist, Charles Kingsley, who ‘was deeply unsettled by the sight of what he called “white chimpanzees”’ when he visited Ireland in 1860. Colonial cartoonists, some of whose work Malcolm and Hall reproduce, habitually depicted the Irish with simian faces; they also quote the prejudice of Arthur Topp (leader-writer of *The Argus*)—‘the Irish were a race of morally, socially and intellectually inferior people’—and the opinion of the Geelong doctor and Parliamentarian, Alexander Thompson, of the southern Irish as ‘utterly useless; in point of intellect they are inferior to our own aborigines.’ Modern readers might well remind themselves that Australia’s first peoples still endure that sort of jejune contumely.

Their chapter on ‘The Irish and indigenous Australians’ considers the ‘positive relationships that existed between Indigenous and Irish peoples, based at least in part on a recognition of shared injustice, dispossession and colonial oppression’; the fact that ‘during the 20th century, Catholics became more actively involved in indigenous missions, with the laity, female religious and European male orders taking the lead’; and the public dispute, in 1892, between the Port Hedland squatter, Charles Harper, and Matthew Gibney (the Irish-born bishop of Perth) in which Gibney mentioned ‘the white settlers whose deliberate murders in no single instance met with the punishment that invariably overtook the blackfellow convicted of a

similar crime against the invaders of his country'. Otherwise, priests seem mentioned largely in references to the incessant grizzles of "Establishment" figures that the Irish were unduly susceptible to the bigoted, narrow-minded and seditious propaganda of their pastors.

This new history of the Irish in British Australia is an uncomfortable read – some might ask what has changed in this querulous society – but, like the putative virtues of bitter medicines, it has the potential to do us all good.

### **BOOK REVIEW**

#### *Angels, Incense and Revolution: Catholic Schooldays of the 1960s*

Author: Wanda Skowronska

Publisher: Connor Court Publishing Pty Limited, 2019

ISBN: 9781925501919

Paperback: 226 pages

Price: \$29.95

Reviewed by Catherine Thom\*

It may seem odd to begin a review of a book with the final chapter. However, I do this because it seems to capture a strong emphasis of the author's reflections on Catholic Education in the 1960s. In Skowronska's words 'the post war generation... benefitted immensely from the richness, sense of mission and Christ-like compassion of the parochial school system'. She adds, 'in the 1950s and 1960s reason, mystery, true silence, reflection and good fundamental catechesis were pervasive, and fundamental to our spiritual formation.' (203) She does accept that, 'some will disagree with my version of events' and she welcomes their stories but she holds firm to her 'unending gratitude to the [sisters], priests and brothers who gave us so much as intrepid teachers, generous missionaries, witnesses and thinkers.' (205)

As Maureen O'Connor, a former Brigidine claims, this book 'is a must read for all Brigidines. A fabulous journey back into the past...' But it is more than this, and for more people than the Brigidines. Many Catholic students of the 60s and 70s, both boys and girls, would have memories similar to those enunciated in this small volume. Not all might be so positive

\* Catherine Thom has been an educator since the 1960s and remains so today with a passion for History, especially that which involves our beleaguered Church.